A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
The Kettering Review® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Kettering Review®, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

The Review welcomes manuscripts of 1000-3500 words and black-and-white line illustrations for themes appropriate to its interests. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed and stamped return envelopes. The editor assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. The Review also welcomes news of activities, programs, and events relevant to its expressed interests but reserves the right to publish such information at its discretion.

Copyright © 2011 by the Kettering Foundation
ISSN 0748-8815
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>John Dewey</td>
<td>Editor’s Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lawrence A. Cremin</td>
<td>The School as Social Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Stewart Ranson</td>
<td>Public Education and the Education of the Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Judith Green</td>
<td>Towards a Learning Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Wendy Brown</td>
<td>The Continuously Planning City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Bill Bywater</td>
<td>We Are All Democrats Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>David Mathews</td>
<td>Tarrying with the Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*in an interview with Noëlle McAfee*  

. . . afterthoughts

---

Editor’s Letter

Those who keep track of such operational details tell us that John Dewey has been one of this Review’s more frequent contributors over the past, almost 30 years. Now Dewey was a professor of education—a teacher of teachers, that is to say; and because he was born and grew up in the 19th century, it may seem odd to find him a font of wisdom for the 21st! But his interest was the American public and how citizens of democracy might learn to maintain the practice of self-government in a time and a nation already becoming victim to what Dan Yankelovich nowadays refers to as “scientism”—subordinating democratic citizens to the supposedly superior wisdom of institutions and the mensuration of “experts.” Lawrence Cremin was a disciple of Dewey, a long-time friend who himself became president of the renowned Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City. And he, three-quarters of a century later, wrote (in the tribute to Dewey that we reprint in this issue):

What’s important about public education is that we work through to certain agreements about value and policies. We don’t simply galvanize the world; we also decide upon common ground.

Cremin underscores Dewey’s conviction that education is not merely the challenge of the school. “Democracy,” Dewey had written, “is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience.” And accordingly, Cremin recognizes that family life, religious life, and work life—all educate, and the education in all of these realms is “as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.”

Now this Review—which is clearly about to focus its interest upon the education that citizens of a democracy must find—is not (if only out of respect to these writers) ready to take off against the schools, who are perhaps by now already suffering their share of the slings and arrows of outraged citizens. One has to learn also to become a citizen of the democratic community. And while that may entail the well-taught practice of some skills in the classroom, it requires, fundamentally and consistently, both an understanding of the experience and aspiration of others and a willingness to fashion means that may accommodate them—different as they may be from ourselves—together among us. Children nowadays learn to communicate digitally, as they used to learn with script. Increasingly, then, as communities themselves change, they, too, may need to be seen as communities of learning. Government begins with self-government, rather than the government of others; and learning belongs in the community, rather than merely the classroom.

Readers of the Review may be interested to note that the essays and excerpts that comprise this edition are presented in the chronological order of their publication, although that is not customary Review practice. It is not that we, the editors, have developed a sudden addiction to digging in the chasms of passing time, to history per se, but that the
writers in this issue are all acutely aware of the demand that constant change places upon a community, and therefore of the demands the community must make upon itself to understand and share the responsibilities that change must place up on them. Changing mores, and the changing institutions through which they are reflected, call on communities to adapt. “There was,” wrote our third contributor, Stewart Ranson, in the final decade of the 20th century that Dewey had ushered in, “an urgent need for fundamental change, to create a common purpose, and the conditions for individuals and their communities to flourish, by empowering their sense of agency and responsibility for the future.” Communities, too, must learn.

Changes in the community’s lifestyle, of course, had different implications for each of these educators: for Dewey the education of a self-governing people was critical; for Cremin, no less critical is the breadth of societal learning, through institutions—like the family, the church, and the community—that largely shape citizens’ lives; and Ranson sees change as a fundamentally political requirement to provide “the foundation for public and collective empowerment” by way of practice in our contemporary democracy.

Having now already survived a decade of our 21st century, we know there are still more publicly apparent differences among us than used to be acknowledged. While Dewey and Cremin were concerned about the use of institutions through which citizens might learn to practice an effective democracy, their concern sometimes seems to have worked into what is almost a fear that we may not be capable of so controlling the ills that flesh is heir to. It is interesting, thus, to find the first of our 21st-century writers, Judith Green, staunchly “Deweyan” in her critique of the new century, although this “heritage” (as she affirms it) may be “at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits.” She illustrates this hope affirmatively by citing “a wide range of formal and informal opportunities for citizen participation in government and in other future-shaping processes.” (Some of them have in fact been described in past issues of the Kettering Review.)

