A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
The *Kettering Review* ® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

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ISSN 0748-8815 (print)
ISSN 2471-2914 (online)
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Cover art: Seung Lee, Bamboo #3 (30”x 30” Mixed media 2015)
Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair
By Bonnie Honig

Democracy is rooted in common love for, antipathy to, and contestation of public things. Without public things, action in concert is undone and the signs and symbols of democratic life are devitalized. In the United States, the president must wear a flag pin, it seems, but the pin’s signifying power is underwritten by a national park system, public cemeteries, public education, and more. Without such public things, democracy is reduced to procedures, polling, and policing, all necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient conditions of democratic life. If we leave to democracy merely the practice of electoral majoritarianism and deliberative proceduralism while divesting democratic states or publics of their ownership of or responsibility for public things, we risk reducing democratic citizenship to repetitive (private) work (what Lauren Berlant calls “crisis ordinary”) and exceptional (public) emergencies (what we can call “crisis extraordinary”). From a public-things perspective, it is notable that one of the first things the Occupy movement did at Zuccotti Park was to establish a communal library. Without public things, we have nothing or not much to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest. There is nothing to occasion the action in concert that is democracy’s definitive trait. What Christopher Breu says about the commons is true for democracy as well: There can be “no common without the commons” or, as he also says, “no subjects without objects.”

Public things are part of the “holding environment” of democratic citizenship; they furnish the world of democratic life. They do not take
care of our needs only. They also constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship.

At the very least, public things press us into relations with others. They are sites of attachment and meaning that occasion the

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inaugurations, conflicts, and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenships and democratic sovereignties.

New York’s Central Park was built in an awful swamp, but on it were lavished incredible skills, craftsmanship, design, and materials. This and, in particular, the use of Alhambra style tiles whose colors do not stop at the surface but run all the way through, stands as a great metaphor for public things whose powers run all the way through us. And this lavish care was no accident. As Joshua Cohen explains, “Olmsted had spent the 1850s working as a journalist, writing about slavery and aristocracy. He thought that the conflict between North and South in the United States was part of a global fight between democratic and aristocratic models of society. There’s an aristocratic criticism of democracy that goes all the way back to Plato, that when you try to do things for everyone you end up with lowest-common-denominator crap. Olmsted saw building Central Park as a way of proving the aristocrats wrong. It was built by a democratic society for a democratic society—for the people—and was incredibly beautiful. His bet was that people would be drawn to it.” And they have been. At their best, public things gather people together, materially and symbolically, and in relation to them diverse peoples may come to see and experience themselves—even if just momentarily—as a common in relation to a commons, a collected if not a collective, to redeploy Michael Oakeshott’s distinction.

In political theory, where collectivity is the point of departure, we can see how collectivity postulates successful acts of collection and recollection, and that such self-collection occurs in relation to objects. In political theory, we might attend, in particular, to the power of public things to stimulate the object relations of democratic collectivity. Those public things are the infrastructure of democratic life, and they underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity that, for the moment, still survive. The ubiquitous flag pins that even the American president must wear are underwritten by the public things of democracy: schools, prisons, water treatment plants, wars, transportation, and more.

In Undoing the Demos, Wendy Brown comes close to commenting on this. She notes the undoing of the demos by way of privatization and by new habits of rational calculation that, she says, have taken the place of public things and civic-mindedness. But her primary focus, notwithstanding her discussion of the demise of the public university, is on the educational goods the public university has the power to deliver and on the demos that needs to be educated, and not on the powers of the public
thing as such. She charts the loss of the idea of a people united in deliberation and action to build a collective, democratic present and future. She faults neoliberalization, as a result of which markets are everywhere, market rationality governs everything, and the basic terms of democratic life have been lost. Looking for ways out of the problem, Brown is drawn to Rousseau’s paradox of politics, in which he says that a good people and good law or institutions presuppose and require each other. In the period of founding, good law is required to found a people but good people are needed to found good law. How to break out of the impasse of the paradox? In the Social Contract, Rousseau imagines a miraculous lawgiver who appears on the scene for long enough to get the social contract going by convening the people, setting the agenda, and giving good law. I will suggest here that the lawgiver’s role may be played by public things.

