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**Cover art:** Seung Lee, Bamboo #3 (30”x 30” Mixed media 2015)
Alignment of an institutional world to the social and personal worlds gives meaning to citizen agency and challenges people to see one another as fellow citizens.

I want us to get a better grip on democracy as a concept because we often set either too low or too high a standard. In some high school and college government textbooks, democracy is achieved merely by following the rules, obeying the law, and showing up to vote (when we feel strongly enough, that is). In other, more philosophical conversations, democracy is attained only when certain cognitive, deliberative, or distributive demands are met that protect decision-making forums from public ignorance, strategic bargaining, and resource inequalities. By contrast, I want to bring things down to earth: to specific places, routines, and above all, to specific people in proximity to one another sharing tasks, information, and decisions. Democracy means sharing power to shape a common public life with others who are not the same as us. This is more demanding than rule-following, obedience, and voting, but it also differs from the philosophers’ standards.

Consent, legitimacy, sovereignty, and myriad other terms used in political theory can sound legalistic and formal, as if democracy were only about laws, regulations, and voting rules. Instead of the legal, regulative, and electoral, however, I want to stress the productive as being the vital core of democracy: we share tasks that constitute us as a people—we produce education, justice, security, and more. We learn how to do this task-sharing activity well or poorly, consciously or not, in schools, workplaces, street corners, hospitals, courtrooms, and many other places. Cognition does not drive democratic work in such places; it follows it. Laws and rules help shape institutions
that allow citizens to act, of course, but it is the action itself that makes them democratic.

Pessimism pervades contemporary thinking about democracy. In academia, some worry about “oligarchic” and “neoliberal” power while others raise alarms about “populist” and “demotic” influence. Outside the university, widespread distrust of politics and politicians is common, as is a pervasive lack of trust in each other as resources for long-term constructive social change.

I think this pessimism and distrust is deeply rooted in the nonparticipatory and professionally managed public world Americans live in. Yes, we have social movements, but many civil society groups have become top-down hierarchical organizations that mobilize support, fund-raise, and advocate narrowly for an otherwise unlinked membership population. Where once such groups tutored people in the practical communication, interpersonal, and organizational skills useful for effective civic participation, today they are managed by increasingly professionalized staff. Yes, we have politics, but in government, too, public institutions that could welcome, indeed require, citizen contributions simply do not. Courts, for example, once heard most cases through a jury trial made up of citizens acting—for a few days—as part of their government. Now, only one to four percent of state and federal criminal cases reach the trial stage, with the rest plea bargained or settled.

We might suspect, and we wouldn’t be wrong, that the organization of modern life is unfriendly to democracy. We have good reason to be anxious about concentrations of power and non-transparency in our institutions. If we know where to look, however, we will see some powerful examples of democratic innovation that could point a way out of our current situation. Collective work in unassuming, everyday places is happening all around us and inviting us in.

Innovators are working in education, journalism, criminal justice, health care, city government, and other fields today. They are democratic professionals not because they do democracy really professionally, but because they do professionalism really democratically. They are democratizing specific parts of our public world that have become professionalized: our schools, newspapers, TV stations, police
departments, courts, probation offices, prisons, hospitals, clinics, and government agencies, among others. They use their professional training, capabilities, and authority to help people—in their fields of action—to solve problems together and, even more important, to recognize the kinds of problems they need to solve.

They share previously professionalized tasks and encourage lay participation in ways that enhance and enable collective action and deliberation about major social issues inside and outside professional domains.

Professionalism, broadly understood, has important meanings and implications for individuals, groups, and society at large. To be a professional is to have a commitment to competence in a specific field of action—you pursue specialized skills and knowledge so you can act well in difficult situations. Professionals understand their work as having an important normative core: beyond simply earning a living, the work serves society somehow. Sociologists of the professions stress the ways occupations draw boundaries around certain tasks, claim special abilities to handle them, police the ways in which they are discharged, and monitor education and training. Democratic professionalism is an alternative to a conventional model of professionalism I call social trustee professionalism, yet it is also different from some other approaches critical of professional power, which I call the radical critique.

