

KETTERING REVIEW



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

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Searching for Public Judgment

by Daniel Yankelovich

“The American Dream depends on replacing the present state of mass opinion with public judgment.”

In an early work, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, published in 1968, Habermas argued that knowledge conceived as a body of facts and truths existing apart from human purpose is a myth. He developed his thesis that knowledge is *always* linked to purpose and is never properly conceived as a stand-alone body of information and theory.

Habermas described three categories of knowledge, the human purpose each serves, and the procedures we use in each for distinguishing between valid and invalid modes of knowing. Empirical-analytic science, as pursued in the natural sciences, is the first type of knowledge. This form of knowing is to exercise control over nature, so as to accommodate it to human uses. It is closely linked to learning by trial, error, and experimentation. The second category is knowing that we associate with insight into people’s motives, character, values, and world views. To refer to this form of knowing in the American vernacular, we would probably use terms such as *intuitive understanding* or *interpretive insight*—to enhance human understanding and communication. Habermas’ third category is knowledge having an emancipatory purpose—to make people free, to emancipate them mentally from false forms of consciousness, ideology, prejudice, and mental coercion.

Habermas redefines the concept of human reason, deemphasizing its identification with logic and analysis and emphasizing instead its biological rootedness in the universal human ability to communicate across barriers of language and culture. It is this concept of reason that is reflected in public judgment. He believes that the gift of reason is wired into our genes, but not merely in the sense of formal reasoning ability. Habermas believes that people are endowed

by nature, as an inherent part of the human condition, with a larger form of reason. This larger form is a gift that enables people to communicate with each other across national, linguistic, and ideological boundaries in ways that can lead to a shared concept of what is true and what is false.

This genetic endowment does not find expression under any and all conditions. It is not as robust, say, as the ability to walk upright or to express anger or sexual desire. It is intimately linked to speech and language, but speech and language expressed under special conditions. For reason in this sense to prevail there must (1) be dialogue rather than monologue (i.e., people must be talking *to* and *with* each other, not *at* each other) and (2) the dialogue must be free from domination and distortion.

This subtle capability to achieve mutual understanding through language and speech when coercion is absent is a concept of human reason that differs markedly from traditional definitions equating reason either with logic or with objectivist forms of knowing. Its survival value is that, in enhancing people's ability to understand each other, it permits them to take concerted action when necessary.

One way to grasp what Habermas has in mind is to apply his concept of reason to the American scene. One of President Lyndon Johnson's favorite phrases was "Let us reason together." Johnson would often make this appeal when confronted with opposition to his point of view. We know from many anecdotes of the Johnson era that, in these sessions of "reasoning together," LBJ was not talking about formal logical reasoning or scientific empirical inquiry any more than Habermas is. (Johnson never hesitated to use the power at the command of a forceful President of the United States to "communicate" his point of

view.) For Habermas on the other hand, the use of power, coercion, or manipulation undermines the possibility of genuine communication. And yet, despite this profound difference, one senses that the two men, the earthy Texas wheeler-dealer President and the highly theoretical

People can reach mutual understanding even when their interests and points of view collide.

German philosopher, at some deep level shared the same faith—that people can, through dialogue and discussion, reach mutual understanding even when their interests and points of view collide; and that this capability is, in some sense, a process of reasoning together.

Communicative action, Habermas urges, is a form of reason just as compelling as those embedded in our technology and objectivist modes of knowing. In Habermas' own words, part of our natural endowment is "a gentle but obstinate, never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason, a claim that must be recognized whenever and wherever there is to be consensual action." It is this "claim to reason" that can eventually lead to the kind of open dialogue among public, experts, and leaders in which there is give-and-take, two-way communication rather than monologue, and the genuine encounter between leaders and citizens on which true democracy depends.

Only through mutual understanding created by such a process can citizens participate in the decisions that shape our common destiny as a nation and a community. Throughout the history of Western civilization, from the polis in ancient Greece, through the ideals of the Enlightenment of the 18th century, to the revolutions of the

20th century, thinkers have searched for the conditions within which human community and freedom can thrive. Habermas, working in this tradition, attempted in his theory of communicative action to sketch what might be called a “dialogue of democracy”—the

The gift of reason is wired into our genes.

unique and difficult form of communication between public and leaders that genuine democracy requires.

One can look at Habermas’ dialogue of democracy either as a philosopher’s utopian ideal that is largely irrelevant to the power-driven, money-driven world in which we live, or as a practical and realistic way to accomplish national goals we believe are important. Habermas himself always stressed his practical intent. Indeed, one of his harshest criticisms of German philosophy was that it had become so disconnected from the everyday life of the nation that an ugly Nazified culture could coexist side by side with professors mouthing the most lofty and noble sentiments and not be aware of their bad faith in doing so.



