HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE 2017
The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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ISSN 2469-6293 (print)
ISSN 2471-2280 (online)
HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2017
We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering’s understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

*David Mathews*
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BEYOND THE “INFORMED” CITIZENRY
The Role of Judgment in a Deliberative Democracy
An Interview with Noëlle McAfee and David McIvor

Many of the challenges facing democracy have to do with the inability to address disagreement in a constructive fashion. That is, our dysfunctions are relational rather than informational. However, many approaches to civic engagement, particularly in higher education, emphasize technical knowledge, even when using the language of “deliberation.” Beyond the “informed” citizenry, Kettering’s research has seen the true promise of deliberation as deepening public judgment despite circumstances of disagreement. To distill this understanding of deliberation, Derek Barker, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Noëlle McAfee, professor of philosophy at Emory University, and David McIvor, assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University.

**Barker:** As you know, we are hoping that this volume can bring together thinking on the democratic role of judgment that has informed Kettering’s research on deliberation over the years, including our work with higher education institutions. Noëlle, your “Three Models of Democratic Deliberation” essay was one of the first that alerted us to important differences among concepts of deliberation that were emerging in the 1990s. Looking back, what was the central insight of this piece?

**McAfee:** In academia the prevailing view of political deliberation is that it involves a rational—that is, not emotional—process of reason giving. For social scientists, it means that citizens might come up with more coherent rankings of their preferences. For most philosophers who write on deliberation, it is a way for people to better reason together about which norms are universalizable. Having been a part of these various academic communities, and having also been an organizer and observer of actual public deliberations, I was struck by the way “deliberation” meant tremendously different things to different communities, usually according to their preconceived needs: for social scientists, to gather empirical data better (including what the public thinks); for philosophers, to think about how people reason better; and for citizens, to think about what the hell they are going to do. I took my cue from the citizens, including the many I had observed in National Issues Forums and deliberative polling experiments (the latter designed by social scientists, but featuring citizens with their stubborn
insistence on solving problems), to note that, in deliberating, people are weaving together their multiple perspectives to try to decide what to do. And in the process, they often change their relationships with each other, which the late Hal Saunders saw as a central aspect of politics.

**Barker:** Let’s talk more about what Noëlle described as the “citizen” model. She described a kind of public thinking—more public than simply stating preferences—but different than expert knowledge. Some have referred to this as “public judgment.” In light of current trends in our democracy, what do the two of you see as the importance of judgment in our public life?

**McAfee:** One thing all three models share is the notion that in a democracy public policies should be authorized or legitimated by the public, and that deliberation offers a way for developing sounder public will. Those who focus on preferences, such as many social scientists, think public will can be gleaned by aggregating individuals’ preferences (voting is a means for doing this). Philosophers like Habermas reject that view for a broader understanding of public deliberation, leading to a public will that policymakers can then use to make binding choices through the legislative process. But what I see in deliberative public forums is citizens themselves in the throes of what Dan Yankelovich calls “choice work.” My view is that public will is formed in the crucible of having to decide what to do, which includes working through loss over what has to be forgone. In making sometimes excruciating choices, people are coming to a truly reflective judgment about what should be done. Policymakers who ignore public will do so at their own peril. Of course, there is a lot of noise and distraction in the political system, so it is often hard to see this. Still, as my late colleague Bob Kingston put it, public deliberation turns on the lights and sets the stage for policymakers to do their work.

**McIvor:** Public life is not healthy without good judgment, which is to the body politic what exercise is to the individual human body. Unfortunately, there is broad misunderstanding of what judgment is and a host of obstacles to the practice and performance of judgment.

**Barker:** Excellent analogies! But if judgment is critical, what exactly is judgment?

**McIvor:** We misunderstand judgment because we associate it with the correct application of principles or rules to given cases or situations. This may
be a part of judgment, but only a part. More important is the reflexive capacity to reason carefully about those principles themselves, “to broaden our reason to make it capable of grasping what . . . precedes and exceeds reason,” as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once put it. And this reflexive capacity emerges from and is tested in concrete experiences—hence the intimate connection between judgment and politics, which is inherently action driven. Judgment is not reducible to experience—and for this reason, we should be careful about romanticizing practical experience over theoretical reflection—but judgment is, at its root, a “practical” knowledge insofar as it is a means of being responsive to the predictable and unpredictable consequences of our actions and the actions of others. Aristotle’s old idea of *phronesis* to me still captures the essence of judgment and the importance of judgment for public life.

