

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Cover art: Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, *I Have Work To Do* (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, *Summer Doldrums* (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston's writings.

Cities and Citizenship

By Lewis R. Gordon

Political life is relational, which means it reaches outward. Anti-politics seeks the break down of relations in an effort to force, at least certain groups of people, into the prison of non-relations.

An area of philosophical research on the rise is philosophy of the city. When many hear about this field, they often think immediately about environmental responsibility and urban management. There is, however, much more offered in this area of study if we reflect on what cities actually are and their intimate relationship to politics and, as a consequence, power.

Most contemporary people confuse urban centers with cities. They have, in effect, confused architectural structures with what was hoped to take place in them. The citizen, however, historically preceded the city. It was the production of citizenship, a complex and constant negotiation of power emerging from human beings living together, that produced the demand for spaces, transformed into places, for their continued cultivation. This meant, in principle, that citizens produced cities wherever such practices emerged. It also means that we, contemporary humanity, could in principle produce different *kinds* of cities instead of the urban organization of life that we have come to think of as such.

The historical circumstances leading to urbanization emerged in antiquity through a series of factors linked to citizenship. The first was the emergence of city-states in forms that led to what Greek-speaking peoples called the polis and in turn to what they called politics. The polis created a structure of “within” and “without,” wherein the compression of citizens entailed population density. Though it doesn’t follow that citizenship requires compression, the social world, as we know, is interactive. Keeping others outside, however, carried a price of limited space, and thus ceasing to spread

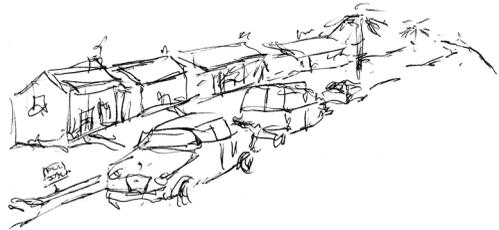
outward, some dense populations expanded upward. Others reached outward to the point of cities becoming countries. The upward became part of the outward in concentric fields of political activity.

An addition is the set of norms linked to urban places of citizenship, which led to the notion of “civilization,” which referred to the ability to live civilly—in short, in cities—where “the civilized” became another way of saying city-dweller. As cities became confused with urban centers, this term led to the urbane standing in for the civilized and the citizen. An urban-dweller need not, however, participate in practices of citizenship.

Cities and urban centers have historically been plagued by the simultaneous presence of people who embody citizenship and those who don't. A strange phenomenon of inside and outside thus followed historically with regard to those who are physically located in urban centers yet outside because of a lack of political belonging. In short, cities without citizens emerged.

The citizen historically preceded the city.

In some cases, the lack of citizenship is voluntary, where dwellers are simply passing through or freely choose to step outside of public life. Ancient Greek-speaking people had a disparaging word for the latter: *idiōtēs*. It referred to a private person, one not concerned with public affairs, in a word, as the



reader has no doubt surmised from its obvious English cognate—*an idiot*. The word has even more ancient origins. Think of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2030 BCE–1640 BCE) Egyptian word *idi* (“deaf”). The presumption, later taken on by the ancient Mediterranean Greek-speaking peoples, was that a lack of hearing entailed isolation. The implications are manifold where many people could be packed together without ever listening to each other. Such a society, from the perspective of the ancients, would be one of idiots.

A different problem emerges, however, where there are people committed and willing to participate in practices of citizenship—speech and listening—but are barred, ignored, or deliberately thwarted from doing so by the powerful in their society. Race and racism in avowed democratic republics, for instance, are exacerbated by shifts emerging from the management of cities. Republicanism, the position that citizens should not live under arbitrary laws, had the consequence of rendering no one above the law but also, unfortunately, some people below it. For those within the law, there was (and continues to be) an implicit equality of access. This implicit egalitari-

anism of republicanism raised the inevitable question of scope. The history of race under republican systems was premised on an avowed legitimate exclusion of certain people from the system *on the grounds of systemic integrity*. This

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meant that their inclusion represented violation. The circumstance is similar to what theologians call *theodicy* (“god’s justice”), where evil and injustice are presumed external the all-good god. If we replace *theo* with *civil*, we would have *cividity*.

The logic of cividity depended on a logic of contraries instead of contradictions. Contraries separate elements in a consistent system of inclusion and exclusion. It is, in other words, perfect for racist states with imposed systems of apartheid or segregation. Contradictions, however, are dialectical; they require *interaction*, negotiation, and the crossing of zones. The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction. Differences are presumed at least at intellectual

and, in today’s parlance, ideological levels.

Citizens don’t always work things out, however, and the collapse into violence would mean civil war, where opposing insides and outsides result. Discursive opposition is abrogated, and the opposite of citizenship rules. Cities, then, as places of citizenship, were places of agency and shared power—in short, political places—fundamentally, though not often explicitly stated as such, democratic spaces. This was so in spirit or aspiration even when not often achieved.

