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Editors’ Letter

This season’s Review—like every Review, perhaps—is a way of inviting, broadly, fellow citizens into a dialogue about some of the exchanges that come to be voiced much of the time in deliberations, prompted by citizens throughout the nation. (And yes, nowadays in nations far beyond it!) Why do we deliberate together? What makes it work? And how do we learn to live as a people, sharing a community’s life together, different though our experiences, tastes, and interests may be? It is this weighing together of the ways in which we may counter or accept the various interests that provides for our lives as “a people” that we sometimes refer to as “deliberative politics.”

The pieces in this Review collectively point to the central role of such deliberative publics in coming to public judgments needed to steer democratic states. The esteemed public opinion researcher, Daniel Yankelovich, argues that publics bring to the table something that governments cannot: a worked-through sense of what is right for the country, bringing together facts and values, pragmatically and morally, dialogically, into public judgment.

Melvin Rogers adds another dimension to this theme. In his introduction to a new edition he has edited of John Dewey’s The Public and its Problems, Rogers discusses Dewey’s point that at its best a pluralist public engages in “systematic care” for what should be taken up by governmental agencies and that it functions as “a sensory network” for emerging problems. In other words, a vibrant public is essential not only for democratic but for effective governance.

None of this is news to the Kettering Foundation or its sister organization, the National Issues Forums. Reviewing more than 20 years of NIF deliberations, in addition to deliberating about public problems, the NIF can also be seen as deliberating about the health of the political system itself. Even through times when the public has found itself shut out and alienated from politics, citizens continue to voice their strong desires to be able to participate and make a difference. “From deliberation, we learn, not how to write laws,” Kingston writes in closing, “but what kind of community we want to be.” And the answer to that seems, clearly, to be a democratic community in which what the public thinks does indeed matter.

Our old friend, the journalist E.J. Dionne, brings us to more recent history where a long consensus seems to be fraying. That consensus was that Americans’ dual, and sometimes warring, values — of liberty and social obligation — should both be appreciated and maintained. This was also a consensus that a democratic public would work to balance these values. Dionne points to the recent emergence
of radical individualist politicians who want to eliminate the social-obligation part right out of the American character. Fortunately, the new generation of Millennials “espouse even more than their elders the values and commitments of the Long Consensus.”

The last two essays in this Review move us from the American context to an international and World-Wide-Web context. Political philosopher Nancy Fraser asks how, as the public problems of the day increasingly defy national borders, can an international pubic sphere form to develop public will and hold accountable borderless forces. As all the previous essays in this Review have demonstrated, democratic governance depends on a pluralist, dialogic, and engaged public to identify problems and develop judgment about what should be done. What we need now, Fraser argues, is an international public sphere that can generate public opinion to judge the legitimacy of international policies.

To the many obstacles that Fraser notes, the final essay, by Noëlle McAfee, suggests some possible solutions, namely through the public conversations that occur online. These are increasingly making the public’s voice, though often rau-cous and unfiltered, audible.

For almost a quarter of a century, McAfee has been a colleague in this work—not only as a respected scholar and professor but as a Review associate editor, too. So we are proud—as well as relieved—that she has agreed to serve now, routine-ly, as the Review’s coeditor. And as a kind of celebration, the two of us, just this once, decided each to contribute an essay of our own to sketch, in company with four distinguished scholars, a sense of the complexity, range, and value of genuinely public deliberation to the patterns of self-government that characterizes our democracy.

Robert J. Kingston and Noëlle McAfee
“There are times when the opinions of Americans do come across as steeped in ignorance, misinformation, prejudice, and mindlessness; but there are also times when people’s opinions are thoughtful and down to earth, bristling with good sense and wisdom.”

Several years after I started to do public opinion research in the 1950s, my doubts about the indoctrination I had received in my graduate school training began to grow stronger. By the 1970s, I had developed serious reservations about the conventional paradigm of knowledge I had absorbed in the Philosophy and Social Relations departments at Harvard. I found that my surveys of public opinion raised a number of puzzling questions whose answers would take me decades to resolve.

Why, I wondered, is there such extreme variation in the quality of public opinion? On some issues, people’s opinions express nothing more than their own unrealistic wishful thinking, or echo what some TV newscaster said that morning. On other issues, people have deliberated thoughtfully, exchanged views with others, and formed judgments of startling clarity and realism. In conducting public opinion polls, there are times when the opinions of Americans come across as steeped in ignorance, misinformation, prejudice, and mindlessness; but there are also times when people’s opinions are thoughtful and down to earth, bristling with good sense and wisdom.

Extreme variation in the quality of public opinion occurs not only from issue to issue but also on the same issue at different points in time. In the early stages of the development of an issue, people seem oblivious to the consequences of their opinions and their views are mushy and full of contradictions. In later stages, their views grow settled, firm, and thoughtful.

In the course of conducting hundreds of studies of public opinion, I have watched as the public gradually has clarified its thinking on issues of importance to it, and eventually
people take into account the facts as they understand them and their personal goals and moral values and their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves. For example, in weighing the pros and cons of decriminalizing drugs, people tend to make their judgments on whether “it is the right thing to do” and not only on whether it might reduce crime rates.

The public’s anger at managed health-care organizations for putting profits ahead of people’s health reflects their sense that such policies are destructive both morally and practically. When majorities of the public form judgments about capital punishment, whether for or against, they understand that sometimes the criminal justice system miscarries and innocent people are condemned to death; and simultaneously they take into account their own values about the sacredness of life, the requirements of justice, and the well-being of the society. Their social values and personal morality, their interpretation of the meaning of life, and whatever statistics they happen to know about crime rates are all aspects of a single, indivisible judgment.

We can, of course, separate out the factual information and the values analytically into two piles and insist that policymakers, in the interests of objectivity, put their values aside. But in doing so, we would be playing a game of abstraction that will lead to many undesirable dead ends. I remember when public opinion turned against the Vietnam War. The elites in Washington, “the best and the brightest,” as David Halberstam ironically labeled them, were hung up on their “village pacification ratios” and other quasi facts long after the public had reached its considered judgment that the effort was no longer worth the cost. The public’s judgment was essentially a moral one, and it was a form of knowledge superior to the mountain of factual information at the disposal of the leadership in Washington.

In public judgment, facts and values are indistinguishable from each other.

the United States needs allies to help it carry out the leadership responsibilities of a great power. Ever since, the public has never wavered from this judgment, even in periods when foreign affairs distract public attention from urgent domestic concerns or when America’s political leadership is tempted to act alone against the wishes of our nation’s friends and allies.

In public judgment, facts and values are indistinguishable from each other. Average Americans judge whether a policy makes sense without differentiating sharply between practical and moral considerations. In making a judgment,
It is not that policymakers deride judgment as a human quality. On the contrary, good judgment is highly valued. But it is valued as a personality trait, like being courteous to strangers or having a good sense of humor. It is not seen as a formal requirement for making policy or practicing one’s profession. Some people have good judgment; others do not. That’s the way the chips fall. In choosing people to fill top-level policy positions, good judgment is sometimes highly valued. But it is not something leaders expect from the public. And when it comes to defining the kind of formal knowledge needed for shaping policy, moral judgment is usually left out of consideration. The assumption is that moral judgment is one thing, knowledge is another; let’s not get the two mixed up.

According to the conventional view, good quality of public opinion comes from being well informed; poor quality of public opinion is synonymous with being badly informed. It would be perverse to deny that in many situations factual information is relevant to quality of opinion. If I want to know whether a bridge is safe to drive on, I want the best-informed expert opinion available. But if I want to know which one of two candidates will make the better president, I would place more trust in the judgment of the voters than in the well-informed views of the TV pundits who follow the campaign.

Obviously, information plays some role in shaping public opinion. But usually it is a secondary role. To assume that public opinion is invariably improved by inundating people with data greatly exaggerates the relevance and importance of information. Over a period of years, it gradually dawned on me that the creative processes whereby people convert raw opinion into considered judgments are essentially dialogic.

All three essential characteristics of dialogue contribute to improving the quality of public judgment. Empathic listening, for example, is indispensable to forming sound public judgments. The quality of people’s opinions improves as they attend to the views and experiences of others. I have watched people’s views change on a variety of issues—attitudes toward their employers, immigration, health care, school reform, teenage pregnancy, assisted suicide, race relations, drug abuse, free speech, punishment for crimes, the president’s sex habits—when they have been exposed to a diversity of viewpoints and have listened to them empathically. In forming their own judgments, it is very helpful for people to hear how others feel about the same issues that concern them.

The ability of people to influence one another as equals also contributes to the quality of public opinion. As in all forms of dialogue, the quality of public opinion is best served when coercive pressure is reduced to its barest minimum. An interesting example is the growth of the gender gap in presidential elections in the 1980s and 1990s. Before that time, the women’s vote followed the men’s. The disparity between the political outlook of men and women culminated in the huge gender gap of 1996—a whopping 26 percentage points. The huge disparity between the male and female vote reflected the growing autonomy of women as they freed themselves from the pressures of husbands and fathers. (In the 1996 election, men and women of both political parties held strikingly different
attitudes toward the role of government in maintaining a social safety net for those in need.)

The dialogic process of laying bare one’s most cherished assumptions—the third essential feature of making judgments—works as well as it does because of a dynamic that psychologists call “working through”: the hard work involved when people absorb, assimilate, and adapt to emotion-laden events, such as failures, separations, and traumas, that cause them to question their most cherished assumptions. Factual information free of emotion takes very little time to work through. A woman writes a note to her husband saying “I am leaving your dinner in the fridge.” The husband takes no longer to digest this bit of factual information than he does to read the note. But suppose that instead of the note reading, “I am leaving your dinner in the fridge,” it read, “I am leaving you.” The information content is conveyed instantly. But it may take months or years for the husband to work through its full emotional meaning.

Why is the exchange of views in dialogue so much more effective in advancing people’s understanding than the more direct forms of conveying information to people in the form of news reports, articles, or books? The writings of the late philosopher Hannah Arendt provide us with an insightful answer. She believes that dialogue is a powerful method for uncovering and testing the truths of human experience. It does so through a process that Arendt calls “representative thinking.”

In dialogue, I present my own unique way of looking at an issue. I then heed your way of looking at it. A third and a fourth and a fifth participant in the dialogue present their perspectives. The judgment of all participants is enriched by their ability to incorporate all of the varied perspectives. We are mutually engaged in representative thinking.

When people who share a common purpose do dialogue, each participant develops a depth of perspective that is not possible when the issue is examined from a single point of view. Through dialogue we fashion a communal perspective on the goals and values that guide our lives. To this search for mutual understanding we bring our entire life experience.

When spoken by an individual, the familiar phrase *It seems to me . . .* is just an idiosyncratic opinion. But as dialogue unfolds and people interact with one another, modifying their points of view, each *It seems to me . . .* is tempered and enriched in the light of others. All of the *It seems to me . . .* judgments add up to something more than a random collection of opinions; they reveal an issue viewed from a great variety of perspectives and experiences: they show representative thinking at work. Such truth seeking is a joint endeavor in which we actively pool our collective wisdom. The truths of how to live together can, Arendt argued, be gained only by representing reality from this kind of variety of perspectives.

For this understanding to develop and grow, the shared problems and values of those who would form a community must be viewed from many different perspectives. Out of this cauldron of communal consideration a limited number of shared understandings will be formed, some of which will prove to be transitory while others will stand the test of time.

Thus, in helping people to move from raw opinion to considered judgment, dialogue engages them in a complex, time-consuming, intensely
I remember arguing with him: “Isn’t it a waste of time and money for us to take a sleeper back and forth to Detroit?” (There were no jets at the time.) “Besides,” I added, “there isn’t much we can add to what is already in the report. Isn’t it better for them to read it at their own pace than to have to listen to so many detailed findings in one sitting?”

He replied, “Oh boy, have you got a lot to learn!” Patiently, he explained the facts of life to me: “There’s a lot at stake for them. If they do what the report suggests, it’s going to cost them millions of dollars, and it’s a huge risk. Top executives don’t make up their minds from a piece of paper. Our fancy methodology isn’t going to convince them. They want to see us, ask us questions, see if we know what we’re talking about. They trust me because I’ve been working with them for years. But this is a bigger deal than anything I’ve done for them up to now. And the only thing they know about you is that you’re young and inexperienced. Luckily, they don’t know what an innocent you are. They have to size you up, see if you speak with forked tongue.”