Still, to Wendy Brown—whose essay we have drawn from a volume of essays published originally in France a few years ago—a government whose election—and whose legislation—may be engineered by oligarchs is not a true “rule of the people,” universal suffrage notwithstanding. She argues that, democracy must contrast with aristocracy, tyranny, and oligarchy, “and also with a condition of being colonized or occupied.” Bill Bywater, in a recent interview with our editor, Noëlle McAfee, recalls that Dewey called democracy “a name for a life of free and enriching communion . . . a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all.” Thus he closes our issue, appropriately, with his sense of the “learning community,” always “becoming” and constantly challenged by the continuing, tireless factor of change. And it is precisely on that point that David Mathews focuses his “afterthoughts,” still looking towards a day when systems may change “if communities also assess or learn about themselves.”
So between the 19th and the 21st centuries, the preoccupations with citizens’ education do sometimes seem to be utterly different; but they may turn out to be fundamentally variant responses to an awareness of change. And to the continuing dilemma of democracy—for which a deliberative public, learning to share its understandings, may be the only answer.

Without reference to these essays, we asked our Review artist, this time, to provide for us just five sets of sketches or portraits that might suggest the impact of change, within remembered decades, in relation to home, communication, travel, earning a living, and politics. And if these merely add to our confusion or despair, we hope readers may find comfort in the cover—Cimetière Marin de Sète, a reproduction of a recent work by the esteemed contemporary photographic artist, Joan Powers—merely because it suggested to us what might be of continuing value in our ephemeral lives.

Robert Kingston
Most of our pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, only by the promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding.

The function of education, since anything which might pass by that name was found among savage tribes, has been social. The particular organ or structure, however, through which this aim was subserved, and the nature of its adjustment to other social institutions, have varied according to the peculiar condition of the given time. The general principle of evolution—development from the undifferentiated toward the formation of distinct organs through division of labor—stands out clearly in a survey of educational history.

With the development of the state has come a certain distinction between state and society. As I use these terms, I mean by state the organization of the resources of community life through governmental machinery of legislation and administration. I mean by society the less definite and freer play of the forces of the community which goes on in the daily intercourse and contact of men in an endless variety of ways that have nothing to do with politics or government or the state in any institutional sense. Now, the control of education by the state inevitably carried with it a certain segregation of the machinery of both school administration and instruction from the freer, more varied, and more flexible modes of social intercourse. So true is this that for a long time the school was occupied exclusively with but one function, the purveying of intellectual material to a certain number of selected minds. Even when the democratic impulse broke into the isolated department of the school, it did not effect a complete reconstruction, but only the addition of another element. This was preparation for citizenship.
Citizenship, to most minds, means a distinctly political thing. It is defined in terms of relation to the government, not to society in its broader aspects. To be able to vote intelligently, to take such share as might be in the conduct of public legislation and administration—that has been the significance of the term.

Now our community life has suddenly awakened; and in awakening it has found that governmental institutions and affairs represent only a small part of the important purposes and difficult problems of life, and that even that fraction cannot be dealt with adequately except in the light of a wide range of domestic, economic, and scientific considerations quite excluded from the conception of the state of citizenship. We find that our political problems involve race questions, questions of the assimilation of diverse types of language and custom; we find that most serious political questions grow out of underlying industrial and commercial changes and adjustments; we find that most of our pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, but only by the promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding. We find, moreover, that the solution of the difficulties must go back to a more adequate scientific comprehension of the actual facts and relations involved.

The isolation between state and society, between the government and the institutions of family, business life, etc., is breaking down. We realize the thin and artificial character of the separation. We begin to see that we are dealing with a complicated interaction of varied and vital forces, only a few of which can be pigeon-holed as governmental. The content of the term *citizenship* is broadening; it is coming to mean all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community.

