A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
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Cover art: Seung Lee, Bamboo #3 (30”x 30” Mixed media 2015)
This journal has long stressed the role of citizens in shaping public life, participating in democracy, and creating better conditions for democratic institutions to flourish. Where others see the creation of public goods as primarily the domain of institutions and experts, for many years we have looked at how communities of ordinary citizens, locally and nationally, can help make democracy work better, that is, at how the public is vital to a well-functioning democracy. As our readers know, we have long argued that democracy is much more than a matter of participating in periodic elections. More broadly, it involves activities from holding neighborhood forums to coaching youth sports and even to leaving the front porch light on. Together, citizens help shape the public agenda and they deliberate over the democratic legitimacy of more formal institutions and policies. Even when they disagree, their collective deliberations, over time, can develop into public will about what ought to be done.

In this issue of the *Review*, we are looking at matters a little differently. How, we wonder, might formal public institutions work with informal publics? How might they contribute to—or get in the way of—the public’s democratic work? How can organizations and institutions align themselves with the work of a democratic citizenry? These simple questions form the backbone of this issue of the *Kettering Review*.

These are not questions about how people and institutions can work in lockstep. Rather, we’re asking, How might they better align or complement each other? In a complementary relationship, the various parties can work in the same direction without losing their unique strengths and missions. In a high-crime neighborhood, committed citizens might escort children to school, while a formal institution might analyze data on how effective that initiative is. Both are necessary components of tackling the problem, but citizens are not necessarily in a position to analyze data and institutions are not necessarily responsible for walking children to school every day.

Finding a complementary alignment is obviously difficult. In this issue, we explore the challenges inherent in attempting to work in this manner, the characteristics of organizations that have decided to do so, and a few examples of organizations trying their best to align their work with the work of a democratic citizenry.
The issue starts with an excerpt from the work of the late Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, who makes the case for an expanded notion of what governance means. In her piece, Ostrom highlights how institutional action is necessary but not sufficient to produce vital public goods. She states, “If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service.” This presumption pushes people to the sidelines of democratic life when, in fact, they often have vital contributions to make in the service of producing public goods.

Albert Dzur picks up on this theme of professionalization as he highlights the stories of what he calls “democratic professionals.” In settings as diverse as public schools, local government, and prisons, Dzur shows how professionals across the country are altering their normal routines to better align their work with, and benefit from, the work of others. Dzur shows that these institutional alterations can be challenging, but their promise is immense.

Turning to the work of citizens themselves, our piece by John McKnight tells the story of how he helped form an organization predicated on the idea that people in communities are an enormous, yet often untapped, source of assets, talents, and capabilities that are indispensable as communities struggle to tackle shared problems. Called the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD), the organization is a decentralized network deeply aware of the talents and contributions of ordinary people.

Where McKnight’s work focuses on the power of ordinary people, Bonnie Honig turns to the power of ordinary things, like the usually overlooked and sometimes derelict public telephone booths that still dot New York City in an era when most everyone has a phone in his or her own pocket. But in times of crisis, like Hurricane Sandy, these public things become vital to public life. All the various public things we take for granted are, in fact, items that help create a public world necessary for democracy.

Just as telephones help bring people together, larger networks of communication do so as well, as Lewis Friedland explains in an interview. A veteran communications scholar, Friedland reminds us of how important it is to pay attention to how well particular networks are working—or not working—in bringing people together.
We close the issue with a piece from David Mathews, who reflects on the mismatch between the work of formal, professionally run institutions, which he calls Squares, and the work of informal, loosely organized civic groups, or Blobs. Like Ostrom, Mathews notes that the culture within many institutions is one that views citizens as clients or consumers, as opposed to producers or vital partners. Ultimately, Mathews argues that institutions must learn their way to a new way of being. This learning is not just copying best practices but is accomplished through experimenting with standard professional routines.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue of the Review suggest that productive, complementary relationships between formal institutions and informal civic groups are not just a nice thing or an aspirational goal. As Bamboo #3, the cover art by Seung Lee, evokes, any ecosystem, natural or political, calls for relationships between entities. In politics, the magnitude and complexity of the problems we face calls for such connections and interactions. Luckily, we see in this issue and elsewhere that people are not idle clients or consumers of professionally produced goods and services. Indeed, they are working hard, as they go about their everyday lives, to produce vital public goods. The challenge, which emerges frequently throughout the issue, is to recognize this vital public work and find ways to bring it into productive alignment with the important work of institutions.

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