With some qualifications, I find the “practical intent” of Habermas’ theory of communicative action credible. Transferred from the German to the American scene, a few modifications are in order. But overall, from my perspective as a practitioner who has long been engaged in objectivist research on social-political processes, I believe Habermas and like-minded philosophers have successfully reconnected theoretical philosophy to the practical goals of Western democratic society.

What are the chances of mobilizing the nation’s political will? Can an abstract-sounding objective, such as raising the level of public judgment, come close to priorities as urgent as preserving the environment and curbing drug abuse? The answer to these questions is “yes, *if*. . .” The *if* is whether the public comes to see how much the American Dream depends on replacing the present state of mass opinion with public judgment. The public needs to grasp the connection between improving the quality of public opinion and making our democracy work better in a practical way.

The essence of democratic dialogue is conveyed in Martin Buber’s concept of the “I-thou” relationship. When “I” and “thou” engage each other, something deeper than a mere exchange of views is going on. The I-thou interaction implies a genuine receptivity to the other: I do not listen passively to what you are saying; I respond to it with my whole being. I may argue and dispute the correctness of your views, but “I take them in,” in the deepest sense of the word. And you do likewise. From the encounter, both I and thou emerge changed. Each of us has internalized the point of view of the other.

Another concept supporting the vision is Habermas’ insight that it is disastrous to divorce

human reason from the world of ordinary life—the struggle to make a living, raise families, and live peacefully as a community. When experts, influenced by the culture of technical control, conceive reason as something separate and apart from everyday life—the property of

Reason is not the exclusive property of a class of experts.

a trained class of specialists, scientists, and other elites—then the deepest ideals of the founding fathers of the nation are betrayed. Reason is *not* the exclusive property of a class of experts whose training and credentials certify the possession of a special endowment. Reason is a more humble, more universal, more democratic gift.

To my mind, these are stunning insights. They shape a vision of a democracy that encourages people to listen to each other and to weigh each other's views seriously. It is a vision of a democracy that involves those who wish to be involved and recognizes that the highest expression of human rationality is not nuclear physics or econometric models but ordinary people speaking and reasoning together on issues of common concern.

It is a vision of what David Mathews calls a *deliberative* democracy, as distinct from a representative or participatory democracy. It is a democracy that revives the notion of thoughtful and active citizenship. Citizenship now is treated like a passive form of consumer behavior: people “fail” at citizenship not because they are apathetic but because they do not think their actions or views make any real difference. We need to expand the notion of citizen choice, now confined to elections, to include making choices on the vital issues that confront us every day.

In the 1988 presidential campaign, candidate George Bush promised a “kinder, gentler nation.” This appeal struck a responsive chord in the electorate. But after the election, the phrase *kinder and gentler* became a stock laugh line for TV comedians who used it satirically. Why did this happen? It was not because George Bush was hypocritical. There is no reason to question his sincerity. But it did not take long for observers to realize that his invocation of a kinder, gentler America was a mere slogan, empty words devoid of implementation. This well-meant bit of rhetoric added one more stimulus to the growing cynicism of the American public.

The vision I have is of an America where average citizens engage in serious dialogue about



what would truly make America a kinder, gentler nation. This is what the public wants for America. But with limited resources and conflicting needs, it is difficult to achieve. Slogans and top-down leadership cannot achieve it. It requires serious democratic dialogue to shape a political debate in which the public—the whole public—participates.

As our society is presently organized, few institutions are responsible for the common interest. The theory is that the general interest emerges out of the interplay of special interest. This theory, straight from the textbooks of liberal

The concept of the general interest is an urgent concern.

political philosophy, is today the dominant practice in Washington and the state capitals. It is one of the principal causes of the nation's political gridlock: competing special interests exercise a veto over projects to serve the general interest. The concept of the general interest is, however, an urgent concern for average Americans. As individuals, senior citizens, for example, will give far greater weight to the general interest than will the lobby that represents their special interests. My vision, then, is of a society in which the general interest is as well represented as special interests, and in which average citizens play a decisive role in defining it.



I see this vision as “actively conservative.” It is conservative in the sense of staying true to long-standing American traditions. We need, for example, to recover the public traditions of our political culture, particularly those that understand politics as more than the clash of special-interest groups, mediated by government. The modern concept of a professional government has no place in it for the public or its citizens; the public really is not necessary for the prevailing vision of how we govern ourselves. People feel pushed out of this kind of system; they feel incompetent; and so they reject politics.

Staying true to tradition requires a change of direction. The root meaning of *conservative* is “to save, to conserve.” Sometimes this translates into protecting the status quo. But sometimes it means transformation! If the tradition is losing its way, then keeping faith with it means finding one's way back to the true path—to let in the light of knowledge to elevate the freedom and dignity of people. But in doing so we must also recognize that this means changing our culture and institutions to accommodate a more democratic concept of the light of human reason, one that is not the exclusive property of learned experts but, potentially, of everyone.

