

Citizens,
Deliberation,
and the Practice of Democracy



A Triptych from the Kettering Review

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A Triptych from the *Kettering Review*



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Foreword

As with any book, play, or song, some are more popular than others. The three issues of the *Kettering Review* that comprise this volume are among the most widely read in the journal's 30-year history. One issue is out of print; the other two are in short supply. This might be reason enough to reprint them; but there is another, more compelling reason.

Taken together, the essays from these three issues rigorously explore the meaning of democracy. The term is often so carelessly used that it can mean almost anything, and that endangers one of the world's most significant ideas: that people, ordinary people, should—and by implication, can—govern themselves!

I've always found the etymology of the word *democracy* instructive. The *demos* does not just mean "individuals;" it is *the people*, the citizenry or their territory/place. And it is the people collectively who have the power (*kratos*) to rule. Interestingly, whoever joined the terms *demos* and *kratos* into *demokratikos*, chose *kratos*, which is "supreme power," rather than one of the other Greek terms for "strength" or "rule"—perhaps because democracy developed in opposition to a single ruler who claimed to be the supreme authority.

As instructive as this etymology may be, however, there have always been differing viewpoints on the applied meaning of democracy. This volume includes a wide range of authors, each with his or her own distinctive notion of what democracy should be. Who is right? Since the people are the supreme authority, there is no greater power over them that can say, once and for all, what democracy means. "We the people" have to decide that, decade by decade, community by community, country by country.

As much as I might like to say that people can make this fateful decision by reading this book, or other publications, I can't. I think that the decision about what democracy is to be in the future will ultimately be made by what people are themselves willing—or unwilling—to do as citizens. They will make this decision issue by issue in the public deliberations that Bob Kingston, the *Kettering Review's* editor, habitually writes about.

I am not implying that what is written about democracy in articles and books is irrelevant or simply a kind of background music to the real action going on

elsewhere. Those who write about self-rule have an opportunity to influence what will be considered in the ongoing debate over democracy. That is itself a sign of democracy, and a reason for publishing books like this one. What is written here about citizens is critical in light of considerable evidence that the citizenry is now being sidelined—restricted to limited roles as consumers only or as constituents rather than agents in their own right—despite sincere efforts by many to increase participation and civic engagement. Wouldn't that be ironic: a democracy without a real *demos*, except perhaps a virtual one created by polls?

I believe that we are at a crucial point in the contest over the meaning of democracy. This isn't a highly visible contest like a presidential election; it's more like the clash of tectonic plates beneath the earth's surface. Right now the most common meaning of democracy is as a system of representative government based on elections. That's fine, in itself; yet democracy is much more than that. The richer meaning of democracy discussed in this volume is what makes representative government possible. These essays bring a broader, deeper understanding of self-rule to the debate. I salute the authors.

David Mathews

President, Kettering Foundation

Editor's Letter

Although for many decades the Kettering Foundation had distinguished itself by useful enquiries into education, the natural sciences, and civic life, it was not until the 1980s, under the leadership of David Mathews (who had formerly served as the United States Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, then the largest of the nation's federal agencies), that the foundation turned its attention directly to the question, what can help our democracy “work as it should”? Yet in a few passing years, it seems, citizens and government officials, politicians and perpetual rebels, the affluent and the needy, teachers and (increasingly) students, have taken up that question—accepting, apparently, that it is a critical one, whose answer must be approached by increasing and sustained public dialogue, public *deliberative* dialogue in which we, as citizens who differ from one another in our trades and learning, faiths and economic clout, can nonetheless come to share our concerns. How may we understand—despite our differences in skill and custom—that we live or we fail as communities, as a people?