Race, in this story, offers peculiar reflection. When urban spaces in Euromodern countries were those in which only whites were afforded access to and the benefits of full citizenship, the structure was, like Ancient Athens, one of a complex relationship of citizens with those (noncitizens) who served them. Those were historically women and slaves. In Euromodernity, however, citizenship was racialized, which meant the appearance of citizenship, whether in urban or rural places, became white. Given the population density of urban centers, the possibility of crossing the line, as it were, were high, and thus policing them became crucial, which is why discussion, often hysterical, on law enforcement became peculiarly urban. It is also why urban centers became increasingly characterized as places of “crime.” They became such because the expectation was for such populations to be available when their labor was needed but not “seen.” They faced, then, *the violation of appearance*.

Euromodern urban centers historically divided themselves into places of citizenship (white) and those of criminality (colored and

illegal presence). The stage was set for dialectical struggles over expanded citizenship, where the activities of the struggle *were actual manifestations of citizenship*. There was (and often continues to be) thus the ironic situation of noncitizens

The imposition of so-called law over citizenship meant that urban centers such as New York increasingly became places called “cities” without citizenship.

such as immigrants (documented and undocumented) often embodying citizenship with legally designated citizens either not doing so or actively blocking the path of political appearance through investments in law enforcement and order.

Consider the example of New York City. It could serve as a metaphor for many contemporary urban centers in the United States. A vibrant place of political activity, once burgeoning with institutions focused on civil society as an expression of possibility and the checking of governing institutions, a shift emerged in two moments. The first was white flight (that is, the flight of citizenship with capital) and then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s draconian campaign for law and order. Because citizenship and whiteness were isomorphic, this meant that cit-

izenship moved to the suburbs and rural areas while the remaining populations of color’s efforts at democratic resistance suffered crackdowns from state brutality. The imposition of so-called law over citizenship—where *rule* subordinates political appearance in a continuous erosion of civil liberties—meant that urban centers such as New York increasingly became places called “cities” without citizenship.

Urban centers dominated by rule instead of citizenship meant their sociological and political functions shifted. Readers may be familiar with what urban centers such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Miami, New York, San Francisco, etc. became for whites since the 1980s. For suburban whites, they became places of entertainment. Like Disneyland or Disney World, they became managed places of consumption instead of production. Younger whites, armed with capital, would play in such places until they decided to produce citizens and exercise citizenship, at which point they



took that capital elsewhere. In some instances, black mayors inherited these urban spaces devoid of capital, as seen briefly in such cities as Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, New Orleans, and New York, for instance.

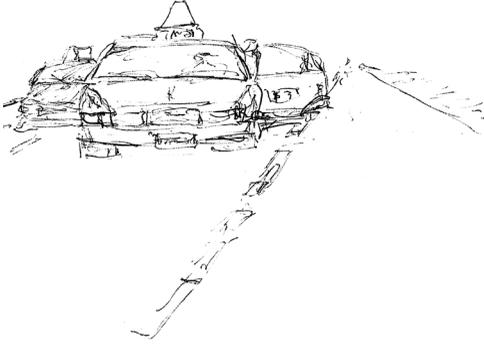
In the time of play, however, the analogy with Disney World offers a consideration. One could enjoy Disney World ironically because it is, at closer look, a totalitarian state. Private, premised entirely on management of consumption, pleasure, and all movement, it is a harbinger of what the fetish of privatization offers under neoconservative and neoliberal models of social and political organization. There is much consumers don't actually see at such theme parks, just as there is so much brutality proverbially hidden in plain sight in today's urban centers, except, of course, for those receiving the wrath of cybernetic management.

What this means, as University of Michigan professor of architecture Milton Curry has shown in his writings on urban centers, appearance as consumption transforms disruption of reverie into criminal behavior. There is, as well, the complicated matter, as the martyred anti-apartheid activist Steve Bantu Biko showed in South Africa and the revolutionary psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon showed in his analysis of colonies and postcolonies in the Global South, that racist states, in fighting against the appearance of certain peoples, also wage a war on politics. The continued relevance of their insights is borne out in empirical research in the United States offered by Amy Lerman and Vesla Weaver's *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequence of American Crime Control*. The authors should have perhaps made

the subtitle: "The Undemocratic Consequence of American Crime Control." In effect, it means many urban centers, increasingly drained of political efficacy and participation, are no longer cities.

As human beings are not gods, we must find alternative ways of building society and living together.

Real cities, in other words, are political. What, however, does it mean to be political? For one thing, the political makes no sense without power. An odd feature of much Anglophone political philosophy is a tendency to reflect on political issues in mostly moral and eventually moralistic terms. The presumption at work is that if people were to become more moral, then the organization of society would be "just." We have already seen, however, that such a presumption could easily be thwarted through forms of cividity, where "justice" depends on a systems integrity protected from those who may sully it. Further, the moralistic appeal fails to address crucial concerns of social change for those who would like to appear as citizens, as agents, as legitimate members of the society. For them, transformation becomes a concern, which would be at odds with a system that considers itself intrinsically just. Their efforts would be the imposition of, supposedly, injustice. Such people face the problem of illicit



appearance. A third problem with the moral applications model is that they make sense if people really can, individually, implement what is right. The problem there, however, is that that would make sense if they were gods. As human beings are not gods, we must find alternative ways of building society and living together. To do that requires fostering and negotiating what is often not explored in the forms of political philosophy that dominate at least Anglophone Western societies such as the United States—namely, power.

