Editor’s Letter

We at the Review are always proud of our covers—and deeply grateful to the distinguished artists, galleries, agents, and collectors who honor us with the privilege of reproducing their work. Not that they are related to the contents of our magazine, which invariably explore the politics of a public, facing collectively its problems: no summary scrutiny, symbolism, allegory, or judgment is ever to be inferred from or read into those works of art as though they might relate to the subsequent pages of the issue. The cover provides, let us say, just a moment for an utterly different way of understanding or capturing our human condition. The art is, simply, itself.

All of which notwithstanding … we do remember that the American artist, R.B. Kitaj (who grew up in Ohio, though he developed his art in Britain) did say, in reference to his painting, If Not, Not, reproduced on our cover, that when he had once expressed his admiration for T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land,” Eliot had said to him that it was “only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life.” Thus, Kitaj wrote, “So it is with my picture.”

Neither artist, of course, had offered either seriously as a statement of his subject or intention; but Kitaj’s comment stayed with us because, in a sense, every essay in this Review—and the issue as a whole—presents to us, as it were, a “grouse.” Or more reasonably put—for ours are reasonable writers indeed—an articulation of what appear to be profound and well-documented ways in which our U.S. democracy today falls short of, or is seriously impedimental to, the ideal practice of the popular, self-governing democracy that we expect to exemplify.

To insist that our authors are “griping” would be as unfair and mischievous as was Eliot’s characterization of his early-20th-century experience of “The Waste Land.” For they merely face, boldly and frankly, what appear to be disappointments, changes for the worse, in our civic life. Derek Barker, for example, a program officer at the Kettering Foundation (and whose essay here is scheduled for publication shortly in an extended form), is concerned that the extraordinary range of nongovernmental organizations (familiarly referred to as “NGOs”)—associations and institutions, schools and colleges, charities and philanthropic organizations, trade unions, and local and national groups of citizens with recognizable professions, interests, and skills—these all have ceased effectively to be the means by which citizens share among themselves, and with their government, the concerns that affect their lives together as a people. Increasingly, Barker says, these institutions act like bureaucracies, often hand-in-hand with (and sometimes funded by) government! Instead of enabling citizens to determine what might be done to develop their communities and to explore the possibilities of government collaboration, the NGOs act increasingly like government
departments. They are becoming “colonized” by government, typically designing and measuring outcomes in the narrowly professionalized and preestablished patterns of academic technicians. Democratically elected legislatures, he explains, delegate power to bureaucratic agencies and NGOs that tend therefore to “focus on, discreet problem-solving efforts with quantifiable results.”

As though to illustrate the point, Bruce Sievers, who for years has distinguished himself among the most thoughtful of foundation leaders, presents a careful exploration of the development of philanthropy into the modern grantmaking foundations. He enriches this history by embracing it in a careful study of the development of what we call “civil society,” the ways in which we organize ourselves (as distinct from our government) for our social well-being. And he elaborates this concern, regretting that, like commercial enterprises, foundations tend to seek “the highest bang for the buck” but are “not very good at solving complex social problems.”

There is, however, a darker, yet more alarming aspect to this apparent diminution of the public voice in the management of our own affairs as a people. It is articulated, or at least summarized, by the distinguished emeritus professor from Princeton, Sheldon Wolin, in his book recently published by Princeton University Press, *Democracy Inc.: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, the full preface to which we have been privileged to reprint at the center of this Review. Wolin, whose imagination is broad as his knowledge is deep, points out that while the fascist and communist dictators of the 20th century were able “by controlling the state and the economy” to “force their societies into a preconceived totality,” our own circumstances begin to suggest what he calls an “inverted totalitarianism”: a “political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.”

“Certain tendencies in our society,” writes Wolin, “point away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and towards what I have called ‘managed democracy.’” Now of course, it is the assumption of democracies that when oligarchies of the rich and the powerful do show signs of taking over authority in the state—and diminishing thereupon the sense of freedom and equal authority of a people determining their collective destiny—it is precisely then that the voice of the people will be assertively heard. Yet though it may be easy to argue, this is sometimes hard to illustrate through much of our history. And to Nina Eliasoph, the cause (or fault) is not merely a tendency among those with power to exercise it, but an apparent reluctance, or at least a timidity, among a mass of well-intentioned citizens who yet seem hesitant to express their political judgments publicly, or to weigh, with others, the potential
or likely outcomes that might attend formal discussion of ways in which their problems might be addressed.

Eliasoph in fact spent many months recording conversations she heard on significant public topics—community problems needing to be addressed in one or another way that would affect different groups of citizens variously. Interestingly, she chose to talk with specific groups of citizens, each of which typified a different kind of interest or commitment, or hobby and practice, within the communities that she examined: some, for example, she characterized as “volunteers,” people who commonly contribute their time for the benefit of others, beyond themselves; others included, for example, those whose shared a focus on and energies in organized kinds of social relaxation that might be associated with music and dance; and so on. Yet the outcome, from every group, was not that its participants were indifferent to or failed to understand the import of decisions that had to be thought through and resolved, but that they consistently tried to avert the challenge of speaking “too seriously”—or perhaps controversially—on what we might call “public” or “political” matters that could challenge the social norms that had been accepted for their lives. “The fault,” as Shakespeare once pointed out, “is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings!” Only in very small and heterogeneous (what Eliasoph nicknames “backstage”) groups did her interviewees seem willing to talk about what were in fact, as they should be seen, serious and sometimes controversial public issues.

So it is perhaps useful to be reminded, at the close of this Review, by paragraphs from the closing chapter of Theda Skocpol’s Diminished Democracy, insisting that citizens can see, have seen, and should see themselves as responsibly, challenged by working in assemblies, groups, missions, even lobbies, to better the opportunities and the conditions of their lives, their communities, and their government.

All of the essays presented in this issue of the Review are excerpted from recently published or about to be published longer works; and we make no editorial pretense that to have read merely these pages is to know the wisdom that their pages transcribe. But as David Mathews acknowledges in his “… afterthoughts,” we try to keep track of what others are finding. “We have seen enough evidence to be concerned,” he concludes. And we hope that our readers, too, will therefore find their own follow-up concerns.

Robert J. Kingston