I respected the judgment. But I still thought it odd that a company would spend tens of thousands of dollars on a factual inquiry conducted involving process as they agonize over how to take the perspectives of others into account as they match the facts with their values and feelings on troubling issues.

This process is sharply different from an elite’s decision making, in which a conscious effort is made to push values into the background in the interest of preserving objectivity. But life being what it is, the values that are shoved out the front door sneak in through the back door. Values can never be excluded from policy decisions. When we try to do so, we delude ourselves.

My first full-time job was with a business research firm in New York in the early 1950s. The firm immediately assigned me to a research project for a client. As the project progressed, I grew more and more enthusiastic about our work because it brought to light information important to the company’s future.

When the head of the firm, a thoughtful and perceptive man, failed to send the final report to the company as soon as it was finished, I felt keenly disappointed; and after a week had passed with the report still undelivered, I asked when he intended to mail it to the client. “You can’t send a report like that in the mail,” he said with some annoyance. “It raises all sorts of questions about the way the company does its business and it calls on them to make big changes. We’ll have to go and present it in person. That’s what I’m trying to arrange.”
Most policies depend far more on values than on factual information. In our political system, for policies to be acceptable they must be seen as consonant with a wide range of values, such as fairness, freedom, compassion, safety, moral legitimacy, the preservation of public order, and so on. In policies that arouse the most passion and concern, these values often conflict with each other. Current drug policy, for example, insists that marijuana be branded as an illegal substance, even though from a pragmatic point of view decriminalizing pot might reduce crime rates. Here the value of public safety conflicts with the value of moral legitimacy. Proposals for education reform to give vouchers to parents so that they can select the school of their choice for their children pit the value of preserving the public school system against the value of individual choice. Welfare reform that requires mothers of young children to enter the workforce even though doing so may not be good for the children pits fairness against concern for children.

All significant social policies call for weighing competing values against one another and playing them off against whatever factual information may be available. In this complex process, the interaction among people creates shared perspectives in which facts and values are inextricably intertwined. These shared perspectives, in which values are central, constitute an important form of knowledge. It is not fake knowledge, second-rate knowledge, or mere ventilation of feelings. It is simply a different kind of knowledge than the kind experts generate. In our culture, however, value-laden perspectives aren’t considered to be knowledge and so are not taken seriously when policy is being shaped.

Leaders know how much discipline it takes to stay with the facts and not let their own wishful thinking and personal values confuse issues. They perceive, correctly, that the public...
is that by adding the value-rich perspectives of the public to the information-rich perspectives of the expert, we can create wiser policies.

The claim that policy should be grounded in judgments that mix fact and value together collides so directly with the positivist paradigm of knowledge that either the claim must be false or the paradigm flawed. Since I believe that the claim is valid, the fault must lie with the paradigm.

Even leaders who are flexible about most things will cling tenaciously to the cognitive frameworks they developed in their youth for coping with the confusion of the world. These tend to be among the deepest layers of one’s buried assumptions. They are difficult to change even when they have grown obsolete and dysfunctional.

It is so, at least partly, because our culture is hooked on splitting the world into artificially separate compartments of facts and values. The solution is to become less rigid about the split and to devote more attention to ways of knowing, including dialogue, that intermingle values and facts.

Webster defines wisdom as “the ability to judge soundly and to deal sagaciously with the facts, especially as they relate to life and conduct.” This dictionary definition helps us to distinguish between information and wisdom. Information is fact-driven. Wisdom is the more encompassing term; it goes beyond factual knowledge by adding values to facts. Since most public policies bear on life and conduct, we need to bring values as well as factual knowledge to bear. The methods of science and professional expertise are excellent for generating factually based knowledge; the methods of dialogue are excellent for dealing with this knowledge wisely. The point of engaging the public in dialogue does not observe this discipline and that average Americans are long on feelings and opinions and short on factual information. In their view, to enter into dialogue with the public for purposes of shaping policy is to put feelings ahead of facts and to compromise the standards associated with objectivity, professionalism, expertise, and specialization. In effect, to endorse dialogue with the public enthusiastically, they would have to abandon a paradigm of knowledge that is as much a part of them as the way they sign their name or part their hair.

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who work together. With it, it will become a powerful tool both for shaping policy and for strengthening our democracy.

Astonishingly, the idea of knowledge as a hierarchy has persisted for 2,500 years, although the form of knowledge privileged to perch at the very top has changed a number of times. Over the centuries the Platonic Ideas were displaced from their privileged position at the apex of the hierarchy by other contenders for top billing such as conceptions of God revealed through faith, conceptions of reason revealed through logic, and, ever since Newtonian physics in the 17th century, the laws of nature revealed through scientific inquiry.

But the bottom spot on the hierarchy has never changed. There, occupying the pits, never being elevated above their lowly rank, are found the judgments of the masses, still deemed to be imprisoned in a dark cave of ignorance and prejudice, mistaking appearances for reality.

To myself and others privileged to attend elite colleges, it made perfect sense that we were being trained as an intellectual and professional elite who would be privy to the highest reaches of knowledge, separating us from and elevating us above the opinions of the mass of people, who do not have access to the same knowledge. In earlier eras, priests who had been trained to believe that their form of sacred knowledge belonged at the top of the hierarchy must have felt the same thrill at being initiated into the mysteries of true knowledge. Many of today's elites share this same conviction that they possess a higher order of knowledge than others in the society.

Like most people raised in the Western tradition, I began my professional life with the assumption that knowledge is ordered in a hierarchical fashion, with science at the top, professional and scholarly knowledge in the middle, and the opinions of the mass public at the bottom. It did not take long for disillusionment to set in. After several years of studying the opinions of the public, I realized with a shock that average Americans possessed insights different from, but certainly not inferior to, the knowledge of elites. Yet for most of my professional life I was rarely able to convince those who had little contact with the public of the validity of this insight. They were too immersed in the tradition of the hierarchy to see what, from their point of view, had to be a disagreeable reality they would rather not see.

Each tool of knowledge has its own appropriate uses . . . those of dialogue and related ways of knowing are designed to understand the human predicament and the truths of living.
Knowledge, then, is a pluralistic phenomenon. For purposes of gaining control over people and things, the knowledge of technical and scientific experts has proven superior to other ways of knowing. But for the truths of human experience—learning how to live together in peaceful, creative, civilized societies—technical expert knowledge is awkward, heavy-handed, and unresponsive. It fails to address the great questions of how to live, what values to pursue, what meaning to find in life, how to achieve a just and humane world, and how to be a fully realized human person—all essentially issues of judgment often arrived at through dialogue.

It would be nonsense to claim that dialogue gives answers to life’s dilemmas and that through dialogue people will find values to live by. The knowledge claims I am making for dialogue are much more modest. We need to use dialogue to focus on the collective problems of living together in communities. For all of its powers, scientific expertise has no answers for us here. But dialogue can help us discover the truths of living together if we change the prevailing paradigm of truth and wisdom.

In summary, the strategy I am proposing is aimed at reducing elite resistance by focusing on the obsolete nature of the notion of a single hierarchy of knowledge—the main intellectual supports of the elites’ blind spot. The last thing we want to do is to bog policymakers down in an overly idealistic or naïvely populist conception that “the people” are always ahead of the experts and elites. Going this route would rob the concept of public engagement of its seriousness. Having made this acknowledgment, however, the next step in the argument is to deconstruct the elites’ blind spot. It makes no sense to draw sharp lines between facts and values or to assume that there is one and only one path to knowledge and truth. I believe that the judicious use of dialogue can transform the public into an invaluable partner of leaders and elites in shaping policy because dialogue brings forth the wisdom inherent in the collective public experience.

Public-opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich is the co-founder and chair of Public Agenda and the author of twelve books. This essay is excerpted from his 1999 volume, The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation.
John Dewey understood the historical emergence of democracy as a way of broadening the use of political power. Indeed, he defends this view in *The Public and Its Problems*; throughout that work, Dewey consistently emphasizes the fortuitous emergence of political democracy. He resists the idea that democracy was fated to happen.

By political democracy he means “a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials” through universal suffrage that emphasizes the *publicity* of decision making. Despite its contingent emergence, Dewey argues that democracy’s development nonetheless represents an “effort, in the first place, to counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of rule by accidental and irrelevant factors; and in the second place, an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends.”

He sees democracy emerging in an attempt to block political power from being exercised arbitrarily: “I would not minimize the advance scored in substitution of methods of discussion and conference for the method of arbitrary rule.” The use of power is arbitrary, for him, when it cannot be substantively informed by those over whom it will be exercised. In such instances, Dewey argues, freedom itself is threatened. Legitimate political power is not merely restrictive—that is, it does not merely constrain freedom but, more significant, it makes freedom possible by giving citizens control over the forces that govern and enable their lives.

To be sure, Dewey argues that the early rise of modern democracy emanated from a concern over governmental intrusions on freedom. But this worry, he maintains, was mistakenly interpreted as a “natural antagonism between ruler
and ruled,” subject and government, when in fact the true target was abuse of political power. “Freedom,” he writes, “presented itself as an end in itself, though it signified in fact liberation from oppression and tradition. . . . The revolt against old and limiting associations was converted, intellectually, into the doctrine of independence of any and all associations.” Dewey seeks to refocus practical and intellectual energies on the correct target. The result is that authority, insofar as it is bound up with institutional structures that track the concerns of citizens, is not necessarily inimical to freedom. Political power, in *The Public and Its Problems*, thus refers to both the role individuals play in “forming and directing the activities” of the community to which they belong, and also the possibility that is open to them for “participating according to need in the values” that their community sustains.

Dewey’s defense of democracy is important for redefining the meaning of political participation. Democracy, as he describes it, defines members not simply by virtue of the actual participation with which they engage in determining social possibilities, but also by the potential participation that remains open to them if need so arises. For him, to the extent that power functions to determine social possibilities, those possibilities cannot be of such a nature that they preclude the future contestability and development of how power functions. Hence the following remark: “The strongest point to be made in behalf of even such rudimentary political forms as democracy has already attained—popular voting majority rule and so on—is that to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles.” To be attentive to such needs and troubles means that “policies and proposals for social action be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed.” As he had argued much earlier, to say that we hold in reserve the power to contest indicates that the legitimacy of decision making hinges on the extent to which citizens do not feel permanently bound by those decisions in the face of new and different political changes.

The view of democracy that Dewey defends—and that informs *The Public and Its Problems*—is fundamentally linked to how he understands the function of the public and its relationship to the state. He envisions the public as the permanent space of contingency in the sense that there can be no a priori delimitation, except as it emerges from individuals and groups that coalesce in the service of problem solving. He envisions publics as standing in a directive and supportive relationship to the state and its representative and administrative institutions. But insofar as the state is resistant to transformation because it is defined by a set of fixed interests, publics then function in a more oppositional role and build their power external to the state. Democracy,
Follett (1868-1933), Arthur Bentley (1870-1957), Ernest Barker (1874-1960), and Harold Laski (1893-1950), in which individuals are viewed as emerging from the nexus of multiple and sometimes conflicting social groupings, among which is the state itself. In civil society, information and pressures are communicated across those associations. In such pluralistic conditions, problems and conditions are bound to emerge; some of these may very well come from the functioning of governmental regulation or activities of the market economy. The result of such problems is that groups within civil society are politicized and so become “a public.”

To say they become “politicized” only means that indirect consequences have affected individuals to such an extent that a distinct apparatus is needed to address their concerns. The associated groups that emerge may already be in existence, albeit in a nonpolitical mode (e.g., religious organizations, professional associations, or cultural organizations), in civil society. Or it may be the case that the public is composed of multiple associations that were already in existence, having no discernible relationship to one another until the problem emerged: the problem helps focus what is shared and provides the point of departure for collective problem solving, even as its members debate and argue over how best to address the problem.

A concern should emerge at this point regarding Dewey’s account of the public. On the one hand, he speaks of “the public,” yet he seems quite clear in his chapter, “Discovery of the State,” that multiple groups and associations of individuals advance claims requiring systematic care. In fact, this is why he has cautioned those theorists that make use of the definite article, saying that the concept of the state, like most concepts which are introduced by The, is both too rigid and too tied up...
with controversies to be of ready use. The used in conjunction with public suggests a homogeneous domain in which the whole of society is directed through a deliberative mechanism, while the absence of the definite article points to a space that is internally plural and one in which deliberation is context specific. How does Dewey address this ambiguity?