The older idea of the school was that its primary concern was with the inculcation of certain facts and truths from the intellectual point of view, and the acquisition of certain forms of skill. When the school became public or common, this notion was broadened to include whatever would make the citizen a more capable and righteous voter and legislator; but it was still thought that this end would be reached along the line of intellectual instruction. To teach children the Constitution of the United States, the nature and working of various parts of governmental machinery, from the nation through the state and the county down to the township and the school district—to teach such things.

The school was occupied with the purveying of intellectual material to a certain number of selected minds.
The schools’ concern was the inculcation of certain facts and truths and the acquisition of certain forms of skill.

Recent inventions have so multiplied and cheapened the means of transportation, and the circulation of ideas and news through books, magazines, and papers, that it is no longer physically possible for one nationality, race, class, or sect to be kept apart from others, impervious to their wishes and beliefs. Cheap and rapid long-distance transportation has made America a meeting-place for all the peoples and tongues of the world. The centralization of industry has forced members of classes into the closest association with, and dependence upon, each other. Bigotry, intolerance, or even an unswerving faith in the superiority of one’s own religious and political creed are much shaken when individuals are brought face to face with each other, or have the ideas of others continuously and forcibly placed before them. The congestion of our city life is only one aspect of the bringing of people together which modern inventions have induced.

That many dangers result from sudden dislocations of people from the surroundings—physical, industrial, and intellectual—to which they have become adapted; that great instability may accompany this sudden massing of heterogeneous elements, goes without saying. On the other hand, these very agencies present instrumentalities which may be taken advantage of. The best as well as the worst of modern newspapers is a product. The organized public library with its facilities for reaching all classes of people is an effect. The popular assembly and lyceum is another. No educational system can be regarded as complete until it adopts into itself the various ways by which social and intellectual intercourse may be promoted, and employs them systematically, not only to counteract dangers which these same agencies are bringing with them, but so as to make them positive causes in raising the whole level of life.

Along with this increasing intercourse and interaction, with all its dangers and opportunities, there has come a relaxation of the bonds of social discipline and control. I suppose none of us would be willing to believe that the movement away from dogmatism and fixed authority is anything but a movement in the right direction. But no
one can view the loosening of the power of the older religious and social authorities without deep concern. We may feel sure that in time independent judgment, with the individual freedom and responsibility that go with it, will more than make good the temporary losses. But meantime there is a temporary loss. Parental authority has much less influence in controlling the conduct of children. Reverence seems to decay on every side, and boisterousness and hoodlumism to increase. Flippancy toward parental and other forms of constituted authority waxes, while obedient orderliness wanes, the domestic ties between husband and wife with them. Selves, as well as to their children, lose something of their permanence and sanctity. The church, with its supernatural sanctions, its means of shaping the daily life of its adherents, finds its grasp slowly slipping away. We might as well frankly recognize that many of the old agencies for moralizing mankind, that kept men living decent, respectable, and orderly lives, are losing in efficiency—particularly

With increasing intercourse and interaction has come a relaxation of the bonds of social discipline.

those agencies whose force rested in custom, tradition, and unquestioning acceptance. It is impossible for society to remain purely a passive spectator in the midst of such a scene. It must search for other agencies with which it may repair the loss, and which may produce the results the former methods are failing to secure. Here, too, it is not enough for society to confine its work to children.

However much they may need the disciplinary training of a widened and enlightened education, the older generation needs it also. Besides, time is short, very short, for the average child in the average city school. The work is hardly more than begun there, and unless it is largely to go for naught, the community must find methods of supplementing it and carrying it farther, outside the regular school channel.

The intellectual life, facts, and truths of knowledge, are much more obviously and intimately connected with all other affairs of life than they ever have been at any previous period in the history of the world. Hence a purely and exclusively intellectual instruction means less than it ever meant before. And, again, the daily occupations and ordinary surroundings of life are much more in need of interpretation than ever they have been before. We might almost say that once there was a time when learning related almost wholly to a world outside and beyond that of the daily concerns of life itself. To study physics, to learn German, to become acquainted with Chinese history, were elegant accomplishments, but more or less useless from the standpoint of daily life. In fact, it is just this sort of idea which the term culture still conveys to many minds. Where learning was useful, it was only to a comparatively small and particularly select class in the community. It was something that only the doctor or lawyer or clergyman needed in his particular
There was a time when learning related almost wholly to a world outside that of the daily concerns of life itself.