The social trustee ideal emerged in the 1860s and held prominence for a century among traditional professions such as law and medicine, as well as aspiring professions such as engineering and social work. It holds that professionals have a more general responsibility than just a fiduciary or function-specific obligation to their clients. Of course, professionals are obligated to competently perform their tasks, but they also have general responsibilities that stem from their social status, the trust clients place in them, and the market protection governments have permitted them through licensing and other regulations. As Talcott Parsons put it, “A full-fledged profession must have some institutional means of making sure . . . competence will be put to socially responsible uses.” For example, the medical profession heals people, but it also contributes to the larger social goals of curing disease and improving public health. And the legal profession, besides defending their clients’ rights, also upholds the social conception of justice.

Social trustee professionals may represent public interests in principle, but in fact, this
A radical critique emerged in the 1960s, drawing attention to the ways professions can be impediments to the democratic expression of public interests rather than trustworthy representatives. Though aware of the benefits of modern divisions of labor that distribute tasks to different groups of people with specialized training for the sake of efficiency, productivity, and innovation, critics such as Ivan Illich and Michel Foucault worried about task monopolies secured by professionals that block participation, shrink the space of democratic authority, and disable and immobilize citizens who might occupy that space.

Professions shrink the space of democratic authority when they perform public purposes that could conceivably be done by laypeople. Critics stress that these services and products have public consequences: how they are done affects people not just as individuals but also as members of an ongoing collective. And sometimes professionals quite literally shrink the space of participation by deciding public issues in institutions, far from potential sites of citizen awareness and action. Think of how health care professionals promote certain kinds of treatment and healing over others and how criminal justice professionals construct complex anger management and life-skills programming for convicted offenders. Professionals can disable and immobilize because, in addition to taking over these tasks, their sophistication in, say, healing or sentencing, makes people less comfortable with relying on their own devices for wellness and social order. Professions are professions by virtue of their utilization of abstract, specialized,

representation is very abstract. Serving “the community” is not seen by professionals as something that requires much say from diverse members of actual, present-day communities. Under the terms of the social trustee model, professionals serve the public through their commitment to high standards of practice, a normative orientation toward a sphere of social concern—doctors and health, lawyers and justice—and self-regulation. The model is held together on the basis of an economy of trust: the public trusts the professionals to self-regulate and determine standards of practice, while the professionals earn that trust by performing competently and adhering to the socially responsible normative orientation.

Those public administrators, for example, who see themselves as social trustees assert quite straightforwardly that they are hired to manage issues for which they have specialized training—public budgeting, town planning, and the orchestration of service provision, among others. If their communities disapprove of the way they do their jobs, they can fire them, but true professionals do not need to listen to their communities.
or otherwise esoteric knowledge to serve social needs such as health or justice. The status and authority of professional work depend on the deference of nonmembers—their acknowledgment that professionals perform these tasks better than untrained others. But with deference comes the risk that members of the general public lose confidence in their own competence—not only where the task itself is concerned, but for making informed collective decisions about issues that relate to professional domains of action.

How can professional actors help mobilize rather than immobilize, expand rather than shrink democratic authority? The radical critique leaves this question largely unexplored. Critics offer few alternatives to social trusteeism for reform-minded practitioners who wish to be both professional and democratic: to depersonalize or to develop highly self-reflective and acutely power-sensitive forms of professional practice that draw attention to the ways traditional practices and institutions block and manipulate citizens. Yet these reform suggestions fail to register the ways professional power can be constructive for democracy. To the extent that professionals serve as barriers and disablers, they can also, if motivated, serve as barrier removers and enablers. Especially in complex, fast-paced modern societies, professional skills and knowledge help laypeople manage personal and collective affairs. What we need is not an anti-professionalism, but a democratic professionalism oriented toward public capability.

So, how might democratic professionals go about their work? While heeding the conventional obligation to serve social purposes, they also seek to avoid perpetuating the civic disenfranchisement noticed by radical critics of professional power. Democratic professionals relate to society in a particular way: rather than using their skills and expertise as they see fit for the good of others, they aim to understand the world of the patient, the offender, the client, the student, and the citizen on their terms—and then work collaboratively on common problems. They regard the layperson’s knowledge and agency as critical components in resolving what can all too easily be seen as strictly professional issues: education, government, health, justice, and more.