Democracy entails a kind of openness in which its substantive meaning is always in the process of being determined.

Dewey’s answer seems to be that the public denotes a space of pluralism in which the indirect consequences of various and distinct groups require systematic care. In other words, it is a space not quite reducible to civil society, but not yet identifiable with governmental institutions; a space in which claims regarding the need for systematic care are acknowledged by citizens and around which they consolidate their political identity. Citizens seek to translate their power of voice as a specific public into state power. State power becomes then the administrative component that can effect change. So “the public” refers to a space internally differentiated between specific publics.

In explaining the meaning of systematic care, Dewey invokes the image of state precisely to institutionalize political claims built up from the public that consolidate into a public. He writes the following: “The state is the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members.” So the translation of political claims and grievances into state power requires officers and administrators who are charged as trustees of a public, holding fiduciary power. “Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected.”

For Dewey, this means that publics, whether on the local or the national level, not only supervise how power functions, but in many respects also determine and influence the ends to which it will be put: “A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.” Hence, the state, although important for Dewey, is nonetheless a “secondary form of association.” In other words, although the activity of political institutions—that is, the formation of laws, statutes, and binding regulations, or the establishment of administrative agencies, for example—will often be the result of those officials and representatives, this only comes about for Dewey because the direction and purpose of these institutions is determined elsewhere. Although functioning at the fringes of the state, the public is nonetheless configured as the site from which opinion—and will—formation originate and that is institutionalized via the state.

Dewey’s account of the relationship between publics and the state specifically rejects the notion of a public, holding fiduciary power. “Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected.”
tion of a unified deliberative public that makes claims in the name of “the people” and that is beyond contestation. He thus rejects metaphysical descriptions that locate the emergence of the state in god, reason, will, nature, mind, or contractual relationships. The public refers to a space of unity and difference that functions only if we see it as indeterminate, thus allowing the state to emerge as an instrument or tool of problematic activity on the part of human beings. This much Dewey explains when he says that scholars have looked for the state in the wrong place:

They have sought for the key to the nature of the state in the field of agencies, in that of doers of deeds, or in some will or purpose back of the deeds. They have sought to explain the state in terms of authorship. Ultimately all deliberate choices proceed from somebody in particular, acts that are performed by somebody; and all arrangements and plans are made by somebody in the most concrete sense of “somebody.” Some John Doe and Richard Roe figure in every transaction. . . . The quality presented is not authorship but authority, the authority of recognized consequences to control the behavior, which generates and averts extensive and enduring results of weal and woe.

His point is that connecting the state as state to particular authors who constitute a public or fixed foundations undercuts the extent to which the public can function as a sensory network for emerging problems that can then be managed by state institutions. Focusing on authorship for understanding the state ironically fixes the

There is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.

latter and imputes to the public a substantive unified identity that, as Dewey argues, is out of step with a pluralistic society.

For Dewey there can be no permanent closure of the public with a fixed political identity from which the state can be inferred, even though there will be specific delimitations of particular publics. The latter—delimitations of particular publics—implies that state institutions and the substantive decisions that follow from the institutions (at both the national and the local level) will very well come into existence in response to the specific claims of a public, as for instance, those arguing for health-care reform, more equitable distribution of monies for public education, or better safeguards on businesses whose waste by-products are contaminating a local reservoir. The former point, that which relates to the public as such, means that insofar as the claims of a particular public are instantiated in the state, they cannot exclude the possibility of addressing developing needs that require systematic care. To be sure, all developing needs may not be legitimate in this regard, but the first step in assessing their legitimacy, Dewey believes, will have to rest with the extent to which addressing those needs might
potentially implicate us in relationships of domination. Still Dewey’s point is that the public is that space in which the democratic state attempts to see widely and feel deeply in order to make an informed judgment. For him, a democratic public, and by that fact a democratic state, is radically inclusive in theory, even though such inclusiveness means the emergence of distinct and exclusive publics.

In many ways Dewey’s discussion of the public has as its goal an inclusive state apparatus: “There is no sharp and clear line which draws itself, pointing out beyond peradventure—like the line left by a receding high tide, just where a public comes into existence—which has interests so significant that they must be looked after and administered by special agencies or governmental officers. Hence there is often room for dispute. The line of demarcation between actions left to private initiative and management and those regulated by the state has to be discovered experimentally.” Experimentally determining the nature and scope of the state means we are attempting to envision supplemental institutional and legal appendages that need to be added to address the concerns of a particular public. But we are also implicitly, Dewey believes, testing the extent to which preexisting institutions are amenable to transformation. Insofar as such institutions are not, Dewey envisions the public as standing in a more oppositional rather than supportive and guiding relationship to the state. In this instance, the claims of specific publics may ultimately point to the entrenched resistance and limitation of state institutions. As he explains of political development, “Progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance.” In this context, the public potentially stands in an uneasy relationship to the state, especially in its attempts to democratize the functioning of the state. Dewey captures this point where he worries about the extent to which state institutions ossify around a set of interests and become unresponsive to new and emerging publics, the result of which generates a revolutionary impulse:

These changes relating to associated relationships are extrinsic to political forms, which, once established, persist of their own momentum. The new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganized, because it cannot use inherited political agencies. The latter, if elaborate and well institutionalized, obstruct the organization of the new public. They prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grow up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal molds. To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public, which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted. This is why the change of the form of states is so often only by revolution.

We should not understate the importance of this passage in *The Public and Its Problems*.
we recapture, sustain, and employ democracy’s radical character in the face of its eclipse? How can the public reemerge, given the technological, economic, bureaucratic, and psychological obstacles that stand in its way? These questions were not relevant merely in the 1920s but seem equally, if not more, relevant in today’s political climate. And while Dewey often struggles for an answer, he is insistent that the solution is bound up with restoring a sense of communal life that can move us from the impersonal Great Society into the personal and meaningful Great Community. “Unless,” he writes, “local communal life can be restored, the public can not adequately resolve its most urgent problem; to find and identify itself.” What would communal life look like, given the national and, increasingly, international stage on which political problems play themselves out? This is the primary question, whose answer seems terribly and perhaps tragically elusive.

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“There are repeated and quite consistent indications that a deliberative public politics may transform individuals, inform public judgment, and address problems associated with a given social fabric.”

In 1992, just a decade after the National Issues Forums had published their first issue guide, the editor of a new guide prefaced it as follows:

For just over a decade . . . the forums have encouraged Americans to sort through difficult choices that face the nation, issues that range from the deficit, AIDS, and drugs to abortion, racial inequality, and health care . . . This issue book asks readers to struggle with a different sort of problem . . . an exploration of the health of our political system itself.

A solution to that “problem”—the health of our political system itself—has regretfully not yet been reached. Once before, and again during the ensuing 15 years, the issue of our own government, and the effectiveness of the citizenry in it, had been or was to be raised in the dialogues known as National Issues Forums; and what had evidenced a characteristic uncertainty and cross-directions in the many deliberations about the kinds of schools we need for our children was to become apparent, too, when we turned to problems of our democratic government—or at least, to the complaints we make about it. Even though in the titles of the issue guides for these forums we can sense the responsibility for self-government that democracy implies, participants remain apparently unsure of actions that we, the people, might take to bring that about.

In 1992, the Cold War threat had passed; the threat of terrorism was not yet immediate and domestic. It was an election year, in which economic projections were to be “read” from candidates’ “lips”; and the voter turnout, especially by the young, was not expected to be high. Perhaps therefore, public deliberation in 1992
increased citizen engagement. Yet no pattern emerged to outline a kind of citizen leadership, without which the hope of democratically addressing national threats—like the deficit, urban decay, the depletion of natural resources, and so on—might be likely to fail. The failures of government, however, were apparently seen in these forums not as merely reflecting the diminution of an active public interest but as being in some obscurely Machiavellian way the very cause of it; and the ensuing and subsequent public deliberation on the topic no more than marginally changed the sense that “leaders” do not lead because no one demands it of them—a thought reflected perversely in the comment of a man in a forum who said people didn’t act because leaders didn’t demand it of them.

This notion that people did not ask of leaders that they lead surely should, anyway, have seemed a distinctly odd reflection from a proudly democratic society. The distinguished 20th-century French scholar, Émile Legouis, once suggested that the first historic document of modern democracy, the British Magna Carta, was forced on King John by his nobles, as the people, overall, were beginning to frame a public voice, beginning, perhaps to imagine even that there might be, one day, “no taxation without representation.” Legouis wrote:

In tones that are harsh and often coarse, which must have been echoed by common men up and down the country, the vices of the nobles, the state, and the clergy were denounced. Some sided with the people against their governors . . . even against the king.

Yet after seven more centuries of democracy’s growth, at the end of the 20th century, and now in America, Richard Harwood, responding to the implied question, “what is wrong with politics?,” argued in his relentless commentary, Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street.

and 1993 would focus on the funding of election campaigns; and on the apparent lethargy, with respect to political matters, of the American people, especially younger voters.

The NIF title for its 1992 issue guide on the health of our political system was People and Politics: Who Should Govern? And quite clearly

Ours appeared to be a sadly undemocratic citizenry . . . discouraged from voting, anyway, by registration requirements that were inadequate, complex, or perhaps sometimes even deceptive.

the concern universally in the forums on this issue—and in the research that preceded it—was that the people should govern but that the government (or the elections that routinely reestablishes it) were in the grip of monied special interests. Further, the power of those interests was clearly thought to be complemented by a reluctance among the electorate to get out and vote. Ours appeared to be a sadly undemocratic citizenry that had not experienced any effectively kinetic teaching of civic responsibility in its schools and was discouraged from voting, anyway, by registration requirements that were inadequate, complex, or perhaps sometimes even deceptive, and by candidates who could not be relied upon to deliver what was promised—if, indeed, promises were made and could be understood.

So the conversations went.

In these public deliberations, the tentatively suggested responses of citizens to the predicament they themselves described did include
Five years later, however, John Doble Research Associates—who, in 1997-1998, covered extensively a further set of forums on this same topic of a recognized alienation of citizens from government—reported the deliberations as revealing that people did still feel alienated and disaffected. Doble evidences that people apparently wanted to limit campaign spending and curb the influence of money in campaigns; they wanted government to be closer to the people; but they found it “hard to imagine how citizenship could be rediscovered.” The “obstacles,” they thought, nowadays would include apathy, mistrust (of government by “the people”), and, in Doble’s words, “an inability to imagine what a public is or what it would do.”

Strikingly, one man who had moderated forums on this problem in Portland, Oregon, confessed:

I’ve had almost every person come up to me [after the forum] and say, “Okay, so now what do we do?” And I’m not sure what to tell them.

And Doble observes:

A number of participants maintained that civic involvement would be meaningful and

Americans are both frustrated and downright angry about the state of the current political system. They argue that politics has been taken away from them—that they have been pushed out of the political process. They want to participate, but they believe that there is no room for them in the political process they now know. This sense of impotence differs greatly from the so-called “citizen apathy” we have read about in weekly magazines and heard on nightly news programs. Apathy suggests the making of a voluntary, intentional choice; but most Americans feel, instead, that today’s political situation has been thrust upon them. It is not something that they have—or would have—chosen for themselves.

So the challenge becomes, for Harwood, “how can we reconcile people’s sense of political impotence with their desire to act?” That is surely a challenge that a deliberative people ought to meet.
They want to participate, but they believe that there is no room for them in the political process they now know. This sense of impotence differs greatly from the so-called ‘citizen apathy.’

With the purpose of mobilizing citizens, rallying them, showing them how they could contribute, then I think a lot of us would get involved.”

Whether the irony of this fanciful notion registered on any of the forum participants—in Atlanta or elsewhere—we cannot say, having only oral records, often quite casual, from most places, although we are told that many nodded approval to the Atlanta remark. Events closer, however, may caution us of a tendency among non-deliberative voters to find themselves caught in a web of self-serving interests, not necessarily their own.

