

# KETTERING REVIEW

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

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# The Affective Dimensions of Public Will

by Noëlle McAfee

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*“In recognizing themselves as jointly affected, then communicatively addressing what ought to be done, a public arises.”*

**Y**ears ago I heard the well-known observer of American society, Daniel Yankelovich, make a statement that left an indelible impression. He said, “Any public policy that is not built on public will is built on sand.” Since then, I have noticed that when Congress or an administration would try to push a policy through without public support, more often than not it would eventually fail. Though we are far from being a grassroots democracy, a curious fact is that what the public thinks does indeed seem to matter. Couple that with the problem that the public rarely has full access to information—or opportunity to think through matters with their fellow citizens—and we get a political system that needs sound and reflective public will but lacks mechanisms for creating it. We have a ship of state steered by sailors intoxicated by fear, misinformation, rumors, and demagoguery; themselves split into factions that often won’t even talk with each other. A ship listing terribly!

I will try to address this puzzle by thinking through topics of public opinion, choice, deliberation, judgment, and will. Moreover, I will argue, contra Habermas, that public will formation is not just a cognitive process but an affective one, that calls for the public to engage in both imagination and the work of mourning.

I use the term *the public* in a way that might cause suspicion. It is easy to refer to the public as a mass audience, a body waiting in the wings, even if never called on to the stage; but I prefer to think of the public—as well as “the public sphere”—as a phenomenon, an occurrence, something that arises under certain conditions and dissipates under others. When I walk through a crowded airport, I am not walking through a public—that is, unless a crisis arises there

and people turn to each other to decide what to do.

The public sphere, Habermas writes, is “a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” and in which all citizens can participate. “A portion of the public sphere,” he writes, “is constituted

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## Members of the public need to communicate together to create public knowledge.

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in every conversation in which private persons come together [freely and without coercion] to form a public” and discuss matters “connected with the practice of the state.” Habermas’ formulation echoes Dewey’s: a public is something that communicatively comes into being as private citizens grapple together with matters of widespread concern. For Dewey, it is in recognizing themselves as jointly affected—then communicatively addressing what ought to be done—that a public arises. Absent such conditions the public is inchoate, the phantom that Walter Lippmann claimed it be, that we invoke in empty platitudes to pretend we have a democracy.

**B**y the term *public*, then, I mean what John Dewey articulated in his response to Lippmann in *The Public and Its Problems*: an array of people who are related vis-à-vis some common interests or concerns. “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.” Identifying problems and beginning to see how these problems affect them and their fellows

starts to help a public find itself. Dewey also noted two other processes that need to happen: a public needs to be able to produce a knowledge of what could be done to address these problems, knowledge that might take the form of public opinion, public judgment, or public will; knowledge and resolve that ideally could help shape public policy. And second, members of the public need to be able to communicate together to help create this public knowledge.

As I see it, a public can find itself, or to put it more aptly, *make* itself by coming together to talk about the pressing problems of the day, to identify the sources of problems, to see how these problems differentially affect others, to try to decide together what should be done. Out of these processes—processes that amount to what we call “public deliberation”—might emanate informed public opinion about what *should* be done. This information has a special status. Dewey put it this way, “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.” Public problems are best fathomed by the public itself: it may enlist experts or governments to fix the problems, but it alone is the best judge of what needs to be addressed and of whether the remedy is successful.

The space in which the public makes itself is the public sphere. By *public sphere* then, I mean the space that publics create as they participate with others, to coordinate action and produce outcomes; a space in which public uses of semiotic structures, discursive and otherwise, construct meaning, identity, purpose, and political direction. Such a public sphere involves not just problem solving but world building. Whenever people come together to shape their world and their common future—especially on matters where there is much uncertainty and no prior agreement—a public emerges through what

Harry Boyte calls “public work.”

Public work has a different conception of the citizen—as co-creator of democracies, viewed as a way of life, not simply formal systems of elections and public agencies. To take seriously this concept entails theorizing the civic agent who constructs the common world. Agency, in these terms, involves people’s capacities to co-create their environments, both proximate and extended in space and time. In civic terms, agency infers the capacities of citizens to work across differences, to address problems and shape a common world, in diverse settings without predetermined outcomes.

**T**he literature on deliberative democracy is vast, but there are two constants throughout virtually all of it. First is the idea that a collectivity of free and equal citizens can and should address together political questions about what ought to be done. As Habermas puts it, “A collectivity is confronted with the question ‘What ought we to do?’ when certain problems that must be managed cooperatively impose themselves or when action conflicts requiring consensual solutions crop up.” Second is the idea that deliberation on such questions is first and foremost a cognitive enterprise in which participants engage in the back and forth of reason-giving.