There are a variety of obstacles that prevent us from understanding and exercising judgment in public life: institutional, cultural, and even psychological. Institutionally, citizens are seldom asked to practice judgment, and the most prominent forms of citizen choice work—such as elections—rarely call upon skills of judgment, but instead ask us to line up with a favored “team.” Culturally, we de-privilege judgment when we privilege modes of understanding associated with the natural sciences or with technical expertise. While important and valuable, such modes of understanding cannot substitute for good public judgment. Engineers can tell us how to build a bridge or a bomb, but not *whether* to build one or the other. Lastly, as research in cognitive and behavioral psychology has repeatedly shown, human beings often make mental shortcuts to avoid the difficult work of judgment, relying upon heuristics or other “fast” means of coming to a decision. So there are lots of ways we avoid the practice of judgment, which is unfortunate since the only way to improve at judgment—or at any practical activity—is through repeated exposure and continual effort.

**McAfee:** Let me pick up on David’s point that “engineers can tell us how to build a bridge or a bomb, but not *whether* to build one or the other.” This gets precisely to what is central to political judgment: having to decide in the midst of uncertainty, where there is no correct answer. This was also a point that Aristotle made, that we deliberate when there is no correct answer. We don’t
deliberate about whether the sun will rise or not tomorrow, but we do deliberate about what we ought to do tomorrow. The late Benjamin Barber made the same point, as did Hannah Arendt before him. In politics, there are no banisters or foundations. The difference between politics and the sciences is that in politics the task is to decide what is of value, what to create, what to do. Now, of course, getting the facts right is crucial, but the facts alone will not tell us what to do.

Moreover, in addition to uncertainty, there is often intense disagreement—and no agreed-upon authority on what ought to be done. Barber refers to this as having to decide “under the worst possible circumstances.” There is some truth to that.

But the saving grace is that when people deliberate together, no matter how much they initially disagree, they generally proceed to try to forge some kind of shared understanding and possibly even agreement about what should be done. More specifically, I think most people engage in deliberations with others with the expectation that some kind of agreement can be found. This picks up on Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment, where he argued that when someone claims that something is beautiful then he expects that this would be universally agreed to. I’m not going to go as far as Kant on this, but I do think that when we are deliberating, we think that if we talk and think long enough with others that we might actually be able to arrive at some kind of mutually agreed upon judgment about what to do or what is right.

**Barker:** As our research has evolved, we have found it necessary to distinguish between an informed citizenry and a citizenry that is capable of exercising judgment. How would each of you articulate this distinction?

**McIvor:** Information is the raw material for judgment, but it does not constitute judgment any more than the raw materials of a building constitute the building itself. One has to arrange, assemble, and even throw away material in order to construct a building, and one has to do the same work to construct a sound judgment from the raw material of information.

Daniel Yankelovich’s distinctions and terminology are very helpful here. “Working through” is a key concept for my own work. I have argued elsewhere that a key part of democracy is building up a civic capacity for
“mourning,” which involves facing down the complexity of our political heritage and the inherently tragic nature of political action. Politics is tragic because there are no “win-win-win” situations. Choice means sacrifice. Working through or mourning helps us to take stock of sacrifices and encourages us to listen to those who end up making those sacrifices. In so doing, we can weaken our tendencies toward magical thinking through which we assume that sacrifice or loss can be avoided or blamelessly heaped upon scapegoats. Once again, information is crucial, but information alone cannot guarantee that we do the work of mourning.

**McAfee:** I’m glad David brought up Yankelovich and the work of mourning. I’ve also found Dan’s notion of choice work—which he hit upon having read a bit of Freud—to be very important, and that set me off on a path of exploring the insights of psychoanalysis for democratic politics. In short, I’ve found that deliberation itself is a work of mourning in that any choice entails loss, either of what might be or what has been. Deliberation is not merely a cognitive practice of assessing and offering reasons, it is an affective process of working through and mourning and, as David says, getting over magical thinking (like “of course we can balance the budget and have better health care and continue all our wars abroad,” etc.). Also, let me add that David’s work bringing together Kleinian psychoanalysis with deliberative democracy is groundbreaking.