Under modern conditions, practically every sphere of learning, whether of social or natural science may impinge at once, and at any point, upon the conduct of life. German is not a fact, knowledge of which makes a distinction between a man and his fellow, but a mode of social and business intercourse. Physics is no longer natural philosophy—something concerned with remarkable discoveries about important but very remote laws; it is a set of facts which, through the applications of heat and electricity to our ordinary surroundings, constantly comes home to us. Physiology, bacteriology, anatomy, concern our individual health and the sanitation of our cities. Their facts are exploited in sensational if not scientific ways in the daily newspapers. And so we might go through the whole schedule of studies, once so foreign and alien, and show how intimately concerned they now are with commonplace life. The simple fact is that we are living in an age of applied science. It is impossible to escape the influence, direct and indirect, of the applications.

On the other hand, life is getting so specialized, the divisions of labor are carried so far, that nothing explains or interprets itself. The worker in a modern factory who is concerned with a fractional piece of a complex activity, present to him only in a limited series of acts carried on with a distinct portion of a machine, is typical of much in our entire social life. The old worker knew something of his process and business as a whole. If he did not come into personal contact with all of it, the whole was so small and so close to him that he was acquainted with it. He was thus aware of the meaning of the particular part of the work which he himself was doing. He saw and felt it as a vital part of the whole, and his horizon was extended. The situation is now the opposite. Most people are doing particular things of whose exact reasons and relationships they are only dimly aware. The whole is so vast, so complicated, and so technical that it is next to out of the question to get any direct acquaintanceship with it. Hence we must rely upon instruction, upon interpretations that come to us through conscious channels. One of the chief reasons for the success of some of the great technical correspondence schools of the present day, besides the utilitarian desire to profit by preparation for better positions, is an honest eagerness to know something more of the great forces which condition the particular work one is doing and to get an insight into
those broad relations which are so partially yet tantalizingly hinted at. The same is true of the growing interest in forms of popular science, which is a marked portion of the stock in trade of some of the best and most successful of our modern monthly magazines.

It is commonly recognized that a doctor or a lawyer must go on studying all his life if he is to be a successful man in his profession. The reason is obvious enough. Conditions about him are highly unstable; new problems present themselves; new facts obtrude. Previous study of law, no matter how thorough and accurate, does not provide for these new situations. Hence the need of continual study. There are still portions of the country where the lawyer practically prepares himself before he enters upon his professional career: all he has to do afterward is to perfect himself in certain finer points, and get greater skill in the manipulation of what he already knows. But these are the more backward and unprogressive sections where change is gradual and infrequent, and where therefore the individual prepared once is prepared always.

Now, what is true of the lawyer and the doctor, in the more progressive sections of the country, is true to a certain extent of all sorts and degrees of people. Social, economic, and intellectual conditions are changing at a rate undreamed of in past history, and unless the agencies of instruction are kept running more or less parallel with these changes, a considerable body of men is bound to find itself without the training which will enable it to adapt itself to what is going on. It will be left stranded and become a burden for the community to carry. Where progress is continuous and certain, education must be equally certain and continuous.

Everywhere we see signs of the growing recognition that the community owes to each one of its members the fullest opportunity for development. Everywhere we see the growing recognition that the community life is defective and distorted except as it does thus care for all its constituent parts. This is no longer viewed as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice—may, even of something higher and better than justice—a necessary phase of developing and growing life. Men will long dispute about material socialism, about socialism considered as a matter of distribution of the material sources of the community; but there is a socialism regarding which there can be no such dispute: socialism of the intelligence and of the spirit. To extend the range and the fullness of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual resources of the community is the very meaning of the community.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was one of the leading philosophers in the American pragmatist tradition. He wrote extensively on the public, experience, art, and nature; but he may be best known for his ground-breaking philosophy of education. This essay is drawn from an address he delivered to the National Council of Education in Minneapolis, Minnesota, July 1902.
The proper education of the public will not go forward in our society until we undertake anew a great public dialogue.

The most notable distinction between living beings and inanimate things, Dewey tells us, is that living beings maintain themselves by renewal. Among human beings, that renewal takes place through a process of cultural transmission, which Dewey refers to as “education in its broadest sense.” Education in its broadest sense is a process that is continuous, ubiquitous, pervasive, and all-powerful—indeed, so powerful that Dewey draws the moral that the only way adults can consciously control the kind of education children get is by controlling the environment in which they act, think, and feel.