I have argued elsewhere that Rousseau’s problem of beginning is not a one-time thing, but a quandary that besets every democracy every day, as new members immigrate and are born into it, and established members are every day repressed (or not) into its norms anew, with varying degrees of success. If, on Rousseau’s account, we need a miracle (Rousseau’s lawgiver) to get started, then we need one every day, on mine. For Brown, though, we are further and further removed from such miracles now. Rousseau’s paradox reasserts itself ever more powerfully under neoliberalism because of the evisceration of the public university system, whose mission of civic education is undone not only by underfunding, which requires ever more fund-raising from private sources (which drives the university’s research and priorities according to values that may be dear to the donor but are often alien to the institution and far from any true democratic needs), but also by neoliberalism’s cultivated hostility to anything that is not clearly instrumental, profitable, and practical from the perspective of late capitalism. Without the public university’s commitments to liberal arts education, we are thrust back into the insoluble paradox, albeit now with no miracle in sight. Says Brown, “Hence, another variation on Rousseau’s paradox: to preserve the kind of education that nourishes democratic culture and enables democratic

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particular statement of it contains one of her explicit references to public things as such:

When there is only *homo oeconomicus*, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good. Here, the problem is not just that public goods are defunded and common ends are devalued by neoliberal reason although this is so, but that citizenship itself loses its *political* valence and venue [sphereism again; italics in the original]. Valence: *homo oeconomicus* approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way. Venue: Political life, and the state in particular, . . . are remade by neoliberal rationality [and] . . . the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty [is eliminated].

Is Brown’s case so compelling because it is so obviously true? Perhaps better, we can say that her powerful writing makes what is true about it suddenly seems inescapably obvious. We have seen public universities trade in faculty governance and accountability for private donors, market incentives, and industry benchmarks. We have seen those who once appreciated an institution’s uniqueness turn, instead, to talk about its “branding.” We have witnessed the craze for “massive open online courses” (MOOCs) as the next big thing, and the sight of universities as unabashed chasers of the next big thing, and we have heard the silence that followed the apparent collapse or normalization of the craze that was originally touted as foretelling the transformation of education.

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All of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object.

are, Brown laments, limited to mere “reform and resistance,” both of which, she thinks, do little or nothing to remediate the bleak conditions under which democracy labors fitfully to survive today, a labor that, Brown intimates, has already been rendered nugatory.

Brown’s analysis of the wholesale conquest of democratic life by neoliberal reason and, more importantly, of *homo politicus by homo oeconomicus*, is compelling and stark. This

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rule, we require the knowledge that only a liberal arts education can provide. Thus, democracy hollowed out by neoliberal rationality cannot be counted on to renew liberal arts education for a democratic citizenry.” Without the vision and aspirations nurtured by such education, we
into service delivery. Thus, when Toni Morrison charts the transition in her political lifetime from US subjects being addressed as “citizens” to being addressed as “taxpayers,” most of her readers will experience the jolt of recognition that underwrites Brown’s theoretical arguments.

But the power of the case may also be its limitation. The overtaking of the contemporary mind by neoliberal rationality is so powerful in Brown’s account that it is difficult to understand where resistance could come from and how a politics of alternative movements could take hold. That is precisely the problem Brown wants to chart. With her jeremiad, she seeks to awaken a public to the problem, but she risks becoming its captive. She mentions, in passing, some alternative movements and intimations of possible alternative politics, and this suggests that other things may also be afoot, but she does not give them any real weight, and it is hard to imagine them getting a grip on, much less interrupting, the incredible powers of the new episteme charted by her. These alternative political movements are always there, but Brown says that they only surface episodically. When they do surface, they politicize what neoliberalism naturalizes or economizes and they do so, often, by way of objects. Inequality was politicized by Occupy, which began with the occupation of a hybrid public/private space, an act quickly followed by the installation of a public library.

In a way, focusing on the objects rather than the subjects of democracy might help to highlight anew the inequalities of race and the operations of white supremacy in the US context. Talk of the demos or the people distinguishes who is in and who is out, but it often obscures unequal memberships. Talk of public things, however, immediately calls to mind which of the demos’s bodies are policed in public venues and which are assumed to belong there. American streets are open to free use by some citizens, but when frequented by others those same streets quickly turn into sites of surveillance or control. Hoodies in malls, homeless people in parks, ethnic minorities in the “wrong” neighborhoods, Muslims going to the mosque, black protesters sitting at whites-only lunch counters, black teenage girls swimming in a communal pool, dragged out because they are “too loud,” then tackled by grown men in police uniforms, dead bodies left lying in the road. These incidents, familiar from decades of headlines and history, remind us how public things are asymmetrically policed, restricted, and controlled these days without the brazenness of “Whites Only” signs but often no less volubly or effectively. Everyone knows. That is why those excluded or marginalized, and their
allies, demand access to public things—because that access looks like citizenship; and it is. But all too often, as soon as access is won, the value of the public thing or, more accurately, its desirability among whites, goes down. This is a reason to struggle more mightily for public things, not a reason to give up on them. It is a reason to invest our best in them, as was done with New York’s Central Park, something everyone wants to be part of. Democratic sovereignty is an effect, I want to say; public things are its condition, necessary if not sufficient. They are the basis of democratic flourishing, prods to action in concert.