When the issue was first revisited again in this century, however, in 2006, the focus of the entire deliberation was on “reclaiming the public’s role”—an interest that clearly evoked, if it did not actually reflect, a US tradition of the public’s own democratic sovereignty. Instead of the timorous, “officials will have to show people what to do.” This “reclaiming” had itself become our democracy’s challenge—as the discussion guide title makes plain, its title being Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role. (Emphasis added.) It seems as though the National Issues Forums, whose mission itself is to affirm and enrich the public’s responsibilities in democratic self-government, were taking on the public! And appropriately, the naming of the issue thus, and the competing “approaches” whose putative merits would frame the “choice work” that public deliberation embodies, were drawn in clear lines from citizen “complaints” about the diminution of their role that had repeatedly emerged during the preceding decade.

In a stimulating little study, Sustaining Public Engagement, published in 2009 by the Kettering Foundation and Everyday Democracy, Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, the authors, distinguish between what they call “embedded public reflection” and “embedded public action.” They describe the first this way:

When a community uses deliberation with some regularity to address problems of weak social fabric, to transform individuals, or to inform public judgment, we say they have embedded public reflection.

And the second as follows:

When a community translates public reflection into action to provide public input, to mobilize communities and resources to solve
local problems, or to achieve collaborative governance, we say they have embedded public action . . . intimately connected to institutions and organizations that possess the resources and authority to address the social problems at issue.

Now it is still difficult, over the 30-some years we have been analyzing deliberations, in fact, to identify more than a sample of communities in which we might confidently observe public deliberation as an “embedded” means of acting to change longer embedded societal disorders. But some examples suggest that a pattern of public deliberation, even in a culture of such diversity as the USA, can and does consistently secure meaningful public reflection that may, given appropriate energy in leadership and institutional facility, be translated into effective political action of the kind that democracy aspires to. There are repeated and quite consistent indications that a deliberative public politics may transform individuals, inform public judgment, and address problems associated with a given social fabric.

As we have seen, the slowly shaping changes, over half a century of citizens’ reflection on their appropriate role in the world, paint this development on a large canvas; so do the slow first steps towards a 21st-century sense of “the energy crisis” and “the immigration crisis.” The possibilities of a shared tolerance glimmer even through dilemmas like those presented by matters reflecting differences of ideology and faith, or cultural differences—like abortion, immigration, and AIDS. And in a culture where paddling one’s own canoe is an ideal, there will no doubt nonetheless eventually be accepted alternative means of providing care to those most in need.

Looking towards the ideal deliberative community sometimes leads to glib talk that seems to imply that the ideal democracy in the United States today is as it was in Greece, BC. There, it seems to be inferred, the practice of public action was based on the outcome of public deliberations. Insofar as there was a governing order, it was merely responsive to the predetermined public will. The paradoxical history of that idea is not our business now; but it is important to note that this (ideal or “routine”) relationship between public will and its formal (or “official”) enactment is difficult to evidence historically, and unlikely within contemporary structures of democracy, whose electoral systems have been traditionally unenthusiastic about shared authority, whose major nongovernmental organizations have become increasingly thought of, by the public, as instruments of government, and whose popular constituency tends always to be wooed by divided but sophisticated ideological oligarchies.

Certainly Yankelovich at Public Agenda has always seen the deliberative “working through” process of the public as the ultimate guide to legislators—directions for policymakers, in effect; and Mathews at Kettering has always argued it as the essential means through which the community comes to know itself—a necessary preface to public action. But the long movement towards a public coping more readily in a situation with international obligations, and the misunderstanding of (or reluctance to cope with) shared obligations, and the persistent or repeated ease of complaint against government by a people who supposedly govern themselves, suggest that

People found it ‘hard to imagine how citizenship could be rediscovered.’ The ‘obstacles’ would include apathy.
what we, as a people, might best keep tackling our reluctance, as citizens, to accept the responsibility of deliberating together.

The continuing practice of public deliberation itself reveals the slow-paced movement that translates the idea of change into the conceptualizing of public action. The forums of 2006 on reclaiming the public’s role were instructive in the way in which they revealed citizens addressing the same old problem, but with an unmistakable difference of tone from that of a decade before. It may be like seeing a child after the first year of college; or a grandchild after a first term at nursery school; or a daughter, after marriage: what one knew before is still there, and recognizable; but there is an added confidence, a genuine spark of awareness, and the hope of achievement. “Democracy,” wrote Harwood, now, “is based on people talking to one another”—what might be called “public talk.” Indeed, democratic living is the antithesis of the monastic: we become ourselves as citizens only in the practice of community-making conversation. We learn as we weigh one choice against another; and we sometimes accept what we might individually forego as the price of what we may collectively achieve.

The democratic state is inescapably “ours” and inevitably “us”; and the slow-paced movement that all of these sessions of public talk have reported reveals its unique choreography. What first happens when people gather to deliberate over ways in which to cope with a complex problem is probably little more than a kind of griping, even hand-wringing, about the overwhelming fact of the problem’s existence. That is perhaps inevitable and little more than a social affirmation of the agreement to talk. But we are not all likely to welcome reports of a familiar and pathetic gripe with banner headlines, as though it were a “finding” from public deliberation. We don’t meet in deliberation merely to vent known frustrations or to advertise our confusion. Those are no doubt among our reasons for deliberating, but we meet to learn together something that we cannot know or have not been able to accept, alone.

When John Doble produced the first of his widely recognized annual print reports of outcomes from the National Issues Forums—it was on foreign policy, in the early 1990s—the reason for its enthusiastic reception was that the skillful analysis of the patterns of thought expressed in the forums enabled him to present “outcomes” with the accompaniment of supporting, but not determining, “ballot” data, collected from questionnaires, following the conclusions of the deliberative sessions, that reflect the clarity, if not quite the mathematical authority, that we associate with survey analyses that reflect polling data. Obviously, as all of us were always careful to point out when the outcomes of public deliberation were presented to professionals in government and media, these were merely descriptive and qualitative studies of the thinking among self-selected groups. We eagerly chose other ways—noting the nature of the groups, their diversity and geographic range, the clearly nonpartisan nature of support ma-
terials, and the inferred sense of judgments in a formative stage—to underscore what we sensed to be their potential political importance, hoping that might lead towards some professional political acceptance. And we took to employing

The continuing practice of public deliberation itself reveals the slow-paced movement that translates an idea of change into the conceptualizing of public action.

the useful phrases public thinking and a public voice to distinguish what is unique in this work.

Yet from the start, such reports of public deliberation were almost inevitably hitched to the survey analysts’ quasi-scientific credo, to the quantitative values of politics-as-usual. They were assumed to be persuasive only in so far as they recorded widely shared attitudes, if not technically majority opinions. What was sought in the professional establishments of politics and government—and certainly of commerce—was the size of opinion, the mass of discernible change, the currency of a specific concern. It is in the nature of reporting for political ends—as it would be, also, for marketing purposes—to record observations in this way; and in a democracy like ours, where both majority and minority opinions are only theoretically of importance to suit particular occasions, it is as appropriate as it is thoroughly regrettable.

In this respect, the nationally televised *A Public Voice* program at that time had a somewhat easier task than print reporting in that it had real citizens to show, on film, as if in extended dialogue. It could offer visuals of a train of thinking, over time; and by editing, by juxtaposing individual responses of concern or uncertainty, it could more simply present an offered thought in the process of change as it came into contact with thought and experience from others. In effect, in the televised programs we had the advantage of real life “characters,” and actually sometimes used recognizably the same people in different sequences to make what are genuinely human and individual changes in perception “real” to a video audience. Yet even though the *Public Voice* program had the interest and expectation of “characters,” as in theater, rather than the baggage of science and numbers that is anticipated among professional social scientists, anyone who looks carefully today at the video archives of *A Public Voice* can see that they are essentially collections of opinions, expressed in real time, juxtaposed in such a way as to reveal the actual patterns in the progression of “public thoughts”—the weight or breadth of approval collectively given being indicated by the number of approving or contradictory or “qualifying” perceptions that surround it, before a peculiarly succinct summation (or dismissal) by one or two on-camera participants opens the way for transition to a “next step” in the deliberative process. In other words, the origi-
nal hours of film have been edited down to the familiar “television hour” in a way that reveals the process or “pattern” of public thinking, as it was found from an aggregate of many more deliberative hours, filmed in different sites over a few weeks of the year. (Shakespeare, we tell ourselves, and Euripides, set the pattern, albeit with more interesting subjects and more consummate grace, as well as their own gifts for language!)

Inevitably, then, we were sometimes obliged to show the value of a public judgment much as politicians and pollsters measure the import of public opinion, although we argue that “public opinion,” unlike the narrative of deliberation, is a fictive construct, implicitly defining possibility in terms of predetermined questions that relate to a preestablished agenda. We know, however—at least in our wiser if more theoretical moments—that public deliberation is valuable precisely because it is not so restricted by prior assumption. People’s opinions are merely instrumental in public deliberation; they are refracted or enlarged as they accommodate newly reported experience, evolving into subtly different views, shared from others talking with them. Our own opinions may not, in the end, change for each of us as individuals; but our understanding of their implications will.

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“Individuality seeks expression in communal acts as well as individual deeds; and . . . the self longs for autonomy but also freely embraces the encumbrances and responsibilities of family, friendship, community, and country.”

When he announced his ill-fated presidential candidacy in August 2011, Rick Perry, in a single sentence, brought to life the stakes in our national argument at that moment in our history. “I’ll work every day,” he declared, “to make Washington, DC, as inconsequential in your life as I can.”

That same month, Mitt Romney, in theory the Republicans’ least ideological contender, delivered a memorable and revealing line at the Iowa State Fair, when someone in the crowd shouted out a demand to increase taxes on corporations. Romney smiled and gave a reply more heartfelt than was typical of a candidate whose comments were so proudly disciplined. His proclamation heard round the political world? “Corporations are people, my friend.”

Romney’s language echoed the legal point that the Gilded Age Supreme Court had made and on which the Citizens United decision was built. But that wasn’t his purpose. He was presenting a simple argument that “everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people.” Yet his comment went viral because it seemed to go to the heart of the divide in the nation—and perhaps also to Romney’s identity as a corporate conservative. For many, endowing corporations with the same standing as actual human beings (and often with additional privileges) was precisely what ailed the country.

A month later, the Occupy Wall Street protests were launched on a sea of homemade signs. Naturally, one of the earliest placards proclaimed, “Corporations are not people.” Another declared: “Due to recent budget cuts, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off.”

Barack Obama’s first term in office began with the rise of the Tea Party movement and drew to a close with the protests against the
power and influence of America’s richest “one percent.” The two movements represented bookends of the American political sensibility, one directed at the power of government, the other at the power of high finance. They highlighted two aspects of the American character, reflected in the Tea Party’s focus on liberty, self-reliance, and the unencumbered individual and in Occupy Wall Street’s emphasis on equality, interconnection, and social obligation.

In a democratic republic, “those people” are also fellow citizens. And self-government ultimately requires us to work with them, too.

In better economic times, we might have expected a different outcome. Yet there was a certain inevitability that no matter how hard Obama tried to make it otherwise, his presidency could never avoid becoming the locus of a great national struggle over who we are as a people. The crisis the country faced economically, the crisis of identity created by fears of decline, the crisis of national authority that began taking hold under George W. Bush, and the crisis of contemporary conservatism—all came together to force the country to a decision point. At stake was the long consensus that had guided the nation for a century.

It was not inevitable that conservatives would respond to Bush’s failures and their defeat in 2008 by moving to the right. In similar circumstances, other conservative parties and movements had regained power by pursuing moderate paths, proposing to check the excesses of their progressive foes without undoing all their work. This was how the Republican Party had eventually dealt with the New Deal, accepting its achievements as reflecting the popular will. In following that course, the Republicans went with rather than against the grain of American history. The Civil War had decisively settled the question that we were a nation, not a collection of states. The economic developments that followed thoroughly nationalized our commercial life. The federal government grew in tandem with the economy. After the New Deal, Dwight Eisenhower was the quintessential figure in this new settlement.

But many Republicans and conservatives never accepted the path of accommodation. With Barry Goldwater’s nomination, they began pulling the party in a new direction. The shift was gradual, and Ronald Reagan did not try to unravel the New Deal consensus. But Bush’s failures opened the way for a decisive break, and Tea Party activists became the agents and symbols of a new conservative revolution.