Dewey goes on to tell us that there is a marked difference between the education everyone gets simply from living with others and the deliberate education offered by the school. In the ordinary course of living, education is incidental; in schooling, education is intentional. In developing the argument, Dewey takes the familiar early-20th-century tack of going back to the origins of institutions in some primordial state of society. The family, he tells us, began in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuity of a line. Religious associations, he continues, began in the desire to ward off evil influences and obtain the favor of supreme powers. And work began in the simple enslavement of one human being to another. Any education that might have derived from participation in these institutions, he points out, was at best incidental. And, indeed, he tells us, by way of illustration, that savage groups have no special devices or materials or institutions for teaching the young, with the exception of initiation ceremonies. For the most
part, they depend on the kind of incidental learning that derives from shared activity.

As civilization advances, however, life becomes more complicated, and much of what adults do is so complex that simple participation no longer suffices for the transmission of culture. At this point, Dewey suggests, intentional agencies, called schools, and explicit materials, called studies, come into being. And the task of transmitting particular aspects of life is delegated to a special group of people called teachers. Dewey is careful to point out that schools are an important means for transmitting culture, but only one means among many, and when compared with other agencies, a relatively superficial means. Although schools are the only means adults really have at their disposal for going systematically and deliberately about the education of the young, in a modern industrial society, with its multiplicity of political and educative agencies, the school could never be the main determinant of political, intellectual, or moral change. The best the school could do would be to form the understanding and the dispositions necessary for movement toward a changed social order.

Dewey revealed the dilemma beautifully in an address he gave to a conference on early childhood education at Teachers College in the spring of 1933. The address began with one of Dewey’s great aphorisms: “The most Utopian thing about Utopia is that there are no schools at all.” Education in Utopia, Dewey went on to say, is carried out without benefit of schools, since children learn what they have to know in informal association with the adults who direct their activity. But Dewey did not go on from that point to describe a Utopian society whose values were so pervasive and whose institutions were so cohesive as to form the young through the very process of living. Rather, he went on to describe a society in which there were schools, but essentially activity schools of the sort Dewey and his daughter Evelyn had written about in *Schools of To-Morrow*. Dewey was trying to reconcile the dualism between school and society, but he was for all intents and purposes the victim of his own theoretical polarity. And, indeed,

**In a modern industrial society, the school could never be the main determinant of political, intellectual, or moral change.**

that polarity persists right down to the present time. We see it in the ambivalence of the educational reform movement of the 1960s, with its free school proponents on the one side and its de-school proponents on the other. And we see it also—and in a more dangerous form perhaps—in the vast pendulum swing of American opinion during the 1970s, from a century-long overreliance on schooling as
a general instrument of social aspiration to a period of widespread disenchantment with schooling.

Dewey went awry, it seems to me, where he dwelled on the origins of institutions rather than their functions. What matter that the family may have begun in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuation of a line? What matter that religious associations may have begun in the desire to ward off evil influences and secure the favor of supreme powers? What matter that work may have begun in enslavement to others? For one thing, we can't really know how they began; for another, the question of origins may not be central to the argument. The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.

Every family has a curriculum, which it teaches quite deliberately and systematically over time. Every church and synagogue has a curriculum, which it teaches deliberately and systematically over time—the Old and New Testaments, after all, are among our oldest curricula, and so are the Missal and the Mass, and so is the Book of Common Prayer. And every employer has a curriculum, which he teaches deliberately and systematically over time; and the curriculum includes not only the technical skills of typing or welding or reaping or teaching but also the social skills of carrying out those activities in concert with others on given time schedules and according to established expectations and routines. One can go on to point out that libraries have curricula, museums have curricula, Boy Scout troops have curricula, and day-care centers have curricula, and most important, perhaps, radio and television stations have curricula—and by these curricula I refer not only to programs labeled educational but also to news broadcasts and documentaries (which presumably inform), to commercials (which teach people to want), and to soap operas (which reinforce common myths and values).