As to the distinction between an informed citizenry and a citizenry capable of exercising judgment, an additional point is that this can be like the distinction between a debater and a deliberator, with the first entrenched in his or her own preconceptions and the second leaning forward, open to seeing new perspectives. Those stuck in old traumas, clinging to given identities and positions, exhibit what Freud called repetition compulsions, literally acting out without remembering, much less working through, their experiences and positions.

**Barker:** Noëlle, related to what the two of you were saying about the difference between judgment and technical knowledge, academics have recently been talking about deliberation in terms of “epistemic” benefits—this notion

**Information is the raw material for judgment, but it does not constitute judgment any more than the raw materials of a building constitute the building itself.**
that deliberation produces “better” outcomes. Has this become a fourth model? Are you surprised to see academics thinking of deliberation in this way?

**McAfee:** There are two ways to think about epistemic outcomes of deliberation; one through a kind of correspondence theory of truth and the other a pragmatist one. The school of thought you are referring to is of the first sort and supposes that deliberations can search for and track political truths and hence substantively (and not just procedurally) produce better outcomes. In other words, in the former school, deliberation is not just a fair procedure; it is also one that could ensure better outcomes, better in the sense of tracking some external normative truth. They don’t mean truth about the facts, but a truth about what is the right thing to do. I find this to be a very curious view because it betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of politics, which is about deciding in the midst of disagreement about what external standards are agreeable and binding and still figuring out collectively what kind of actions we can all live with and get behind. So this kind of view smuggles in a truth that politics eschews.

But there is a second way to think about the kind of knowledge produced by deliberation, a pragmatist one along the lines of William James’ view that “the truth is what works” and John Dewey’s view that only a shoe’s wearer knows where it pinches. For a public to fathom the problems that beset it, people need to engage in deliberations with other, different people to get a richer multi-perspectival view of what is going on. This is part of the citizen view I describe, not the so-called epistemic view. I call it an integrative approach because in their deliberations people are weaving together multiple disparate views about what is at issue, about the effects of possible actions on different people, and about their various views about what should be done. This is a production of a public knowledge that did not pre-exist; it emerges in the process of deliberation itself.

**Barker:** David, I know you are tracking efforts of scientists to get involved in public debates around climate and other science-related issues. Are they thinking of deliberation in epistemic terms?

**McIvor:** I don’t get the sense that epistemic theories of deliberation have spread very far within the ivory tower of academia, let alone beyond it. I sense within this approach an old anxiety that an orientation toward mutual understanding is not enough, that we want deliberation or democracy to provide some certainty about the truth content of public decisions. Yet again, whether we build a bomb or a bridge is a practical matter. There is no context- or procedure-independent standard for determining the truth of that decision. Practical judgments are about better and worse, more reflective or less reflective, not true or false.
As for how academics, scientists, and experts who don’t study deliberation understand it, some things are becoming clearer to me. First is the durability of what we would call a “deficit” model of the public or of citizens. For many people in academia—but also for many people within government institutions or the world of business—the authority of their expertise rests on its separation from public understanding or common sense. Many academics see themselves as producers of knowledge—and of course this is true for many technical pursuits. The difficulty is when that knowledge is seen as the special possession of its producers and as fundamentally different from the self-understanding of the lay public. From this perspective—where the public is defined by what they don't know—deliberation looks very different from how we’ve been talking about it here. It looks more like a focus group that a business might use for testing an advertisement: the goal is to determine the most effective marketing strategies, not to actually engage people in the work of public judgment. So I hear many people talking about the value of public deliberation as a way of determining what kinds of rhetorical strategies scientists might deploy to effectively communicate their message. The danger is that deliberation becomes another means of manipulation.

For many others in academia and elsewhere, however, there is a growing recognition that a deficit model of public knowledge is a nonstarter for improving the quality of public life. There are some novel academic experiments where academic expertise is, to put it bluntly, being “put in its place.” I’m part of one of these experiments here at Colorado State University in the area of public health. From this perspective, deliberation—both formal and informal—is a means of communication, not manipulation. As Noëlle said earlier, deliberation can lead to the development or deepening of public relationships. Those public relationships—across institutional or other barriers—are what can improve the broader ecology of public life.

Barker: David, as “deliberative democracy” has developed from a theoretical ideal to a field with a global network of educators and practitioners, we have been excited about all of the interest in deliberation, but also concerned that the radical potential of deliberation might get assimilated into and confused with conventional notions of politics. Are you seeing this problem as deliberative democracy becomes a “field”?