For all his difficulties as a candidate, Rick Perry had captured his movement’s new objective with great succinctness in his pledge to make the federal government as “inconsequential” as possible. His statement would have horrified Hamilton, Clay, and Lincoln (and of course
Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Johnson). And that, was, in a way, his point. With more candor and radicalism than politicians typically muster, Perry was calling into question not only Obama’s decisions, not only the achievements of the Great Society, the New Deal, and the Progressive years, but also a much older American project that envisioned a national government that the country’s citizens would see as both consequential and constructive—just what Hamilton promised long ago in Federalist No. 27. Perry’s emphasis on states’ rights echoed Calhoun more than Lincoln.

Passage of the health-care law was a substantial victory, an achievement that had eluded every Democratic president from Harry Truman forward. For all the criticism Obama received, he was right to undertake the fight and to carry it to success. Yet the battle for health-care reform took too long and the process through which the measure passed was ugly, given the Republicans’ refusal to cooperate and Obama’s insistence that bipartisan cooperation be attempted long after it had any chance of succeeding. The process tainted the bill, and the time needed to pass it allowed a great achievement to turn sour for voters who felt they never heard an adequate explanation of what the intricate law accomplished.

If describing developments in American political life candidly is dismissed as a form of partisanship, then honest speech becomes impossible. Partisanship is indeed destructive when party advantage or personal ambition prevents two sides from solving problems by reaching agreements that they would otherwise be prepared to make; but when two sides do not operate within the same framework, identify the same problems, or even share a common understanding of our history, the difficulty of finding accord cannot be ascribed to pettiness, selfishness, or a lack of imagination. It reflects the fact that the country has reached “a time for choosing,” to echo the title of Ronald Reagan’s memorable 1964 speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater. (The time for choosing that Reagan had in mind was delayed, partly by the relative moderation of Reagan himself when he was president.)

America has worked well on the whole because we have faced such times for choosing only rarely. Our divided political heart inclines us to resist such moments. The American experiment from the beginning recognized both sides of our character, and successful American politicians understood, with Tocqueville, that we are a nation of private striving and public engagement, of rights and responsibilities. Americans understood that individualism needed to be protected from concentrated power in both the private marketplace and the government. They also understood that individuality seeks expression in communal acts as well as individual deeds; and that the self longs for autonomy but also freely embraces the encumbrances and responsibilities of family, friendship, community, and country. These truths have usually been accepted, albeit in different ways, by progressives...
and conservatives alike. It is this deep American consensus that is now in jeopardy, and its disappearance threatens to block constructive action at the very moment when our position in the world is precarious.

It can fairly be said that I have placed more emphasis in these pages on community than on individualism. I have done so to underscore the extent to which the American conversation has veered away from an understanding of our communal impulses. But nothing here is intended to deny the fierce independence that Americans so value. We have always held up as heroes inventors and adventurers, cowboys and private eyes, entrepreneurs and free spirits. “Telling Americans to improve democracy by sinking comfortably into a community, by losing themselves in a collective life, is calling into the wind,” wrote the historian Robert Wiebe. “There has never been an American democracy without its powerful strand of individualism, and nothing suggests there ever will be.” Wiebe is entirely right. But it is also calling into the wind to pretend that Americans have lived by individualism alone. We are the nation of both High Noon and It’s a Wonderful Life. Our current discontent has many roots. But we will not resolve our problems or restore our greatness by fleeing from either of our twin commitments, from either side of our character.

There is no point in seeking compromise at the midway point between the Long Consensus and the radical individualists. The Long Consensus itself embodies moderation, balance, and compromise, a view Obama himself finally embraced in a series of speeches in the fall of 2011 and early 2012. There is much room for argument within that consensus over when and whether to tilt more toward the public or the private, the individual or the community. What the country neither needs nor wants is an endless series of campaigns and political battles revolving around competing fears—of excessive government on one side and of an end to core programs, such as Medicaid and Social Security, on the other.

The rising generation that rallied to Obama in 2008 did not do so simply because of their fascination with an unusual and compelling human being—“the biggest celebrity in the world,” as John McCain’s campaign correctly called him. They also mobilized because, as a generation, they espouse even more than their elders the values and commitments of the Long Consensus. Obama ended his first term by embracing the imperative of defending the Long Consensus—belatedly, perhaps, but also forcefully. But it will be the task of the new generation to make it vital in the unfolding century.

Young Americans are, at once, more passionately individualistic and more passionately communitarian than any other age group in the country. The Millennials (generally defined as Americans born in 1981 or later) are the most socially tolerant of the generations. They are also the generation most comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity, most open on matters such as gay marriage, and most welcoming to new im-
migrants. The fact that they are such a racially and ethnically diverse generation explains and undergirds many of their attitudes. Latinos, who combine a determination to succeed with a strong commitment to community and the idea of a common good, are an important component of the Millennial generation. It is a generation whose members have faith in their own capacity, collectively and as individuals, to effect change.

Their sense of communal obligation is made manifest in their exceptional devotion to service—as volunteers in tutoring programs, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, environmental initiatives, and community organizing. They are also the generation that bore the largest burden of fighting the nation’s two longest wars. Surveys have consistently found that helping those in need is a high personal priority for members of this generation.

They have more faith than their elders do in government’s constructive capacities, even as they also wish for a government that is less bureaucratic and more nimble. They combine the idealism of the 1960s generation with the more worldly concerns of the generation that came of age in the 1980s and the 1990s. One might say that they are more practical than the 1960s generation, and more idealistic than younger Americans were in the 1980s. They want to do good, but they want the good they do to last. They are willing to take risks, but they are not foolhardy. They have doubts about politics, but they have shown a willingness to give politics a chance. They have few illusions, but they do have hope.

No one harnessed those hopes more effectively than Obama. In the 2008 election, two-thirds of voters 29 and younger supported him; by contrast, Obama won only 45 percent among voters who were 65 and older. As the Pew Research Center pointed out, this was “the largest disparity between younger and older voters recorded in four decades of modern Election Day exit polling.”

Moreover, Pew observed, “After decades of low voter participation by the young, the turnout gap in 2008 between voters under and over the age of 30 was the smallest it had been since 18- to 20-year-olds were given the right to vote in 1972.” The members of this generation are more engaged in politics at this point in the life cycle than any generation in four decades.

Turnout among the young rose steadily beginning in 2000, as has support for Democrats. In 2008, Obama built on something that was already happening even as he mobilized the young in unprecedented ways.

Members of the new generation believe in voluntary action and in government action. They are more skeptical of traditional norms than older Americans are, yet their goals in life might have found approval from old-line Whigs. When asked by Pew’s researchers to list their most important goals in life, “being a good parent” ranked first at 52 percent, followed by “having a successful marriage” at 30 percent and “helping those in need” at 21 percent. Interestingly, this last came in ahead of “having a high-paying career,” which came in at 15 percent. This generation is pioneering a blend of progressive politics and back-to-basics values.

Yet the citizens of this new economic and technological world have lost neither their desire
for social justice nor their inclination to protest conditions that narrow their opportunities. The anti-Wall Street demonstrations and the support they won are evidence of this. Consider that we are a nation that celebrates the liberating possibility of new technologies, and then we

We are libertarians when things go well for us, but we want to socialize the risks that threaten us.

quickly form social networks. We disparage the federal government, and then we heap praise and honor on our men and women in uniform, who represent the most self-sacrificing part of that government. More prosaically, we demand that government do less and spend less, even as we demand that it do more for the elderly, for the unemployed, for the education of our children, for the eradication of disease, for safeguarding our natural environment, for protecting consumers, for preventing financial fraud and abuse.

We are libertarians when things go well for us, but we want to socialize the risks that threaten us, notably those arising from old age, natural disasters, unsafe products, and ineffective drugs. “Government is the enemy,” former Republican Senator Bill Cohen once said, “until you need a friend.”

It was one of the great strengths of the Long Consensus that it was neither static nor backward-looking. It fostered, absorbed, and managed change. Paradoxically, by building a sense of social and economic security, the consensus encouraged risk taking and innovation by making risk less frightening. Government underwrote the infrastructure—social as well as physical—within which innovation could occur. By promoting mass education, research, and scientific breakthroughs, government increased the capacity of individuals to prosper and society’s capacity to advance technologically. The GI Bill and subsequent federal college scholarship and student loan programs were classics in the genre: they expanded individual opportunities while increasing the community’s economic resources (and its level of knowledge and expertise).

Hamilton and Clay might be shocked at the speed with which American society democratized itself; they would not be surprised by government’s capacity to foster growth or promote mass education.

At the same time, those who devote their lives to public service through government too often find themselves demonized, their significant contributions disparaged, their sometimes heroic efforts to innovate and reform dismissed. This creates a vicious cycle that further erodes government’s capacities. Broad assaults on government tarnish its image, which in turn discourages the innovators and the reformers from joining the public sector in the first place. Paul Light, a close student of the bureaucracy, has observed that young people interested in...
public service have gravitated more to the not-for-profit sector than to government. This is certainly good for the third sector; it is not good for the future of government. We must thus create a new virtuous cycle in which government’s need to attract new talent leads it to create dynamic work environments. Public sector work should again provoke pride. Those who work for government should experience the same sense of efficacy that their peers in the private and nonprofit sectors do. It was, after all, only a half century ago that John F. Kennedy created a genuine excitement over the prospect of government work. “When my brother John and I were growing up,” Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg declared in a speech in 2000, “hardly a day went by when someone didn’t come up to us and say, ‘Your father changed my life. I went into public service because he asked me.’” The devotees of the New Frontier who descended upon Washington in 1960 were not saints, but neither were they mere opportunists. “The mood,” wrote the journalist Godfrey Hodgson, “was strangely blended from ambition and idealism, aggressive social climbing and a sense of youthful adventure.” We could do, and have done, much worse.

But restoring this enthusiasm for public service will require us to create a government that is much less distant from our aspirations to a sense of community. Government is not just a bureaucracy. It is also a town square. It is not simply a place that issues licenses and permits but also the institution that builds the schools, colleges, libraries, parks, and neighborhood centers that foster community life. In a democracy, government should be seen less as an entity that issues commands than as a forum where citizens debate the future of their community and their nation. Government is not just the FBI and the IRS, as important as those two institutions are to our security and our solvency. It is also the TVA, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the National Science Foundation.

Liberals and progressives have sometimes forgotten that their purpose is not and never has been to defend government as such. Big government is not an end. Government’s most successful ventures have involved empowering individuals and communities, often by increasing the bargaining power of those who previously had been at an unfair disadvantage. The New Deal’s most successful venture in redistributing wealth and income to the less affluent was not any particular tax-spend-and-transfer program but the National Labor Relations Act, which enabled employees to form unions and bargain on their own behalf. Requiring manufacturers and lenders to provide consumers with adequate information on the products they buy and the loans they receive costs government little, but it can shift the balance in market transactions decisively in the consumer’s direction. Government’s massive commitment to education at all levels is not—or certainly should not be—about the employment of educators and administrators.
It is (and has been through most of our history) an effort to provide citizens with the capacity for self-government, prosperity, self-reliance, and personal growth. At a moment of skepticism about all institutions, reforms that promote public and private transparency, accountability, and responsiveness will speak to all of the disparate villages and neighborhoods that make up the world of Bill Bishop’s Big Sort.

Democratic self-government, if it is functioning properly, is simply the expression of the will of the community. The republican conception of government to which our Founders subscribed stoutly opposed the idea of a government captured by factions or for sale to particular interests. This is why the Citizens United decision opening the electoral system to the intrusion of large sums of money is antithetical to the Founders’ intentions. Republicanism insisted that citizens should participate in public life not simply to serve their legitimate personal or group interests but also, and primarily, because self-rule is essential to liberty. “Unless citizens have reason to believe that sharing in self-government is intrinsically important,” Michael Sandel has written, “their willingness to sacrifice individual interests for the common good may be eroded by instrumental calculations about the costs and benefits of political participation.” Paradoxically, restoring republican idealism is the only practical remedy for our democratic distemper. All other solutions are likely to fall short. One senses it was this intuition that inspired tens of thousands to knock on doors in 2008 in pursuit of nothing more, or less, than “change we can believe in.”