We have a theory of education in which each of the major educative agencies performs a meditative role with respect to the others and with respect to society-at-large. The family mediates the culture, and it also mediates the ways in which religious organizations, television broadcasters, schools, and employers mediate the culture. Families not only engage deliberately and systematically in the teach-

Wise choices can be made as to where to invest what effort to achieve which goals with respect to which clienteles.

ing of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities; they also screen and interpret the teaching of churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, schools, and employers. Similarly, the school not only engages deliberately
and systematically in the teaching of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities; it also interprets the teaching of families, churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, and employers. One can go on and work out all the permutations and combinations. What is more, these various institutions mediate the culture in a variety of pedagogical styles—and the different combinations of these styles that pertain in different situations at different times. Further, these various institutions mediate the culture via different technologies for the recording, sharing, and distributing of symbols. In effect, they define the terms of effective participation and growth in the society. The theory of education becomes the theory of the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to the society-at-large.

Of the implications of this analysis for policymaking in education, I would put forward three assertions: first, that we have to think comprehensively about education; second, that we have to think relationally about education; and third, that we have to think publicly about education. Let me take each of these up in turn.

First, thinking comprehensively, we have traditionally assumed in the United States that the public school, for more than a century, created and re-created the American public, virtually singlehandedly, and endowed that public with its unique capability of working cooperatively on social problems, despite its ethnic, racial, religious, and class heterogeneity. The assumption, of course, is not without foundation. The public school has labored mightily over the years to nurture certain common values and commitments and to teach the skills by which a vastly variegated society can resolve its conflicts peacefully rather than by the methods of guerrilla warfare. Indeed, the public school has actually come to symbolize the quest for community in American society. But the public school has never functioned alone or in isolation. Where it has succeeded, it has functioned as part of a large configuration of institutions, including families, churches, Sunday schools, and reform schools, committed to essentially complementary values. When the configuration has disintegrated, however, as it has from time to time in our larger cities, and when the centrifugal forces of heterogeneity have overbalanced the centrifugal forces of community, the public school has been less successful. My assertion is not the powerlessness of public schooling—far from it—but rather the limita-
tions of public schooling. And the moral is simple: The public school ought never to take the entire credit for the educational accomplishments of the public, and it ought never to be assigned the entire blame.

The fact is that the public is educated by many institutions, some of them public and some of them private, and that public schools are only one among several important public institutions that educate the public. There are, after all, public libraries, public museums, public television, and public work projects, the most pervasive, perhaps, being the military services. Other societies, of course, have used quite different agencies to educate the public. The Soviet Union, for example, used the Komsomol, a network of youth organizations, as an important instrument of public education, while the People's Republic of China used communes in public factories and on public farms in similar fashion. And the Indians, the Australians, and the Venezuelans have used public radio to teach the skills of literacy in areas too remote for schools.

A kind of obverse of these propositions is the recognition that all educational transactions have both private and public consequences. Family nurture that encourages independence, church teaching that condemns family planning, television news programs that dramatize the human consequences of military ventures—these are but a few examples of private educative efforts with profound public impact. In sum, then, we must consider policies with respect to a wide variety of institutions that educate, not only schools and colleges, but libraries, museums, day-care centers, radio and television stations, offices, factories, and farms. Education must be looked at whole, across the entire life span, and in all the situations and institutions in which it occurs. Obviously, public policy will not touch and ought not to touch every situation with equal intensity—that only happens in totalitarian societies, and even in totalitarian societies it never happens quite as efficaciously as the leaders would prefer. Indeed, there are some situations public policy will not touch at all. But it must consider each so that wise choices can be made as to where to invest what effort to achieve which goals with respect to which clienteles. The United States Congress already does this when it decides to allocate so many dollars to children's television rather than schooling, and incidentally in dealing with children's television it inevitably affects the family. And local communities already do this when they decide in a period of budgetary stringency to close a public library rather than a public school. I would only insist that the range of possibilities be understood far more explicitly than it has been in the past and that public authorities approach these questions of allocation rationally rather than whimsically, and with a full awareness of educational consequences.
First, then, we must think comprehensively about education. Second, we must think relationally. To do this means in the first instance to be aware of the problem of allocation of financial and human resources, as indicated above, and of resultant educational outcomes. And it means, in the second place, that wherever an effort goes forward in education, it must go forward not in isolation from other educative institutions but in relation to them.

The courts have been our most influential agencies of educational policymaking since World War II. But courts tend to stress our differences.