There is a rich philosophical history that sees deliberation as a matter of inquiry, interpretation, meaning making, and hermeneutical engagement. This is a history that stretches from Isocrates and Aristotle to Dewey, Arendt, and Gadamer. In Isocrates’ writings, Timotheus defends his actions in part by saying that we first teach ourselves by talking. Learning is not a solitary venture but something that occurs in conversation. In Aristotle we find a rich literature on deliberation and choice, starting with

the simple observation that we deliberate about matters that are indeterminate. In Dewey we get the idea that the choices we make are, at bottom, choices about what kinds of people we want to be. We also get the powerful notion that the meaning of things is not something waiting to be *discovered* but something communicatively

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## A public sphere involves not just problem solving but world building.

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to be *made*. All told, this literature defies the contemporary conceit that deliberation is about arriving at a “right answer,” even if by that we mean something to which all will agree. When we are talking about *ends*, *values*, and *meaning*, we are not necessarily talking about ascertaining or agreeing but about making and choosing.

As Aristotle noted, we do not deliberate about what is the case; we deliberate about what we might bring about: “What we do deliberate about are things that are in our power and can be realized in action”; about things that are inexact



and whose outcomes are unpredictable; about matters of action rather than matters of science. And “when great issues are at stake, we distrust our own abilities as insufficient to decide the matter and call in others to join us in our deliberations.” Ultimately, “the object of deliberation and the object of choice are identical,” because what we are doing in our deliberation is trying to decide what to do. Aristotle went to great pains to make sure his students understood that deliberation is not aimed at matters of fact but is aimed at indeterminate matters of choice and action. This is a lesson missed by those who may think of deliberation as ascertaining moral truth or doing what is “right.” We deliberate about what we *should do*. And on questions of great consequence we bring others—different others—into our deliberations so that we have a better chance of making a better choice that will work for our community as a whole.

Aristotle’s way of framing deliberation is pragmatist because deliberation is about choosing what to *do*, not about deciding what is true or false; and what we should do will stand or fall depending upon what our *purposes* are. In deliberation, as John Dewey later noted, we



try imaginatively to mesh our purposes, goals, or values with possible courses of action: “In imagination as in fact, we know a road only by what we see as we travel on it; in thought as well as in overt action, the objects experienced in following out a course of action attract, repel, satisfy, annoy, promote, and retard.”

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## We are not talking about ascertaining or agreeing, but about making and choosing.

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These choices have consequences. As Dewey noted, in a way that is consistent with Aristotle’s view:

Deliberation has an important function ... because each different possibility as it is presented to the imagination appeals to a different element in the constitution of the self, thus giving all sides of character a chance to play their part in the final choice. The resulting choice also shapes the self, making it, in some degree, a new self.

All of us are who we are thanks to the choices we have made in the past, and who we will be in the future depends upon what choices we make down the road. There have been and always will be roads not taken; the roads we do take shape who we are. “Every choice is at the forking of the roads,” Dewey writes, “and the path chosen shuts off certain opportunities and opens others. In committing oneself to a particular course, a person gives a lasting set to his own being.... In choosing this object rather than that, one is in reality choosing what kind of person or self one is going to be.” The phenomenon that Dewey describes

holds for communities as well as individuals. While it might seem that deliberation is merely about weighing the merits of different possible outcomes, “below the surface, it is a process of discovering” what kind of a people we want to be.

**N**ow any path taken means that another will not be. In choosing, we have to deal with consequences and mourn the losses of what we chose not to pursue. This is a truly difficult and momentous aspect of choice. To appreciate it one needs to recognize that much political choice is not simply a choice between what one group wants versus what another wants. Often any one of us has to choose because we cannot have it all, no matter how much we want to. We have to decide, and going through the process of decision involves mourning the path not taken. Any community that is undergoing a difficult choice is dealing with deep questions of identity. It is when we—individuals, communities, peoples—are undergoing difficult choices that we find that what is difficult is at bottom a question of what kind of people we want to be.

The qualitative difference between public *opinion* formation and public *will* formation is that the former only calls on us to opine, to mouth our preferences. The latter calls on us to decide. If the public is considered merely as generators of public opinion, then everyone wants everything and no one need decide what the right ends are or how to achieve them. We will get a cacophony of competing claims, disagreement without deliberation or choice. The bar needs to be raised for public discourse: don't just tell me what you like; tell me what you want to do—and what you are willing to give up. And tell me you are ready to do this! Dewey hints at the gravitas of political deliberation. It is not



just an opportunity for developing a sounder public opinion about matters of common concern (which is what Habermas says goes on in the informal public sphere). Nor can deliberation be relegated to the political arenas of legislatures and courts (where, Habermas maintains, actual political decisions are made). A public must itself be involved in deliberating and choosing, not merely in opining or even forming opinions.