For this concept, one does not need a graduate degree to develop sound public judgment. One educates oneself for it but not in the manner the culture of technical control dictates. Eventually, we must reintroduce a broader concept of politics into the educational system. We now teach young people to know about “things”; we teach them forms of scientific knowledge. We do not teach them how to make choices with others. We do not develop the kind of intelligence needed to make public judgments. Not only is our concept of knowledge limited to expert knowledge, so is our pedagogy. Our version of civic education is based on how many students know their state capitals. But the

movements that are now changing the political history of the world are not led by people who knew their state capitals better than other people.

What specific goals would translate this vision from rhetoric into reality? At least three suggest themselves. If American society were to achieve them, much of the vision could be realized.

If our democracy is to remain vital, no goal is more important than bringing the expert-public relationship into better balance. For decades now, a vicious cycle has been unfolding: as the experts usurp more and more of the nation's decision making, the public slumps ever more into mass opinion. There are several logical alternatives for stopping the vicious cycle. We can weaken the experts. We can try to strengthen the public. Or we can combine the two approaches.

In practice, however, it makes no sense to weaken the experts. A populist, anti-expert, anti-intellectual rampage might give some activists emotional satisfaction, but it would be short-lived. The conservative nature of the vision demands that we accept our identity as heirs of the Enlightenment. To be true to that tradition, we must also accept its conviction that scientific knowledge gives our civilization vast powers of control over the material conditions of life. A concomitant of such acceptance is a willingness to give a place of honor to experts and to scientific/technological knowledge. Given the nature of modern industrial society, to discourage the experts from making their optimum contribution would be mindlessly self-destructive. The great task of our era is to tame the culture of technical control, not destroy it. The strategy of choice, then, is to seek to strengthen the public.

A second goal is to broaden several shared cultural meanings, namely, what it means to be

a leader in our society, what it means to be a citizen, and what it means to pursue knowledge. Literature on leadership is vast, but seldom does it focus on the leader as a person who helps to shape public judgment. Strong leaders usually are regarded as individuals who arrive at decisions through individual gifts of character, intelligence, and insight. They then exercise leadership through persuasion, calling upon additional gifts of communication, sincerity, and charisma. It is fashionable among elites to regard as craven



and despicable the tendency of political leaders to “follow the opinion polls” rather than their own convictions.

It should be clear that the two alternatives of slavishly following the opinion polls or standing on one's own convictions irrespective of public opinion are false choices for a democracy. In a democracy, one of the major qualifications of leaders is that they develop the skill to move the public toward consensus by playing a constructive role at every stage of the public

judgment process—consciousness raising, working through, and resolution. For this to happen, the culture has to broaden its definition of leadership to incorporate this ability.

What it means to be a citizen must also evolve culturally. In today's America, citizenship is largely a matter of rights and of voting. People are far more mindful of the rights of citizenship

Experts and public have different roles to perform.

than of its obligations. The general view is, "This is a free country. I have the right to say what's on my mind, move wherever and whenever I want, and do whatever I want as long as it doesn't interface with the rights of others."

On the obligation side of the equation, people acknowledge that they ought to vote and pay some taxes (though not as much as they are now paying). Almost no one feels a personal obligation *as a citizen* to struggle with the issues that confront the country and contribute to their solution. Most Americans do not think they *can* contribute ("I don't know enough about the issue"); and even if they could, they do not think that their contributions are wanted.

They are, of course, correct in this latter assumption: policymakers do not really seek public input. But the task of coming to public judgment requires that people grow convinced that their views count. Making an intelligent contribution is hard work. Americans will not do it unless they have an incentive. It does not have to be a big incentive. But Americans must, at the very least, know that leadership is listening and is responsive. There is no way to change the meaning of leadership without simultaneously changing the meaning of citizenship.

To improve public judgment, the adversarial relationship between experts, and public must be transformed into a cooperative, mutually supportive one. There is no need for conflict. Experts and public have different roles to perform. The public should not try to play amateur expert. The expert should not permit personal values to preempt the rights of citizens to make their own value judgments.

Parts of the education and training system must be redesigned to pay more attention to the *unfamiliar* methods of representative thinking, public choice formulation, working through, and democratic dialogue. This part of the system is almost totally neglected. If more institutions were devoted to improving the methods needed to advance public judgment, the chances of creating a better expert-public balance would be greatly enhanced.

It would be naïve to minimize the scope of the task. Success requires not only changes in existing institutions, such as the media and the nation's elite professional training systems, but also the creation of new institutions and the stimulation of cultural change. Moreover, changes need to occur on both sides of the expert-public gap: the public has to change as well as the



experts. And, perhaps most difficult of all, these changes must occur despite formidable resistance to the concept of public judgment.

On the other hand, the practical experience gained by the Public Agenda and Kettering foundations over the past several decades gives reason for optimism. They show that the task is doable. Through a variety of programs, these two organizations have been chipping away at the many obstacles to public judgment. Their experience suggests that, given enough time, some mass opinion can be converted into public

judgment. In absolute terms, the amount may be small. But its effects may be far-reaching—enough to change American history.

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