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“The conflict between professional and democratic sensibilities seems to be growing, perhaps ironically, because of measures being taken to restore trust.”

This issue of the *Kettering Review* brings together several themes that are central to the Kettering Foundation’s work: the role of public talk in coming to public judgment, the way that a deliberative public can provide parameters for government action, the need for a public sphere to hold governments accountable, and the new kinds of interactions between publics and professions. The latter themes are now central to the foundation’s current stocktaking of troubling democratic trends.

Some of the trends we are tracking are, indeed, ominous. According to a recent report by the Transatlantic Academy, *The Democratic Disconnect*, and a feature article in the *Economist*, entitled “What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy,” there is a lack of connection between the efforts of citizens to strengthen democracy and what is happening in government and the political system, which is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. Grounding our research in histories like Harold Perkin’s *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, we see that the decline of Victorian class society (see *Downton Abbey*) was offset by the rise of a society led by people with trained expertise and its accompanying status. Beginning in the late 19th century, Perkin finds, these new professionals came to transform society itself as they infiltrated every major institution with their ideas about change.

The tension between professional culture and democracy is long-standing. Perkin believes professional expertise tends to breed arrogance, condescension, and the perception that the “uncomprehending masses” are incapable of understanding what professions know to be true. (The uncomprehending masses are democracy’s citizens.) David Brown, coeditor of Kettering’s

Higher Education Exchange, has been a professional, not in one but several fields. But now he describes himself as a “recovering professional” in his new book, *America’s Culture of Professionalism*. He adds to Perkin’s critique his own experience with the tendency of professional society to treat its expertise or knowledge as a property right, like the exclusive ownership of real property. Brown builds on the work of Bill Sullivan, an insightful critic of professionalism, who has long advocated a more civic conception.

Stocktaking in the professions today may be prompted by the troubled relationship between most all professionals and the public, which has lost much of its confidence in the institutions that are professionally managed. Attempts to demonstrate competence and accountability have not stemmed the tide of distrust. Neither have efforts at citizen participation or campaigns to “educate” the public with the “facts.” If, in talking to the uncomprehending masses, professionals operate on the assumption that “if you knew what I know, you would do what I do,” they are likely to be greatly disappointed.

Putting our institutions in the hands of professionals who are supposed to be immune to political pressure was expected to result in greater public benefit and approval. That hasn’t happened, and the reason may be a professional mind-set that is wedded to a form of technical rationality. This mind-set takes on added power when coupled, as it usually is, with the legal authority of bureaucracies. The technical rationality I am referring to sees human society as akin to a machine whose malfunctions can be remedied by instrumental means—like a car engine that doesn’t run properly and needs a skilled mechanic to repair it.

In the early 1900s, Max Weber argued that social behavior, like natural phenomena, such as the rotation of planets, follows calculable

and therefore predictable patterns. Technical rationality could detect these patterns, which could then be changed by effective and efficient means. According to Weber, rationality is at the core of modern authority. However, critics worry that instrumental means have a way of becoming detached from ends. Adding to this critique, James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, points out that faith in technical expertise spawned a multitude of utopian projects of social engineering that, although technically sound, had disastrous results.

Technical rationality, the “property” of professionals, leads to a concept of citizenship that is lacking in agency. From a professional perspective, people can seem like hopeless amateurs. That is exactly how citizens were portrayed in a 1998 article in the *Economist*, “American Democracy: Building the Perfect Citizens.” The article contended that, “When professionals dominate all complex subjects, from the forecasting of markets to the cataloguing of library books, perhaps it is too much to hope that public policy can ever be the province of the amateur.”

This concept of citizenship is reinforced by professional culture’s distinctive notion of service. Professionals usually serve by treating various maladies, and those they treat may easily be seen as objects. Doctors have patients, lawyers have clients, and print journalists have readers. Patients, clients, and readers are largely passive. (After all, patients are supposed to be patient!) From this perspective, it’s easy to think of citizens as *objects* of professional treatment in contrast to the democratic concept of citizens as political actors, as agents.