McIvor: It appears that the critique leveled against technocracy and expert-based public administration that has been part of the deliberative turn in both political theory and practice has started to sink in. Along these lines, I have been encouraged by the growing enthusiasm within public policy and public
administration circles for “collaborative governance.” Collaborative governance literature and practice often emphasize the “wicked” nature of public problems and are therefore in a position to call for and cultivate public judgment rather than pretend that technical fixes or elegant administrative procedures can dissolve those problems. Collaborative governance regimes emphasize co-production of public goods through public-private partnerships, participatory mechanisms, and reciprocal interactions. These regimes are still somewhat marginal and their success is rarely publicized, but they represent a promising institutional development. Ultimately, our public institutions will have to provide space for the work of cultivating public judgment, and collaborative arrangements might be able to play this role. The work of Tina Nabatchi at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University is exemplary in this regard.

There are obvious dangers here as well. We shouldn’t overlook, as you put it, the “radical potential of deliberation.” By this, I understand the way that deliberation can serve as a standing challenge to dominant ways of conducting the public business rather than a “supplement” to institutions that are largely driven by technocratic or bureaucratic concerns. Deliberation is radical because it argues that citizens need to be doing the heavy lifting of public choice work, rather than outsourcing all of that work to formal institutions.

**Barker:** As Noëlle mentioned above, both of you are interested in the implications of psychoanalytic theory for democratic theory. Some might say that from a psychoanalytic perspective, old traumas are too much for deliberation to handle, that our sub-rational neuroses and dysfunctions are more powerful than our rational faculties. What do you say to that line of thinking?

**McIvor:** I think it is important to separate at the outset individual traumas from what I would call “public traumas.” Psychoanalysis began with, and focuses mostly on, individual traumas and conflicts. Public traumas manifest themselves within individual lives, but they are social or political in origin. The stigmas and patterns of disrespect attached to race are obvious examples, which I discuss at length in my book. Noëlle’s wonderful book *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* provides marvelous insight into the connections between psychic life and the life of politics.

Public traumas, like private traumas, are painful and difficult to work through, but since they are the product of public life, they require—unlike private traumas—public dialogue and interaction. Deliberation can play a vital role here, both directly and indirectly. By that I mean that citizens can directly undertake efforts for deliberation about the traumas of public life. In
my book I discuss a particular instance of this when citizens in Greensboro, North Carolina, organized an unofficial truth and reconciliation commission, which investigated and held public hearings about the “Greensboro Massacre” of 1979, an event in which five local labor activists were shot and killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Insofar as deliberation promotes norms of careful listening and mutual respect, it provides a social space where citizens can start to think together about what might be done in the face of public traumas. In my book *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss*, that is what I refer to as the “democratic work of mourning.”

**McAfee:** In your question, Derek, you pose a concern I hear often: that a psychoanalytic process might dig up and activate old traumas in a way that may be overwhelming, so there’s the temptation to let sleeping dogs lie. But I find that individually and collectively, “old dogs” never lie dormant; they are constantly at work, with compulsions getting acted out and repeated unconsciously. Working through does not activate trauma; to the contrary it makes it possible to stop acting it out.

Of course, the space of a public deliberative forum differs from the psychoanalytic clinic. In a forum, we’re not on a couch spilling out our deep dark secrets. But we are giving voice and working through our collective concerns, fears, and worries—often face-to-face with those we unconsciously worry are out to undermine us. So there is still a lot of powerful work that goes on in public deliberations.

My current project addresses the “fear of breakdown” at work in many current collective anxieties, in many communities, especially as more “outsiders” enter. Globally, we’re seeing a kind of stranger anxiety of appalling dimensions, unleashing very primitive defenses.

I should add that a psychoanalytical aspect of deliberation is not at all new to Kettering’s work. It was part of the international work that Hal Saunders engaged in with track-two diplomacy, especially as he brought in the psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan (as far back as the Camp David Peace Accords) to try to understand large-group ethnic identity and trauma, including the ways in which effects are passed down through generations. And it is also central to the very idea of choice work, as we discussed earlier, thanks to Dan Yankelovich’s interest. So now we are seeing a new wave of interest bringing attention back to this central aspect of deliberative politics.

**Barker:** If trauma is as powerful as the two of you say—and that seems right to me—it would seem that deliberation has a tremendous amount of work to do in our public life, perhaps more than even some of its proponents
recognize. Thank you both for helping us understand and recover the political roots of this important democratic practice.
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