

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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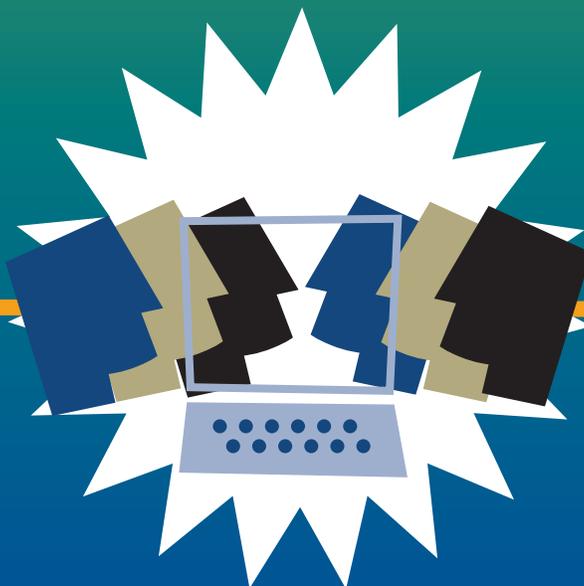
The role of
Civic
Organizations
in today's
society

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By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



The Evolution of Centers for Public Life: NIF and the Return to Civil Society

By Alice Diebel

Kettering has a long history of working with organizations around the country that are trying to build a more deliberative culture and a more public form of politics. Many of these “centers for public life”¹ first came into contact with the foundation through holding deliberative forums and using National Issues Forums (NIF) materials. And over the course of 25 years, Kettering has learned alongside them; our research has benefited greatly from their work and our shared reflections on the practical challenges of public life in a democratic society.

Over time, the centers have played different roles in their communities, including providing basic civic education, bridging differences in difficult conversations, encouraging community problem solving, and informing elected officials about public thinking. Many of the centers fill a combination of these roles, as has been documented in Scott London's report, tentatively titled *Doing Democracy* (forthcoming).

In an attempt to better understand how these different centers understand their work, Kettering brought them together in 2009 for a series of small workshops to explore core challenges. We got a strong sense that the centers have become comfortable with the ideas that Kettering describes and have moved beyond seeing a deliberative forum as an end in itself, to seeing it as part of a larger practice of a more public and deliberative kind of politics. They adapt the ideas to fit the interests of their communities.

The value of deliberation

The centers recognize deliberation as a different way to practice politics. They use deliberation in many aspects of community life—personal, professional, and vocational. That said, they also see that people view public deliberation as a means of communicating that is not particularly natural and that forums can be useful ways of modeling how to deliberate together about a shared problem. And they understand and value how difficult it can be to moderate difficult conversations, especially in a polarized political climate. Developing three options for deliberation and avoiding polar choices is a valuable tool for these discussions. The centers perceive this work as critical to changing today's political discourse.

The role of tensions in issue framing

The centers understand the importance of bringing out the tensions among the things people hold valuable, and they see “weighing” as the heart of deliberation. By highlighting the tensions, participants actually become a little less certain of their own positions, opening up their

willingness to hear other perspectives. The tensions help participants recognize the things we *all* value, rather than seeing things in terms of “us versus them.”

Political acting

The centers also told us that both citizens and institutions must take action, although some centers focus more on informing policymakers while others focus more on community problem solving. They believe that forums can be spaces that build a willingness to act, but they continue to be stymied when participants turn to them and ask, “what happens after the forum?” They worry about jeopardizing their neutrality by supporting any particular actions after the forum.

Reporting on the results of deliberation

When centers report out the results of deliberation, they tend to write lengthy papers that focus heavily on reporting to public officials and less on reporting back to the public in creative ways. Despite their efforts, it is often a challenge to get public officials to see the value of reports on forums because the samples are not large or randomly selected. Kettering has been interested in learning more about whether contextualizing the results of deliberation within the stages of public thinking that Daniel Yankelovich describes might help communities or elected officials better recognize the policy implications of public deliberation. The centers we talked with recognize that the stage of an issue matters: issues are ready for deliberation or not, the public recognizes a need or not, citizens are hot to act or not. Kettering needs further research to understand the connection between the stages of public thinking and the implications to policymaking.

Kettering has long recognized that a center for public life is an important addition to the constellation of community and civic organizations, but this idea seems to be gaining currency elsewhere as well. We see many forms of this work across the country taking shape in the growth of organizations that promote dialogue and deliberation, generally. Yet as Scott London's report reveals, this network of centers with its long history and reflective practice has something important to offer. NIF has proved a valuable entry point into deliberative public politics—particularly when it is understood

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as just that, an entry point, rather than as an event or as an end in itself. We see the work of the centers as an important antidote to trends of polarization and to a general weakening of the civic sphere that pose grave threats for our democracy. As organizations, they are tackling these threats through a variety of approaches, and they are making a difference.

Alice Diebel is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at diebel@kettering.org.

¹ Kettering has referred to them as public policy institutes as well, but this name no longer seems to fit. Of course, each center names itself according to how it thinks about its work.