Democratic professionals in the United States and elsewhere are already creating power-sharing arrangements in institutions that are usually hierarchical and nonparticipatory. They can help us understand the resources available right now for deep cultural change. To appreciate this, however, we must release ourselves from the grip of the prevailing view of how and where democratic change happens.

Drawing on the historical precedents of abolition, women’s suffrage, labor reform, civil rights, and student movements, discussion of
Less noticed are the alterations democratic professionals make to their institutions as they break down internal hierarchies and foster physical proximity between people, encourage coownership of problems previously seen as too complex for laypeople, and seek out opportunities for collaborative work. We fail to see these activities as politically significant because they do not fit our conventional picture of democratic change.

Democratic professionals have leverage on the social world, but it differs from that of the political actors and movement organizers we are used to. The energy involved is not a large burst, but a slow burn fueled not by a shift in public consciousness, but through load-bearing work that fosters relations of proximity within classrooms, conference rooms, and administrative offices, all of them spaces newly reopened to the public as civic spaces. This proximity in public space—getting close enough to see and understand others as fellow citizens—is taken for granted, and yet it is in astonishingly short supply. We live in a democracy, but it is very easy to go through life without ever working democratically on a public problem with others who differ from oneself in terms of race, class, or education.

They regard the layperson’s knowledge and agency as critical components in resolving what can all too easily be seen as strictly professional issues.

democratic change typically focuses on the power of people joined together in common cause to press for major legislative action. Core factors in the process include leadership; mobilization; organizational capacity; consciousness-raising; forms of protest such as strikes, marches, and sit-ins; and electoral pressure on political parties and candidates.

While our default perspective is crucial for understanding some types of democratic action, it is state-centric and privileges resources that are exogenous to daily life. In this first path to democratic change, political action appears as a burst of collective energy that then dissipates after certain legal or policy targets are met: slavery abolished, voting rights for women established, the eight-hour workday guaranteed, military conscription for Vietnam ended. A large enough number of people temporarily leave their everyday routines to join a collective effort. For this reason, some scholars call democratic movements “fugitive” since at the end of the protest or campaign, most people return home, leaving the business of government to insiders.
Bringing laypeople together to produce justice, education, public health and safety, and government—when done routinely in the normal social environment—helps backfill the erosion of contemporary public life. In part, it is accomplished by repairing our frayed participatory infrastructure: the traditional town meetings, public hearings, jury trials, and citizen oversight committees. It also requires remodeling these old forms and creating new civic spaces. Democratic professionals who share load-bearing work in schools, public health clinics, city governments, and even prisons are innovators who are expanding, not just conserving, American democracy.

Managers, officials, and mid-level professionals all too easily seal themselves off from clients, taxpayers, and patients; they serve and treat people without fully understanding them. They privilege speed, efficiency, and cost containment, and employ hierarchies and divisions of labor. These internal arrangements create distance between organizations and citizens, neglecting the democratic value of proximity. To restore it, institutions must edge closer to the public work already being done by lay citizens and community groups. To borrow concepts from Max Weber, proximity requires adjusting formal institutional rationality to accommodate, appreciate, and act upon the substantive rationality of citizens.

David Mathews aptly calls this process alignment and has shown how institutions and citizens alike gain from collaborative rather than technocratic working relations. Alignment, Mathews points out, demands more than being “accountable” or “transparent” or “professional” to citizens on terms defined by professionals, but it “doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties.” Rather, it means an organization must rethink a social trustee orientation and recognize the value of citizens’ attempts to solve problems on their own. Given the right kind of institutional culture, alignment can result in some organizational activities actually being steered by values and objectives brought in by laypeople. Alignment of an institutional world to the social and personal worlds gives meaning to citizen agency and challenges people to see one another as fellow citizens.

**Institutions must edge closer to the public work already being done by lay citizens and community groups.**