In analyzing our tendency to sort ourselves into communities organized by attitudes, lifestyles, and political inclination, Bill Bishop notes our increasing propensity to refer to political opponents as “those people.” In a competitive democratic system, there will always be a certain amount of such talk. In tough political campaigns, being nice is rarely a top priority. But in a democratic republic, “those people” are also fellow citizens. And self-government ultimately requires us to work with them, too.

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“The notion of a transnational public sphere is indispensable to critical theory in the current postnational constellation.”

It is commonplace nowadays to speak of “transnational public spheres,” “diasporic public spheres,” “Islamic public spheres,” and even an emerging “global public sphere.” And such talk has a clear point; a growing body of media studies are documenting the existence of discursive arenas that overflow the bounds of both nations and states. Numerous scholars in cultural studies are ingeniously mapping the contours of such arenas and the flows of images and signs in and through them. Nevertheless, this idea raises a problem. The concept of the public sphere was developed not simply to understand communication flows but also to contribute to a critical theory of democracy. In that theory, a public sphere is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion. Insofar as the process is inclusive and fair, publicity is supposed to discredit views that cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to assure the legitimacy of those that do. Thus, it matters who participates and on what terms.

In addition, a public sphere is conceived as a vehicle for marshaling public opinion as a political force. Mobilizing the considered sense of civil society, publicity is supposed to hold officials accountable and to assure that the actions of the state express the will of the citizenry. Thus, a public sphere should correlate with a sovereign power. Together, these two ideas—the nonnative legitimacy and political efficacy of public opinion—are essential to the concept of the public sphere in critical theory. Without them, the concept loses its critical force and its political point.

Yet these two features are not easily associated with the discursive arenas that we today call “transnational public spheres.” It is difficult to associate the notion of legitimate public opinion with communicative arenas in which
If states do not fully control their own territories, then how can their citizenries’ public opinion be politically effective?

The interlocutors are not fellow members of a political community with equal rights to participate in political life. And it is hard to associate the notion of efficacious communicative power with discursive spaces that do not correlate with sovereign states. Thus, it is by no means clear what it means today to speak of “transnational public spheres.” From the perspective of critical theory, at least, the phrase sounds a bit like an oxymoron. Nevertheless, we should not rush to jettison the notion of a transnational public sphere. Such a notion is indispensable, I think, to those who aim to reconstruct critical theory in the current “postnational constellation.” But it will not be sufficient merely to refer to such public spheres in a relatively casual commonsense way, as if we already knew what they were. Rather, it will be necessary to return to square one, to problematize public-sphere theory—and ultimately to reconstruct its conceptions of the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of communicative power.

The trick will be to walk a narrow line between two equally unsatisfactory approaches. On the one hand, one should avoid an empiricist approach that simply adapts the theory to the existing realities, as that approach risks sacrificing its normative force. On the other hand, one should also avoid an externalist approach that invokes ideal theory to condemn social reality, as that approach risks forfeiting critical traction. The alternative, rather, is a critical theoretical approach that seeks to locate normative standards and emancipatory political possibilities precisely within the historically unfolding constellation.

Let me begin by recalling some analytic features of public-sphere theory, drawn from the locus classicus of all discussions, Jürgen Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this early work, Habermas’ inquiry proceeded simultaneously on two levels, one empirical and historical, the other ideological-critical and normative. On both levels, the public sphere was conceptualized as coextensive with a bounded political community and a sovereign territorial state, often a nation-state. *Structural Transformation* correlated the public sphere with a modern state apparatus that exercised sovereign power over a bounded territory. Thus, Habermas assumed that public opinion was addressed to a Westphalian state that was capable in principle of regulating its inhabitants’ affairs and solving their problems.

Some readers found the Habermas critique insufficiently radical. In the discussion that followed the work’s belated translation into English, the objections tended to divide into two distinct streams. One stream interrogated the legitimacy of public opinion along lines beyond those pursued by Habermas. Focused on relations within civil society, exponents of what I shall call “the legitimacy critique” contended that *Structural Transformation* obscured the existence of systemic obstacles that deprive some who are nominally members of the public of the capacity to participate on a par with others, as full partners in public debate. Highlighting class inequalities and status hierarchies in civil society, these critics analyzed their effects on those included in principle, but excluded or marginalized in practice: propertyless workers; women; the poor; ethno-racial, religious, and national minorities. Thus, this critique questioned the legitimacy of
what passes for public opinion in democratic theory and in social reality.

A second stream of criticism radicalized Habermas’ problematization of the efficacy of public opinion. Focused on relations between civil society and the state, proponents of “the efficacy critique” maintained that *Structural Transformation* failed to register the full range of systemic obstacles that deprive discursively generated public opinion of political muscle. Not convinced that these had been adequately captured by Habermas’ account of the “refeudal-ization” of the public sphere, these critics sought to theorize the structural forces that block the flow of communicative power from civil society to the state. Highlighting the respective roles of private economic power and entrenched bureaucratic interests, their critique served to deepen doubt about the efficacy of public opinion as a political force in capitalist societies.

My own earlier effort to “rethink the public sphere” was no exception. In an article originally published in 1991, I directed criticisms of both types against what I called, following Habermas, “the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere.” In its legitimacy aspect, my critique focused on the effects on public opinion of inequality within civil society. Rebutting the liberal view that it was possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status and class differentials and to deliberate “as if” they were peers, I argued that social equality is a necessary condition for political democracy. Under real-world conditions of massive inequality, I reckoned, the only way to reduce disparities in political voice was through social movement contestation that challenged some basic features of bourgeois publicity. Complicating the standard liberal picture of a single comprehensive public sphere, I claimed that the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could enhance the participation of subordinate strata in stratified societies.

Exposing, too, the bourgeois masculinist bias in standard liberal views of what counts as a public concern, I endorsed efforts by movements, such as feminism, to redraw the boundaries between public and private.

My article also propounded an efficacy critique, which interrogated the capacity of public opinion to achieve political force. Identifying forces that block the translation of communicative power into administrative power, I questioned the standard liberal view that a functioning public sphere always requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state. Distinguishing the “weak publics” of civil society—which generate public opinion but not binding laws—from the “strong publics” within the state (whose deliberations issue in sovereign decisions), I sought to envision institutional arrangements that could enhance the latter’s accountability to the former. Aiming, too, to open space for imagining radical-democratic alternatives, I questioned the apparent foreclosure by Habermas of hybrid forms, such as “quasi-strong” decision-making publics in civil society.

Today, even powerful states share responsibility for many key governance functions with international institutions, intergovernmental networks, and nongovernmental organizations. This is the case not only for relatively new
functions, such as environmental regulation, but also for classical ones, such as defense, policing, and the administration of civil and criminal law—witness the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Criminal Court, and the World Intellectual Property Organization. Certainly, these institutions are dominated by hegemonic states, as was the interstate system before them. But the mode in which hegemony is exercised today is evidently new. Far from invoking the model of exclusive, undivided state sovereignty, hegemony increasingly operates through a model of disaggregated sovereignty.

If states do not fully control their own territories, if they lack the sole and undivided capacity to wage war, secure order, and administer law, then how can their citizenries’ public opinion be politically effective? Even granting, for the sake of argument, that national publicity is fairly generated and satisfies criteria of legitimacy; even granting, too, that it influences the will of parliament and the state administration; how, under conditions of disaggregated sovereignty, can it be implemented? How, in sum, can public opinion be efficacious as a critical force?

The assumption that a public coincides with a national citizenry, resident on a national territory, which formulates its common interest as the general will of a bounded political community—this assumption, too, is counterfactual. For one thing, the equation of citizenship, nationality, and territorial residence is belied by such phenomena as migrations, diasporas, dual- and triple-citizenship arrangements, indigenous community membership, and patterns of multiple residency. Every state now has non-citizens on its territory; most are multicultural and/or multinational; and every nationality is territorially dispersed. Equally confounding, however, is the fact that public spheres today are not coextensive with political membership. Often the interlocutors are neither co-nationals nor fellow citizens. The opinion they generate, therefore, represents neither the common interest nor the general will of any demos. Far from institutionalizing debate among citizens who share a common status as political equals, publicity appears in the eyes of many observers to empower transnational elites, who possess the material and symbolic prerequisites for global networking.

Here, too, the difficulty is not just empirical but also conceptual and political. If the interlocutors do not constitute a demos, how can their collective opinion be translated into binding laws and administrative policies? If, moreover, they are not fellow citizens, putatively equal in participation rights, status, and voice, then how can the opinion they generate be considered legitimate? How, in sum, can the critical criteria of efficacy and legitimacy be meaningfully applied to transnational public opinion in our contemporary world?

The assumption that a principal topos of public-sphere discussion is the proper regulation by a territorial state of a national economy, too, is belied by present conditions. We need only mention outsourcing, transnational corporations, and offshore business registry to appreciate that territorially based national production is now largely notional. Thanks, moreover, to the
Consider, as well, the assumption that public opinion is conveyed through a national communications infrastructure, centered on print and broadcasting. This assumption implies that communicative processes, however decentered, are sufficiently coherent and politically focused to coalesce in “public opinion.” But it, too, is rendered counterfactual by current conditions. Recall the profusion of niche media, some subnational, some transnational, which do not in any case function as national media, focused on subjecting the exercise of state power to the test of publicity. Granted, one can also note the parallel emergence of global media, but these market-driven, corporately owned outlets are scarcely focused on checking transnational power. In addition, many countries have privatized government-operated media, with decidedly mixed results: on the one hand, the prospect of a more independent press and TV and more inclusive populist programming; on the other hand, the further spread of market logic, advertisers’ power, and dubious amalgams like talk radio and “infotainment.” Finally, we should mention instantaneous electronic, broadband, and satellite communications technologies, which permit direct transnational communication, bypassing state controls. Together, all
these developments signal the denationalization of communicative infrastructure.

The effects here, too, pose threats to the critical functioning of public spheres. Granted, we see some new opportunities for critical public opinion formation. But these go along with the disaggregation and complexification of communicative flows. Given a field divided between corporate global media, restricted niche media, and decentered Internet networks, how could critical public opinion possibly be generated on a large scale and mobilized as a political force? Given, too, the absence of even the sort of formal equality associated with common citizenship, how could those who comprise transnational media audiences deliberate together as peers? How, once again, can public opinion be normatively legitimate or politically efficacious under current conditions?

Consider, too, the presupposition of a single national language, which was supposed to constitute the linguistic medium of public-sphere communication. As a result of population mixing, national languages do not map onto states. The problem is not simply that official state languages were consolidated at the expense of local and regional dialects, although they were. It is also that existing states are de facto multilingual, while language groups are territorially dispersed, and many more speakers are multilingual. Meanwhile, English has become the lingua franca of global business, mass entertainment, and academia. Yet language remains a political faultline: threatening to explode countries like Belgium, if no longer Canada, while complicating efforts to democratize countries like South Africa and to erect transnational formations like the European Union.

The assumption that a public sphere rests on a national vernacular literature, which supplies the shared social imaginary needed to underpin solidarity, too, is today counterfactual. Consider the increased salience of cultural hybridity and hybridization, including the rise of "world literature." Consider the rise of global mass entertainment, whether straightforwardly American or merely stylistically informed by American entertainment. Consider, finally, the spectacular rise of visual culture, or, better, of the enhanced salience of the visual within culture, and the relative decline of print and the literary. In all these cases, it is difficult to recognize the sort of (national) literary cultural formation seen by Habermas as underpinning the subjective stance of public-sphere interlocutors. On the contrary, insofar as public spheres require the cultural support of shared social imaginaries, rooted in national literary cultures, it is hard to see them functioning effectively today.

In general, then, public spheres are increasingly transnational or postnational with respect...
to each of the constitutive \( V \) elements of public opinion. The “who” of communication, previously theorized as a national citizenry, is often now a collection of dispersed interlocutors, who do not constitute a demos. The “what” of communication, previously theorized as a national interest rooted in a national economy, now stretches across vast reaches of the globe, in a transnational community of risk, which is not, however, reflected in concomitantly expansive solidarities and identities. The “where” of communication, once theorized as the national territory, now increasingly occupies deterritorialized cyberspace. The “how” of communication, once theorized as national print media, now encompasses a vast translinguistic nexus of disjoint and overlapping visual cultures. Finally, the “to whom” or addressee of communication, once theorized as a sovereign territorial state which should be made answerable to public opinion, is now an amorphous mix of public and private transnational powers that is neither easily identifiable nor rendered accountable.