Adding to the conflict with democracy, professional values, too, can be different from the values of citizens, according to Martha Derthick’s study of the Massachusetts welfare system, *The Influence of Federal Grants*. Originally a locally administered system of relief, the system

in Massachusetts was, at its best, personal, compassionate, and sensitive to differences among people. This system was gradually replaced, however, by a professional one with different priorities. The old system put a premium on responsiveness and could distinguish between one person's circumstances and those of a neighbor. Local welfare officials knew people's names and treated them as individuals. But the new professional system valued uniformity in service because the old system was prone to favor some people over others. Everyone was to be treated the same in the new system—no favoritism!

To be fair, both the original welfare system and the professional one had downsides as well as advantages. The old system, while humane, could be corrupted and mismanaged; the new one could be insensitive to differences in people's circumstances and so encumbered by rules that it was difficult for people to navigate. But it was more efficient from a bureaucratic point of view. In the 21st century, we live with the triumph of a professionalized society and owe much of our well-being to it. Nonetheless, the conflict between professional and democratic sensibilities not only persists, but also seems to be growing—ironically perhaps, because of measures being taken to restore trust.

Take the case of all of the numerous professional efforts to demonstrate public accountability. We all want accountability in our institutions and by their professionals. As Albert Dzur, the author of *Democratic Professionalism*, points out in a memo, "There's real value to accountability—meaning, roughly, that our schools, courts, hospitals, etc. are doing what they say they are doing *and what the public has decided they should do* [emphasis added]." However, Dzur fears this isn't happening; in fact, he sees signs that institutions are moving in the opposite direction by developing even more expert and technical

processes for demonstrating their accountability in hopes of restoring lost public legitimacy or creating better defenses against public criticism. He calls this movement "super professionalism." From a democratic perspective, this is a worrisome trend. Another scholar, Brian Cook, identifies an even more worrisome trend, in *Bureaucracy and Self-Government*: "An increasingly vicious circle has emerged, in which anxiety about control and accountability . . . has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about . . . another layer of controls."

The purpose of stocktaking, of course, isn't just diagnostic; it should lead to remedies. For example, Janet and Robert Denhardt, in their book *The New Public Service*, try to resolve the conflict with democracy by advocating a professional code based on "serving" rather than "steering." But what professional self-interest would prompt this or any other change? Nobel Prize-winning political economist Elinor Ostrom may have part of the answer. In "Covenanting, Co-producing, and the Good Society," she argues that professionalized institutions can only do their jobs well if they are reinforced by the "public goods" produced by the work of citizens. That should be an incentive to treat citizens as agents rather than amateurs; and a sense of mutual benefit should ease the conflict with democracy.

At the foundation, we try to think about practical ways for this sense of mutual benefit to develop. We have been intrigued by the potential of a closer alignment between the work citizens do reinforcing public goods and the work of professionals in institutions. Institutions do the same

things citizens do as they work. They identify problems, make decisions about solving them, marshal resources, organize their efforts, and so on. People do similar things in their civic work, but they don't do them the way institutions do.

A simple example of a better alignment between professional routines and the democratic practices citizens use has to do with the way problems are identified or given names. (We have mentioned the importance of the way problems are named in past *Reviews*.) Professionals, as they should, describe problems in expert or technical terms; citizens, on the other hand, describe problems in terms of the way they experience them and the way they affect what people hold dear. Citizens are more likely to tell a *personal* story when they name a problem than they are to issue a statistical report: the language of professional culture is primarily metric, but the language of civic life is not. To align these two very different ways of naming problems, professionals in journalism, public

administration, and other fields could expand the way they identify problems to include what people hold dear.

The foundation's most recent report on its research, *The Ecology of Democracy*, goes into greater detail about the democratic practice of citizens and other forms of realignment. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn't require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties. Institutional realignment only asks that professionals do what they usually do a bit differently, so that their work reinforces that of citizens. Stocktaking in the professions from a democratic point of view would look for more opportunities for realigning professional/institutional routines with democratic practices. Would this eliminate the tension between democracy and professional culture? Of course not. But it could help forge a more productive relationship.

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