**NEW from
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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

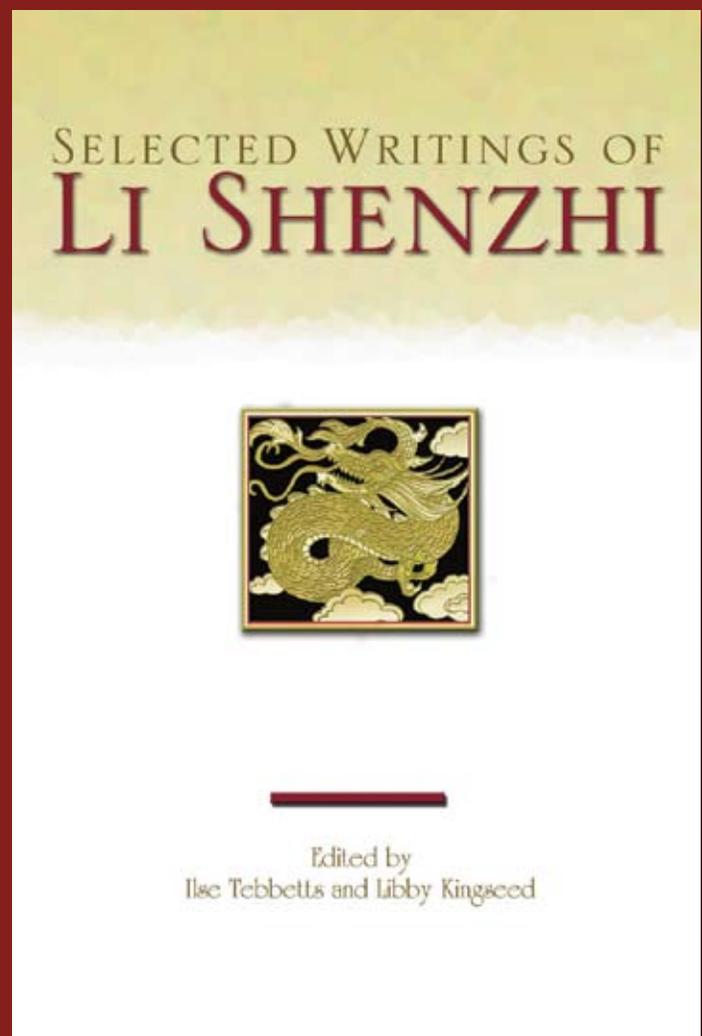
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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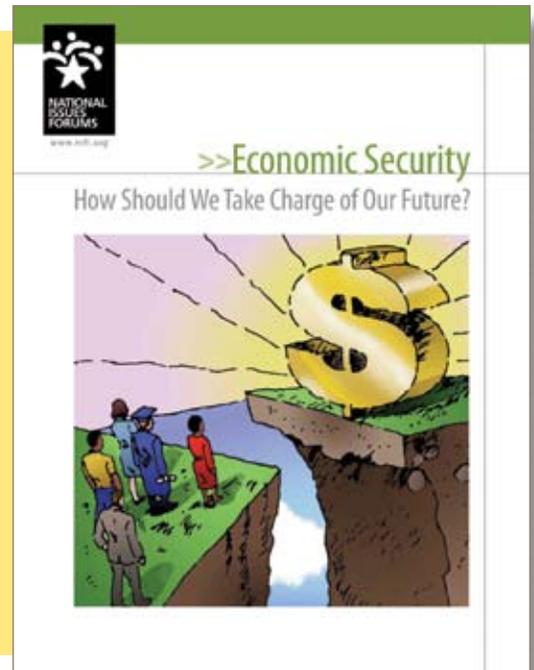
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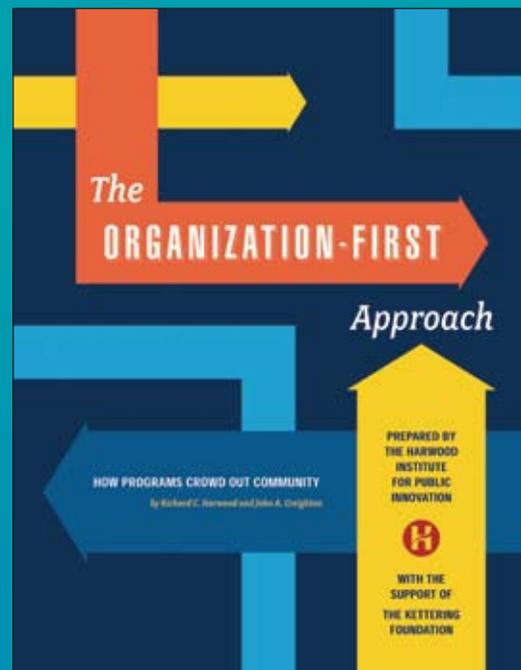
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

“The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization’s programs and agenda instead of the community’s needs or aspirations.”

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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Doing Democracy

A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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