Politics makes no sense without power. But what is power? Often used or spoken about, it is a word rarely defined and thus becomes a source of mystification and suspicion. The concept simply means the ability to make things happen with access to the means of its implementation. Eurocentric linguistic accounts often point to the Latin word *potis*, from which came the word *potent*, as in an omnipotent god, and the divine significance offers a clue. If we return to Middle Kingdom Egypt (actually called

KMT), we would find the word *pHty*, which means “godlike strength.” Going still farther back to the *Coffin Texts* of the Old Kingdom (2686 BCE–2134 BCE), we find the word *HqAw* or *heka*, which activates the *ka* (sometimes translated as “soul, spirit,” or, in a word, “magic”) that manifests reality. The *pHty* is achieved only through *HqAw*, which amounts to a straightforward affirmation of power as the ability with the means to make things happen.

We could retell this story of power and its relationship to politics this way. Our initial

The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction.

abilities and means are our bodies. Where our physical reach is our only means, our impact on the world is limited to force. We directly touch or push things. The human world adds, however, the gift of language, where, through our understanding and production of meaning, we can expand our impact on the world through reaching each other. Add our technologies of communication, and we now reach to the stars. Our ability to affect each other builds the social world and the negotiation of that ability in it. Among human achievements is culture, which

Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, aptly calls “a prosthetic god.” Recall my reminder that human beings are not gods. But the social world of cultural meanings enables us to encumber many of the tasks originally

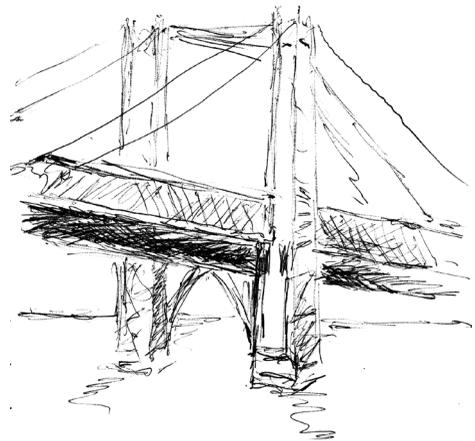
The human world adds the gift of language.

bestowed on gods. We develop ways of controlling our environment, extending our health, and we develop rules and regulations to mitigate our conflicts with each other. For the last, we have developed institutions, such as governments, in which we divest some abilities for the expanded benefits of others. Expanding those capabilities is “empowerment.” But where those are hoarded by the few or a select group, there is a whittling away of power for others to the point of their being locked into the reach of their bodies. Pushed more inward, they implode. That is oppression.

Racist societies promulgate states whose purpose is disempowerment. To lock certain groups into the physicality of their bodies requires rendering impotent the capacities of speech. In effect, such people cease to affect their social world; they become the equivalent of sounds that are not heard. Silent, they become inconsequential. Anti-black racism, as an example, is antipathetic to the meeting of blackness and power. Restricting that rallies forces against the expansion of speech, power, and, by extension, politics. That is why all racist societies eventually

become antipolitical ones. It is no accident that the struggle against racism isn't simply moral (about how we should treat each other) but also political (about the expansion of freedom and capabilities). The additional consideration is interactive. As involving communication, interaction, political life is relational, which means it reaches outward. Antipolitics seeks the breakdown of relations in an effort to force, at least certain groups of people, into the prison of nonrelations.

Where political activity flourishes, so do citizenship and a fierce defense of democratic institutions. There are people in a variety of urban centers in the Americas (North and South) and Europe working at the rejuvenation of citizenship without the racial equivocation of it with whiteness. This involves persistent democratic practice and struggle. I've focused on urban centers here because they're places with large concentrations of people of color. Rural areas, though not only capable of but also increasingly manifesting cit-



izenship, become structurally less so the extent to which they collapse into the ultra-rural—that is, places in which interaction is so remote that the reference point is not to sociality and community but solely to the self. In the United States, the increased structuring of impact in such areas, as seen in the 2016 presidential election, is, in effect, an extension of the war on citizenship. The effect is an effort to subordinate politics to rule.

The 2017 protests, the largest of which thus far was the global Women’s March the day after the US presidential inauguration, marks the beginning of an expanded epic struggle for citizenship. The many public protests from undocumented workers also mark an unusual feature of true citizenship in the face of adversity: courage.

The plight of those who suffered from an imposed invisibility and illegitimacy of their

efforts to assert their humanity and potential as citizens offers much from which defenders of citizenship today could learn. One message is that politics should also be understood as the expansion of options by which meaningful choices mark the flourishing of freedom. Another could be called politically tragic. It demands commitment to a struggle the success of which benefits all, despite opposition, and the failure of which is also a responsibility, unfortunately, shared by the same.

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