In some subject areas, of course, the school originates much of what it teaches. Mathematics is an example. In mathematics, the student learns much of what he needs to learn for the first time in the classroom (though that may become less and less true). But in other realms, in languages and literature, for example, or in social studies or hygiene, or the arts, or the domain of values and morals, the child has his first learning and possibly his most persuasive learning earlier and elsewhere. In these realms, it may be that the best the school can do is engage the instruction of the other educators and seek to strengthen or complement or correct or neutralize or countereducate, or, most important, perhaps, try to develop in students an awareness of the other educators and an ability themselves to deal with them.

For day-care workers, pastors, editors of children’s encyclopedias, and directors of senior citizen’s centers, the message is the same: Whatever is done, to be effective, must be done with an awareness of what has gone on and what is going on elsewhere. Incidentally, the principle has special relevance for evaluation and accountability because whatever judgment is made of any particular educational program must always be made in light of what is going on elsewhere that affects that program. This to me is not that the school is powerless but that the family is powerful: An immense contribution by the school is frequently reflected in a comparatively modest showing on an achievement scale, since with respect to the understanding or behavior being measured by the achievement scale, the child started out not at ground zero but with a deficit, at least as defined by the scale. Or, conversely, as is frequently the case with highly selective institutions, a very modest contribution by the school is reflected in an admirable showing on an achievement scale, since the child has already learned elsewhere a good deal of whatever it is the scale is measuring.

First, then, we must think comprehensively; second, relationally; and third, publicly. By this I mean several things. To begin, it means we must be aware that public thinking about education and public policymaking for education goes on at a variety of levels and in a variety of places. It goes forward at the local, state, regional, federal, and international levels, and it proceeds in legislatures, in the courts, in executive agencies, and in private and quasi-public civic organizations. What’s more, the growing reliance on the courts during the past quarter-century to develop policies through the definition, asser-
tion, and claim of certain social and educational rights is also profoundly relevant. It is an oft-repeated truism that the courts have been our most influential agencies of educational policymaking since World War II. But courts tend to stress our differences: They tend to affirm the rights of individuals or groups to dissent from agreed upon policies. Legislatures, on the other hand, tend to deal with the definition and advancement of that which is common. And hence the growing recourse to the courts in matters of educational policy is fraught with significance for substance as well as procedure. And it is fraught with significance for the policy itself. As my former teacher Henry Steele Commager, certainly second to none in his insistent espousal of the cause of civil liberties, pointed out some years ago in a discussion, *Majority Rule and Minority Rights*, recourse to the courts, particularly in the realm of constitutional law, is an immensely powerful tool in a democratic society for the achievement of short-term goals, especially with respect to the redress of civil and political inequity. But recourse to the courts short-circuits certain processes vital to a democratic society. There is, after all, little opportunity for appeal once the court of last resort has handed down its ruling, and there is precious little political education for the public in appellate proceedings. The legislative process and the public debate surrounding it is a surer and more fundamental long-range educator of the public than the judicial process.

The distinction between the politics of the courts and the politics of legislatures brings me to my final point, namely, that given the range and variety of institutions that educate the public, some of them public, some of them quasi-public, and some of them private, simplistic notions of “public control” become untenable. Control, after all, varies in character and intensity from the kind of direct supervision one sees in the management of public school systems or public libraries, to the kind of regulation exercised over the television industry by the Federal Communications Commission, to the kind of influence tax policy exerts on the size and structure of families, and hence on the character of familial education. And if one looks at the power of the educative agencies farthest removed from the public reach, one is led not to deny the need for effective public regulation of public schools, public libraries, and public television, but rather to affirm the need for public discussion in the realms beyond the reach of direct public control. And hence we are thrown, inevitably, back to the politics of persuasion and to the public dialogue about educational means and ends that is the essence of the politics of persuasion.

We are thrown, inevitably, back to the politics of persuasion and to the public dialogue that is the essence of the politics of persuasion.
We live in an age that affirms individuality and plurality, and given what governments, including democratic governments, have done with their power in our time, one can understand and sympathize with the attractiveness of such affirmations. Yet, if Dewey taught us anything, it was that the public good is something more than the sum total of private goods and that a viable community is more than a collection of groups, each occupying its own turf and each doing its own thing. Indeed, Dewey's own position is strikingly clear: There must be ample room in a democratic society for a healthy individualism and a healthy pluralism, but that individualism and that pluralism must also partake of a continuing quest for community. In fact, individuality itself is only liberated and fully realized as the individual interacts with an ever-widening variety of communities. Recall Dewey's classic paragraph:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond.