It may be that we depend on public things and they depend on us. And this may mean that Rousseau’s paradox, or something like it, is inescapable and irresolvable. But this does not mean we are necessarily defeated by it; there are ways for democratic activists to work within the paradox, to be energized by it. Brown also imagines the call that inaugurates action as a kind of speech act. But the call may come from the object world as well.

Take, for example, public telephones. After Hurricane Sandy, pay phones, normally treated as part of New York City’s ruined landscape, emerged suddenly to become communications lifesavers, relics with an afterlife. As Ben Cohen noted in the Wall Street Journal, “Natural disasters tend to vindicate the pay phone,” which is “mounted high and sometimes behind glass stalls [and so] generally remains serviceable during power outages, even amid flooding.” Cohen goes on in his article to focus on the only problem would-be users of public telephones faced after Sandy (coin overload), missing the irony of a situation in which the immediate problem is seen as being too much money (coin overload) rather than too little (too little money provided to maintain public things). As a result, the real story—the democratic story of public things—is only intimated but left untold. The real importance of so-called pay phones is that they are, as indeed they were once called, public phones, situated on the streets and available to everyone.

Dealing with the effects of flooding, a blackout, and downed cell towers, stormstruck residents of New York City eager to get in touch with friends and loved ones rediscovered the public telephones they had been blithely passing by for years. Said one new user of the old technology quoted by Cohen, “It’s funny what’s hiding in plain sight. . . . It’s invisible, but when you need it, it’s there.” Was she just talking about the phones? What is funny, invisible, but hiding in plain sight is the very idea of public things, things that conjoin people. Shared among users from all kinds of backgrounds, classes, and social locations, the public thing calls out to us, interpelling us as a public. It is all too funny that, in this particular case, the public thing that is calling out to people is in fact a telephone. Will we answer its ring? Many did so, in the aftermath of Sandy, coming together to share the phones, taking messages for strangers, offering change. But with the passing of the emergency,
the sound of the public phone became less audible.

We might see the quaintness of the old-fashioned phones as a synecdoche for the quaintness, in our mostly neoliberal context, of publicness itself. I imagine that is how it would look to Brown, and it does so to me, too, a lot of the time. But the public phone harbors another possibility as well. We could say that the emergency of the storm brought out a kind of craving for the public thing, the thing that hides in plain sight, but when you need it, it’s there. This is different from the mass consumerist need to all be in love with the same private object—the newest iPhone, say—and to have one, of which there are millions. When people own objects privately, they experience the objects’ personal and perhaps fetishistic magic (otherwise, why would we bother owning anything?) but privately owned objects lack the political magic that is my focus in these lectures. That is why Arendt says about objects lose their thingness in neoliberalism (they may or may not); the concern here is that they lose their political thingness. That political thingness is as precious and necessary for the body politic as is the personal magic of the transitional object for the individual in Winnicott’s object-relations theory. It is not that the object exerts a personal magic on all of us in common, but that all of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object. We may think this happens in relation to objects like the iPhone, and it may; we cannot rule that out. But the consumer need for such commodities—the fetish—is more like the ruin, the remnant, of the democratic desire to constellate affectively around shared objects, public things. The ruin testifies to a not quite lost past; might it also bode a possible future?

Sometimes the ruin speaks. The desire for a democracy of public things has been in recent decades rechanneled into commercial formats, but it is not extinguished. The signs are there:

The emergency of the storm brought out a craving for the public thing that hides in plain sight.

such things that “This enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public . . . for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant.” Thus, it is not exactly that
The desire remains. The aspiration is alive, but they require redirection and sustenance.

In the aftermath of Sandy, there were demands for better cell phone towers to secure coverage in emergencies. But no one called for better support for the public telephones that served the public so ably this time. Why not? This response (the response of Brown’s *homo oeconomicus*, undoubtedly) is rather like the decision to build more roads for cars a century ago, in place of investing in public transportation. But the ruin calls for a different response. Why not commit instead to preserve the pay phones in appreciation of the fact that the ones in New York City, that most palimpsest-like of all cities, seem miraculously to work? But not only miraculously, or at least not miraculously in the usual sense: Someone has been tending to them, maintaining the critical communications infrastructure of the city undeterred by the fact that most city residents have withdrawn from it, preferring their own private communications devices, until they fail. Why not turn pay phones from relics of a lost past into the stable new infrastructure of a possible new future of public things? True, in such a scenario public phones may become mere emergency phones, which would be ironic since “emergency” has fast become the only public thing left to us. On the other hand, though, as long as we have a public thing, the space is arguably open for the return of other public things. In the ruins of public things, the return of other public things remains imaginable and realizable. Almost.

Public phones hide in plain sight, but when we need them, they are there. We just need to answer their call.

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