Anything less is a diminution of political freedom. This is not merely the freedom that liberalism champions—the freedom to be let alone—but the freedom that the civic republican tradition has championed: the freedom to participate in creating their common world. Hannah Arendt called this “revolutionary” freedom or “the lost treasure of the revolution.”

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## The bar needs to be raised for public discourse.

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Many other thinkers have walked along the same path: Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Jefferson, and Dewey, and contemporary thinkers—Hannah Pitkin, Ben Barber, Jane Mansbridge, Mary Dietz, and Harry Boyte, among others. This is not to say that they are all civic republicans—I doubt that few of them would describe themselves that way—but that they see freedom of participation as a central aspect of democratic life.

What they provide on the question at hand is a stepping stone between public opinion and public will, namely a kind of thinking. Arendt calls it judgment: it is a kind of perspectival, representative thinking. Drawing on Kant she writes:

Judgment appeals to common sense and is the very opposite of “private feelings.” In ... political judgments, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants.

While participants occupy different positions, in the process of engaging in political judgment people are attending to things they do in fact share, the public goods over which they might disagree but still are forced to make a collective decision. In the space of a public, deliberative forum—in a *democratic* space—there are at least two palpable shifts: first, deliberators encounter the stake they have in things common. These things common are not “common interests,” not anything like a set of agreed-upon goods or views, but rather these things are overlapping places, geographies, institutions, things common about which they might disagree vehemently. But the “sharedness” of these things pulls them into a democratic space in which they find themselves in a world with others, others whom they may not know or like, but still with whom they have to contend as they deliberate over what will come of this world they share and what this world will do. And second, deliberators find that such deliberation calls for an openness to things unexpected. Deliberation has a discernible posture. It is a leaning toward other possibilities, a leaning toward what others might expose.

A key part of coming to public judgment, in Arendt’s view, is persuasion. Where Habermas thinks that persuasion comes about through the unforced power of the better argument, Arendt claims that such compulsion is as forced as any. “Judgments, furthermore, do not compel—in the sense in which demonstrable facts or truth proved by argument compel—agreement.” Rather than coercion, political discourse involves a rhetoric of persuasion.

The judging person—as Kant says quite beautifully—can only “woo the consent of everyone else” in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually. This “wooing” or persuading corresponds closely to what the Greeks regarded as the typically political form of people talking with one another. Persuasion ruled the intercourse of the citizens of the *polis* because it excluded physical violence; but the philosophers knew that it was also distinguished from another nonviolent form of coercion, the coercion by truth.

So in political speech, people appeal to each other; not to their dispassionate rational side, if there is such a separable faculty, but to their passions and concerns.

I have been drawing on Dewey, Arendt, and other allies to develop a pragmatic understanding



of the public and of what deliberative public judgment might be. When we look for the meaning of an event or a problem, it is not just what *it* means but what it means *for us*. Public deliberation helps elucidate the topography of a problem and the range of political permission on what can be done. In fact, in deliberations, a seemingly inordinate amount of time is spent

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## The process of decision involves mourning the path not taken.

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trying to understand the problem itself (whether it's crime, immigration, health care, the US role in the world, or anything else). This may be the case because understanding the problem, and its meaning for us, is not just a matter of excavation and discovery but also of creation, interpretation, and working through. In articulating what a problem means for us, we also begin to articulate (both retrospectively and prospectively) the meaning of "us": who we are, what we want to stand for, with whom we are in relation, including those who might have seemed to be our enemy.

**I**n keeping with Arendt's conception of judgment, in a deliberative forum, participants can contribute their various perspectives on an issue. They can show how any policy will differentially affect them and their loved ones, point out consequences and promises that others might not have noticed. Not only can they increase the store of public knowledge, they can work through, in the Freudian sense, what they might be willing to give up in order to make progress in light of the



broader public judgment they are developing.

To the extent that deliberation is about choice it is about developing public will. But here public will is more than a rational and cognitive decision about what to do. It is a much more *existential* matter. I propose that in the words *public will* we hear more than the result of a choice: we hear a matter of resolution, deep resolve, willingness borne of having mourned the roads we have chosen not to take. As Arendt noted:

It is not knowledge or truth that is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the *decision* what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it.

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