These developments raise the question of whether and how public spheres today could conceivably perform the democratic political functions with which they have been associated historically. Could public spheres today conceivably generate legitimate public opinion, in the strong sense of considered understandings of the general interest, filtered through fair and inclusive argumentation, open to everyone potentially affected? And if so, how? Likewise, could public spheres today conceivably render public opinion sufficiently efficacious to constrain the various powers that determine the conditions of the interlocutors’ lives? And if so, how? What sorts of changes (institutional, economic, cultural, and communicative) would be required even to imagine a genuinely critical and democratizing role for transnational public spheres under current conditions? Where are the sovereign powers that public opinion today should constrain? Which publics are relevant to which powers? Who are the relevant members of a given public? In what language(s) and through what media should they communicate? And via what communicative infrastructure?

These questions well exceed the scope of the present inquiry and I shall not pretend to try to answer them here. I want to conclude, rather, by suggesting a conceptual strategy that can clarify the issues and point the way to possible resolutions.

My proposal centers on the two features that together constituted the critical force of the concept of the public sphere: namely, the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of public opinion. As I see it, these ideas are intrinsic, indispensible elements of any conception of publicity that purports to be critical, regardless of the socio-historical conditions in which it obtains. The present constellation is no exception. Unless we can envision conditions under which current flows of transnational publicity could conceivably become legitimate and efficacious, the concept loses its critical edge and its political point. Thus, the only way to salvage the critical function of
condition and the parity condition were yoked together under the ideal of shared citizenship in a bounded community. Public-sphere theorists implicitly assumed that citizenship set the legitimate bounds of inclusion, effectively equating those affected with the members of an established polity. Tacitly, too, theorists appealed to citizenship in order to give flesh to the idea of parity of participation in public deliberations, effectively associating communicative parity with the shared status of political equality in a territorial state. Thus, citizenship supplied the model for both the “who” and the “how” of legitimate public opinion.

The effect, however, was to truncate discussions of legitimacy. Taking for granted the modern territorial state as the appropriate unit, and its citizens as the pertinent subjects, that frame foregrounded the question of how precisely those citizens should relate to one another in the public sphere. The argument focused, in other words, on what should count as a relation of participatory parity among the members of a bounded political community. Today, however, the question of the “who” can no longer be swept under the carpet. The idea that citizenship can serve as a proxy for affectedness is no longer plausible. Under current conditions, one’s conditions of living do not depend wholly on the internal constitution of the political community of which one is a citizen. Although the latter remains undeniably relevant, its effects are mediated by other structures, both extra- and nonterritorial, whose impact is at least as significant.

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“The Internet seems to be ‘up there’ zinging information packets from one corner of the world to another: a new ‘blogosphere’ produces reports on events large and small; distinctions between public and private disintegrate with the most intimate spaces and acts visually digitized and disseminated.”

I go here cautiously, somewhere between technological determinists—who think that all new media are liberating—and skeptics, who worry about the loss of face-to-face communication and the ironic isolation that occurs when everyone is a blogger and no one is listening to the other. The determinists are wrong to think that just because citizens can now have their own media that they won’t use it poorly. The skeptics may be harder to convince.

So I start by quoting from an e-mail that a dear colleague, Bob Kingston, sent me in response to a post I had written on my own “blog” (which he had learned about after his assistant printed out the post and faxed it to him at home). The post had concerned the issue of time collapse in Iraq, a topic he did, in fact, find interesting. But he was also interested in this whole process of blogging and what it might mean for politics. So he got out his recorder and dictated a long memo that his assistant later typed out and e-mailed back to me. Here is part of it:

As I think you already know, I’m just a little skeptical about the utility and the morality of everyone “blogging merrily along.” I remember, when I was still a small boy, a hundred years ago, I used to linger around elderly gentlemen, sitting in groups of two or three on benches in the park, talking with conviction, camaraderie and high seriousness about the world today—in which they obviously played very little part. To a degree, I was always impressed by them: by their conviction, their experience, even their wisdom. Yet at the same time, my dominant thought was scornful, in the way that only young can be to old: silly old fools, they could sit around talking because they have
nothing else to do, and nobody was going to listen to them anyway! Something of that latter attitude prevails every time I hear of a blog, nowadays: why would anybody assume that somebody else had the time or patience to listen to whatever trivial pre-occupation is on his or her mind? That’s what friends are for; and people who might reasonably be relied upon to do something; but why the hell should anybody else want to listen to me! As one who is committed to—genuinely committed to—the continued and extended generation of a deliberative culture, I recognize that, ideally, everybody should be ready to talk and listen to serious commentary, by anybody, about the matters that affect us all. And this kind of freedom to express is ultimately much more important than the freedom to wear a tie or a hair-do that will attract others’ interest. So I should welcome the habit of blog. Perhaps what I ultimately fear is that it might have a kind of inverse effect—not without some kind of kinship to the a-temporal difficulty that you cite in the blog itself: a kind of encouragement towards—and easy acceptance of—a group self-indulgence that could paradoxically lead towards a world in which we ultimately assume less responsibility, as individuals, for collective action. It may become, at worst, a kind of upscale version of the gripe: an easy way to justify the expression of personal disdain, instead of doing anything serious for collective improvement.

If it is true that blogging is akin to a few people idly talking to each other—or even worse, as I used to think, that it is like someone with a megaphone yelling in a desert—then there would indeed be little political value in it. Moreover, much blogging these days, especially in the United States, seems more like ranting than communicating. Despite such occasional use of blogs, I’d like to describe and discuss ways in which these new media can be—and are being—used in keeping with the aspirations of this publication.

But first note something interesting about Kingston’s reception of my blog post. His assistant printed it out and faxed it to him; he dictated a reply that he mailed to her; his assistant typed out and sent that reply to me by e-mail. There were many layers of mediation and separation between my post and his reply. Kingston did not encounter the blog on his computer.

If he had, he would have seen that he could reply directly to the blog, and that others in turn could see and reply to his reply. In effect, our little conversation could grow larger and larger. Also he would see that on my blog I have links to other people’s blogs, and some of those have links back to mine. I can “tag” a post with key words that allow others interested in these topics to find it. As one weblog hosting company puts it, “It’s about the links, man.” In other words, it’s about creating relationships and larger circles of conversation. The elderly men on the park benches in Kingston’s childhood might have attracted a few passersby; the virtual conversations online may attract exponentially more. But that is not the main difference
roosted on desks in one home after another, they came with a curious software called hypertext. Few people knew what to do with this. If they learned, they had an intriguing code for linking one bit of text with another, so for example, I could footnote a piece of writing ad infinitum with other text stored on my computer, even with drawings, later with pictures, video, music. But for most of the decade this hypertext program was an oddity. Then, in 1989, Tim Berners-Lee dreamed up a way to use hypertext markup language (html) to link data in one computer to data in another.

In the years since, the speed of connections and the amount of available information on the Web has increased beyond what anyone could imagine. I can not only look at most of the world’s artwork from my own little computer but also retrieve information on practically anything, from the recipe for Ernest Hemingway’s favorite cucumber soup to specifics on how to write my own will, tune my own car, sell my own house, or school my own children.

In the years since reading my third-grade textbook, the world has gotten even smaller and our mental topography of it has transformed radically. So now another banality has emerged: the Internet has radically changed communication, making it swifter but altering its trajectories. There are fewer hierarchical structures and more lateral connections; fewer ways for nation-states to censor public communication; more means for insurgent publics to organize themselves, raise funds, start movements, protect rainforests or blow up trains; more self-authorizing and publicly acknowledged authorities running weblogs. The public sphere proliferates and takes on new shapes. The Internet seems to be “up there” zinging information packets from one corner of the world to another: a new “blogosphere” produces reports on events large and small; distinctions between public and private

A public is not a passive body waiting in the wings. It is the effect of a diverse array of people coming together to work through past traumas, forge new identities, and try to understand and decide matters that affect them in common.

television and the bloodied jungles of Vietnam could be in your living room; hop in your car and you could be over the border into Canada in a matter of hours; drive to the darker parts of town and you could buy heroin from Afghanistan with the passing of palms.

In the 1980s, Apple introduced the personal computer. When those computers arrived and
Advertising, political propaganda, lies, and other manipulations are strategic actions. Their aim is not to garner mutual understanding but to reach some other, often veiled, end: to get the other to buy, believe, succumb, or unwittingly obey.

But this is not exactly what Habermas had in mind when he described the public sphere as a discursive space. Habermas’ fundamental model is of the speech-act communication between a sender and a receiver and the extent to which it is communicative rather than strategic. By “communicative” he means aimed toward reaching understanding, following the implicit, presupposed norms of validity, sincerity, and appropriateness that make conversation possible. In other words, we only bother to talk with each other because we presume that the other person will be, or at least ought to be, telling the truth, being sincere, and not trying to manipulate us. Speech acts that poach upon these presuppositions—for example, that take advantage of our assumption that the other is telling me the truth—are strategic not communicative. Understood so, advertising, political propaganda, lies, and other manipulations are strategic actions. Their aim is not to garner mutual understanding but to reach some other, often veiled, end: to get the other to buy, believe, succumb, or unwittingly obey.

A worry I want to address is the worry that in a complex world the public could hardly be capable of self-rule. In a world that is increasingly differentiated, as Niklas Luhmann described, with each sphere developing its own expert knowledge, we need experts and professionals to look after the common weal. The Internet seems to threaten all that. Is this a dangerous development? Don’t we need professions for more than their knowledge—knowledge that can be widely disseminated online—but also for their judgment?

The explosion of information on the World Wide Web is directly linked to the implosion of the boundaries of professional knowledge. I arrive at the doctor’s office with a printout of the possible sources of my ailments. Now that I am

 drive, and screen become extensions of our own bodily limbs, brains, and organs, fundamentally altering perceptual abilities and fields.

In this context, Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as a discursive space resonates. Today the world seems more immediate, not primarily because of high speed travel, though that certainly makes a difference, but because no matter how remote our region we can immediately and communicatively engage with others across the globe and take in the myriad images, symbols, and ideas that crisscross our perceptual field. Of course, this engagement is not at all immediate, that is, without mediation, it is highly mediated through high speed cable, telephone, radio, and satellite infrastructures. Moreover, beyond these physical structures, communication is mediated through a vast array of signs and symbols through which we produce and negotiate meaning, identity, purpose.

disintegrate with the most intimate spaces and acts visually digitized and disseminated; a text message from Boston to Moscow asks a spouse to call home; the ding of “you’ve got mail” changes the space and time in which our relationships proceed. The computer keyboard, hard
These phenomena produce natural reactions in the professions: admonishments, defensiveness, outcries, and paternalism. Woe is the layperson who ventures into these domains without expert assistance. The expert has been her protector and agent. When the layperson stops deferring to the professional, she puts herself in danger.

One of the most upturned professions these days is journalism where, not so long ago, the hierarchy of knowledge production was clear. Reporters gathered the news and wrote the stories; editors cleared them for publication. Standards were firm, making the news as construed safe and fit to print. But now others are gathering the news, writing the stories, and publishing them online without much, if any, reference to journalistic standards. Of course, this has always been the case with “underground” newspapers, missives run off on mimeograph machines with all the bylines pseudonymous. But due to the poverty of most underground publishers to cover the even modest costs of such papers, their circulation was small and mostly inconsequential.

Now the logic of circulation and reach is quite different. In the blogosphere, one’s reach is not tied to one’s pocketbook but to one’s network, salience, and eloquence. Perhaps only one person reads my blog, but if that person links to it in her blog, and another blog links to that one, then my reach expands exponentially. With this kind of interlinking of blogs, of comments posted to comments, with “track backs” and information “running up the long tail” from

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of mutual regulation and self-discipline.” But Walzer barely gives such other possibilities any consideration. Certainly professions have ethical codes, some more robust than others. Codes for realtors are paltry at best, while ones for doctors are quite powerful. But adopting a code doesn’t make a profession. Neither does mutual regulation nor even self-discipline. It seems rather that there is something in this notion of a social bond, let’s say a social relationship between professions and their publics, a kind of promise, a willingness to evolve, develop, and extend judgment. I go to a professional for more than expert knowledge; I go for a bit of wisdom, some judgment as to how, if I do this or that, things might work out.