The challenge always for a democracy, of course, is not to denounce either skepticism or belief, success or disappointment, but to understand together the problems that confront us as an entire people, and the tensions that we must anticipate as a people of common aspirations yet differing and sometimes divisive experience. So a kind of open, public conversation about various problems that face us, as Americans, in our communities, began nationwide in the early 1980s, under the wings of various institutions and organizations. The Kettering Foundation began to produce little books each year on three nationwide concerns—written with careful research among the general public, to find their starting points, rather than the concerns of Washington or of state governments, or the daily gripe of the media. Kettering staff and associates began then to record details of the ensuing conversations, from varied sites of what became called National Issues Forums; and at the end of each of the first five seasons of such localized public discussions, the foundation invited public participants themselves to report their findings to former presidents and their staffs at one or another of the Presidential Libraries. Numbers grew; and Presidential Library gatherings were then replaced by annual nationwide television presentations of the public deliberations, through PBS, and by more formal presentations in communities throughout the nation and in Washington, DC.

More important, perhaps, a habit was being formed: a *democratic practice*—not merely of voting for a party candidate to represent us in the legislature (or an appointed lawyer to judge us in the courts), but to reveal in conversation among

ourselves what aspects of a reported problem most sharply affect us, what is in most urgent need of address, and what (perhaps disappointing) side effects we are prepared, if necessary, to tolerate. The outcome did not often turn out to be “yea” or “nay” to particular interests or oligarchies, but a clear enunciation of those concerns that need ed most carefully to be weighed, according to the public voice.

Now that’s history—and this editor can vouch for it, from the start, when David Mathews and Dan Yankelovich, the distinguished public policy analyst and founder (with Cyrus Vance) of Public Agenda, first gave the idea voice in 1981. And when these deliberative public forums came to celebrate their 25th anniversary in 2006, we at Kettering put out three successive issues—Spring 2006, Fall 2006, and Winter 2007—of the *Kettering Review* (an entire year’s sequence) to explore, with newly commissioned essays, what we had learned about their political value in leading our democracy to “work as it should”—for the people.

Those little magazines—here reprinted as a “triptych” of *Kettering Reviews*, so to speak—have turned out, as David Mathews notes in his Foreword, to be the not-for-profit equivalent of “best sellers” over the past few years. Much has happened—and not always happily—since then in the life of this, our American democracy, and the world of which it is a part. Yet surely none of us, in this second decade of the 21st century, is quite free of anxiety about our changing role in a troubled world economy; or that the Arab Spring has been noticeably darkened both before and since by perhaps even longer shadows; or that young citizens are uncertain what they need to learn (and how to pay for it) granted the uncertain demands of adulthood. If the political establishment tends to act sometimes like rival oligarchies more than as leaders of all the people they are said to represent, these little magazines of essays from five years ago deserve fresh attention. What Mathews calls “the richer meaning of democracy,” discussed in this volume, may perhaps recover the concept of “representative government” as distinct from merely “government based on elections.” And it *could* bring with it Mathews’ “deeper understanding of self-rule.”

Robert J. Kingston

Editor, *Kettering Review*

“Citizens cannot be reduced to and comprehended as mere consumers because individual desire is not the same thing as common ground and public goods are always something more than an aggregation of private wants.”

—Benjamin R. Barber

“A major goal of democracy itself—of the political, of legitimate democracy, and of deliberation—is to produce well-reasoned and fair decisions.”

—Jane Mansbridge

“Democracy is not inherently or fundamentally national, nor is it fundamentally about voting. It is fundamentally about people taking charge of the conditions under which they live.”

—Daniel Kemmis

Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy: A Triptych from the Kettering Review brings together writing by 19 leading thinkers on the contemporary challenges of democracy. These provocative essays, first published in three issues of the *Kettering Review* to celebrate 25 years of the National Issues Forums, challenge readers to rethink conventional notions of democracy, public deliberation, and citizenship. Drawing from a wealth of experience in community organizing, political theory, and public practice, the authors include:

Benjamin R. Barber
Harry C. Boyte
Cole C. Campbell
Vincent Colapietro
Ernesto Cortes Jr.
John Doble
Heidi Gantwerk

Lani Guinier
Will Friedman
Daniel Kemmis
Peter Levine
Jane Mansbridge
David Mathews
Noëlle McAfee

Steven Rosell
Randa Slim
John J. Stuhr
Daniel Yankelovich
Iris Marion Young