This criterion seems to separate the professions that have a rightful and important place in a modern democratic society from those that are dispensable. We might be a bit worse off without travel agents, but we’d survive. But we would be much the worse without lawyers (never mind Shakespeare), doctors, educators, and even journalists. When I go to the doctor armed with information on symptoms and the possible causes (according to WebMD, I seem to have the Ebola virus!), I go in search of this professional’s discernment, the way her education cultivated by experience can lead her to ask the right questions, weigh possibilities (no, you don’t have Ebola) and courses of action. Even with all the information I now possess, even with the change of our relationship—now less hierarchical, more of a partnership—I still expect something important from her as a professional.

The relationship of journalism to a public is a bit more complicated. What made journalism happen in the first place was the ability to publish. Standards evolved over time, mostly as a way to purchase credibility, trust, and readers. Digital
much of a way to say anything together, anyway.

A public is not a passive body waiting in the wings. It is the effect of a diverse array of people coming together to work through past traumas, forge new identities, and try to understand and decide matters that affect them in common. We don't hear that take on the public much, but it is a much more useful way of thinking about what might make democracy possible. So, if a public is like this, something that happens when unlike people, thrown in the same place, try to understand and deliberate together about their common challenges, then there needs to be a venue for them to converse.

The age-old lament about democracy in a far-flung country, about the possibility of democracy in any community larger than, say, 10,000 people, was that this was simply impossible. But not now!

Now we can discern an audible public conversation bubbling up through the blogosphere, where people compare notes (hypertext!), disagree, rant, lament, champion their pet causes, rail against others, hype their own views, but a conversation nonetheless where, occasionally, random acts of deliberation and reflection occur. Even with its unevenness, it is possible to discern in these conversations a sense of how a public is forming, identifying and naming prob-

Technology changes all that. Twenty percent of teenagers in the United States blog. Law professors blog, as do stay-at-home moms, foodies, economists, gardeners, seniors, stand-up comics, activists, passivists, you name it. Mostly they carry on conversations about their own hobbies, proclivities, and interests. But occasionally, as the meta-blogger Rebecca MacKinnon puts it, they commit random acts of journalism. Laypeople, not journalists, digitally transmitted photos from the London Underground after the bombings. Laypeople, not journalists, reported on much of the crisis during and after Katrina. After the hurricane at least one TV station broadcast images from a blog, effectively turning the news show over to bloggers.

But MacKinnon’s larger point though is that most of what goes on in the blogosphere is a conversation, large, interrelated but uncoordinated conversation by a public that is trying to make sense of its world. Some of this conversation takes place in small venues where those interested in something swap information, but at other times the topic in this one little place becomes of great interest to the body politic. Suddenly there are hordes at the door listening in and entering the conversation. This happened to MacKinnon’s own little blog on North Korea, a blog whose traffic spiked after Bush named North Korea as part of the “axis of evil.” What had been a small parlor in the blogosphere became a stadium.

For all the ranters and cranks, there is something truly remarkable about the blogosphere. It is making the public audible. Earlier ways of hearing the public were rather crude: an opinion poll, the sampling of letters to the editor, the sounds emanating from the street protest, or the five-minute diatribe during a city council meeting. We knew what the people around us were saying, but we could only imagine what “the public” was saying, not that a public had
An adventurous journalist would try to capture this public sense of things in stories, but this was hard to do and harder still to assess or verify. It called for a great deal of judgment and discernment, an ability to gauge public sentiment and concern. But now all journalists are being called on to be adventurous, because the public’s conversation, however unwieldy, is manifest on the Web. But being a professional journalist does not mean handing the paper or the station over to bloggers and podcasters; it means using that same judgment to discern what issues are really of concern to the public—and what journalists ought to be covering.

Journalists have other resources that laypeople don’t always have, the connections and the skill to connect the dots, to find out how a matter of concern over here is connected to the machinations of some entity over there. They have the training and the resources to verify their sources and to get the story right. Now one of their biggest sources is the public, something that Minnesota Public Radio is rightly exploiting in its project called Insight Journalism, in which it is calling on all its listeners to become sources.

The emergence of an audible public brings to the fore something that was always important: that professionals do not stand above the public but in relation to them. The digital revolution is more than a media revolution; it is bringing about a major change in how we as a people relate to one another and how we see our own role and expertise in relation to the whole.
“The conflict between professional and democratic sensibilities seems to be growing, perhaps ironically, because of measures being taken to restore trust.”

This issue of the Kettering Review brings together several themes that are central to the Kettering Foundation’s work: the role of public talk in coming to public judgment, the way that a deliberative public can provide parameters for government action, the need for a public sphere to hold governments accountable, and the new kinds of interactions between publics and professions. The latter themes are now central to the foundation’s current stocktaking of troubling democratic trends.

Some of the trends we are tracking are, indeed, ominous. According to a recent report by the Transatlantic Academy, *The Democratic Disconnect*, and a feature article in the *Economist*, entitled “What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy,” there is a lack of connection between the efforts of citizens to strengthen democracy and what is happening in government and the political system, which is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. Grounding our research in histories like Harold Perkin’s *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, we see that the decline of Victorian class society (see *Downton Abbey*) was offset by the rise of a society led by people with trained expertise and its accompanying status. Beginning in the late 19th century, Perkin finds, these new professionals came to transform society itself as they infiltrated every major institution with their ideas about change.

The tension between professional culture and democracy is long-standing. Perkin believes professional expertise tends to breed arrogance, condescension, and the perception that the “uncomprehending masses” are incapable of understanding what professions know to be true. (The uncomprehending masses are democracy’s citizens.) David Brown, coeditor of Kettering’s
Higher Education Exchange, has been a professional, not in one but several fields. But now he describes himself as a “recovering professional” in his new book, America’s Culture of Professionalism. He adds to Perkin’s critique his own experience with the tendency of professional society to treat its expertise or knowledge as a property right, like the exclusive ownership of real property. Brown builds on the work of Bill Sullivan, an insightful critic of professionalism, who has long advocated a more civic conception.

Stocktaking in the professions today may be prompted by the troubled relationship between most all professionals and the public, which has lost much of its confidence in the institutions that are professionally managed. Attempts to demonstrate competence and accountability have not stemmed the tide of distrust. Neither have efforts at citizen participation or campaigns to “educate” the public with the “facts.” If, in talking to the uncomprehending masses, professionals operate on the assumption that “if you knew what I know, you would do what I do,” they are likely to be greatly disappointed.

Putting our institutions in the hands of professionals who are supposed to be immune to political pressure was expected to result in greater public benefit and approval. That hasn’t happened, and the reason may be a professional mind-set that is wedded to a form of technical rationality. This mind-set takes on added power when coupled, as it usually is, with the legal authority of bureaucracies. The technical rationality I am referring to sees human society as akin to a machine whose malfunctions can be remedied by instrumental means—like a car engine that doesn’t run properly and needs a skilled mechanic to repair it.

In the early 1900s, Max Weber argued that social behavior, like natural phenomena, such as the rotation of planets, follows calculable and therefore predictable patterns. Technical rationality could detect these patterns, which could then be changed by effective and efficient means. According to Weber, rationality is at the core of modern authority. However, critics worry that instrumental means have a way of becoming detached from ends. Adding to this critique, James Scott, in Seeing Like a State, points out that faith in technical expertise spawned a multitude of utopian projects of social engineering that, although technically sound, had disastrous results.

Technical rationality, the “property” of professionals, leads to a concept of citizenship that is lacking in agency. From a professional perspective, people can seem like hopeless amateurs. That is exactly how citizens were portrayed in a 1998 article in the Economist, “American Democracy: Building the Perfect Citizens.” The article contended that, “When professionals dominate all complex subjects, from the forecasting of markets to the cataloguing of library books, perhaps it is too much to hope that public policy can ever be the province of the amateur.”

This concept of citizenship is reinforced by professional culture’s distinctive notion of service. Professionals usually serve by treating various maladies, and those they treat may easily be seen as objects. Doctors have patients, lawyers have clients, and print journalists have readers. Patients, clients, and readers are largely passive. (After all, patients are supposed to be patient!) From this perspective, it’s easy to think of citizens as objects of professional treatment in contrast to the democratic concept of citizens as political actors, as agents.

Adding to the conflict with democracy, professional values, too, can be different from the values of citizens, according to Martha Derthick’s study of the Massachusetts welfare system, The Influence of Federal Grants. Originally a locally administered system of relief, the system
in Massachusetts was, at its best, personal, compassionate, and sensitive to differences among people. This system was gradually replaced, however, by a professional one with different priorities. The old system put a premium on responsiveness and could distinguish between one person’s circumstances and those of a neighbor. Local welfare officials knew people’s names and treated them as individuals. But the new professional system valued uniformity in service because the old system was prone to favor some people over others. Everyone was to be treated the same in the new system—no favoritism!

To be fair, both the original welfare system and the professional one had downsides as well as advantages. The old system, while humane, could be corrupted and mismanaged; the new one could be insensitive to differences in people’s circumstances and so encumbered by rules that it was difficult for people to navigate. But it was more efficient from a bureaucratic point of view. In the 21st century, we live with the triumph of a professionalized society and owe much of our well-being to it. Nonetheless, the conflict between professional and democratic sensibilities not only persists, but also seems to be growing—ironically perhaps, because of measures being taken to restore trust.

Take the case of all of the numerous professional efforts to demonstrate public accountability. We all want accountability in our institutions and by their professionals. As Albert Dzur, the author of Democratic Professionalism, points out in a memo, “There’s real value to accountability—meaning, roughly, that our schools, courts, hospitals, etc. are doing what they say they are doing and what the public has decided they should do [emphasis added].” However, Dzur fears this isn’t happening; in fact, he sees signs that institutions are moving in the opposite direction by developing even more expert and technical processes for demonstrating their accountability in hopes of restoring lost public legitimacy or creating better defenses against public criticism. He calls this movement “super professionalism.” From a democratic perspective, this is a worrisome trend. Another scholar, Brian Cook, identifies an even more worrisome trend, in Bureaucracy and Self-Government: “An increasingly vicious circle has emerged, in which anxiety about control and accountability . . . has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about . . . another layer of controls.”

The purpose of stocktaking, of course, isn’t just diagnostic; it should lead to remedies. For example, Janet and Robert Denhardt, in their book The New Public Service, try to resolve the conflict with democracy by advocating a professional code based on “serving” rather than “steering.” But what professional self-interest would prompt this or any other change? Nobel Prize-winning political economist Elinor Ostrom may have part of the answer. In “Covenanting, Co-producing, and the Good Society,” she argues that professionalized institutions can only do their jobs well if they are reinforced by the “public goods” produced by the work of citizens. That should be an incentive to treat citizens as agents rather than amateurs; and a sense of mutual benefit should ease the conflict with democracy.

At the foundation, we try to think about practical ways for this sense of mutual benefit to develop. We have been intrigued by the potential of a closer alignment between the work citizens do reinforcing public goods and the work of professionals in institutions. Institutions do the same
things citizens do as they work. They identify problems, make decisions about solving them, marshal resources, organize their efforts, and so on. People do similar things in their civic work, but they don’t do them the way institutions do.

A simple example of a better alignment between professional routines and the democratic practices citizens use has to do with the way problems are identified or given names. (We have mentioned the importance of the way problems are named in past Reviews.) Professionals, as they should, describe problems in expert or technical terms; citizens, on the other hand, describe problems in terms of the way they experience them and the way they affect what people hold dear. Citizens are more likely to tell a personal story when they name a problem than they are to issue a statistical report: the language of professional culture is primarily metric, but the language of civic life is not. To align these two very different ways of naming problems, professionals in journalism, public administration, and other fields could expand the way they identify problems to include what people hold dear.

The foundation’s most recent report on its research, The Ecology of Democracy, goes into greater detail about the democratic practice of citizens and other forms of realignment. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties. Institutional realignment only asks that professionals do what they usually do a bit differently, so that their work reinforces that of citizens. Stocktaking in the professions from a democratic point of view would look for more opportunities for realigning professional/institutional routines with democratic practices. Would this eliminate the tension between democracy and professional culture? Of course not. But it could help forge a more productive relationship.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.