How do we achieve the educational balance between individualism and community suggested in this formulation? I have a very simple starting point, to which I think there is no alternative: We talk. The proper education of the public and indeed the proper creation of publics will not go forward in our society until we undertake anew a great public dialogue. I would maintain that the questions we need to raise about education are among the most important questions that can be raised in our society, particularly at this juncture in its history. What knowledge should “we the people” hold in common? What values? What skills? What sensibilities? When we ask such questions, we are getting at the heart of the kind of society we want to live in and the kind of society we want our children to live in. We are getting at the heart of the kind of public we would like to bring into being and the qualities we would like that public to display. We are getting at the heart of the kind of community we need for our multifarious individualities to flourish.
Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wrote that when we educate we aim at the good life; and since men and women disagree in their notions of a good life, they will disagree in their notions of education. It’s as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. Obviously, men and women of good will are going to disagree about education. What’s important about public education is that we work through to certain agreements about values and policies. We don’t simply Balkanize the world; we also decide on common ground. We do that in the public schools, in public libraries, and over certain programs on public television because we have a notion of the kind of society our children are going to grow up in and live in. It’s not that we’re going to do away with different lifestyles and different beliefs or with the educational institutions—both public and private—that keep those different lifestyles and beliefs alive. It’s that we must practice those different lifestyles and beliefs within a common framework of mutual respect and understanding. So often in recent years we have cast the choice as one between a fullblown and segregationist ethnicity on the one hand and some plastic, lowest common-denominator community on the other. I would reject both in favor of new modes of thought that permit—nay, encourage—maximum variation within certain common policies. I think we have the models in the alternative programs that have grown up in our contemporary public schools, public libraries, and public television systems, and I think we should develop, share, and publicize those models. In the last analysis, the most important dimension of the politics of education is the business of debating and defining the various forms those models might take and the various curricula they might teach. Moreover, the public debate itself over what knowledge, what values, what skills, and what sensibilities we might want to nurture in the young and how we might want to nurture them is more important than the particular decisions we happen to arrive at during any given time. For the debate itself educates, and that education will affect the entire educational apparatus of the society and therefore the principal apparatus for creating the public.

Individuality itself is only liberated and fully realized as the individual interacts with an ever-widening variety of communities.

[Note: The text includes a quote from Educator and historian Lawrence Cremin (1925-1990) who spent four decades on the faculties of the history department and the Teachers College of Columbia University. He received the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1981 for the second of his three-volume history of American education. This essay was originally published in the TCRecord in 1975.]
Towards a Learning Society

By Stewart Ranson

Our priority must be both to change the purposes of education and to embody, in the reform of social and political institutions, the organizing principle of learning.

Education has, once more, become a national issue and priority during a period of great social, economic, and political change in our society. The intention of this paper is to identify the argument surrounding education, to develop an analysis of its needs, and to propose organizing principles upon which to base education and society for the 21st century. My purpose is to argue for the centrality of education by tying it into the large and unique issues of the time.

It is not possible to assume that the reform of the service can be taken for granted. Indeed, it is central to my argument that the principles upon which the present reforms of education are being based are themselves the problem: education is being made a priority to serve the needs of the nation's economy. It is good that there is a window of opportunity for education based on economic need; but if we value education then we need to discover firmer ground than an instrumental economic imperative to stand upon. Tomorrow, that need may have evaporated. In any event it mistakes the central needs of our time, which are moral and political. My argument is that if society is seriously to address the problems facing education then the solution requires more than a quantitative expansion or a mere adaptation of existing systems; rather it will need a reform of the organizing principles of learning: from instrumental and technical rationality to moral and political principles of the learning society; from learning for economic interest to learning for citizenship.

It is not lack of capacity or educability of the disadvantaged that explain underachieve-
ment; it is more the conditions which have eroded the motivation to learn, or to take seriously an education that all too clearly has provided little meaning or purpose to their lives. An understanding of these factors requires an analysis of the deep social and political structures of our society, which define the subjectivity, self-esteem, and capacity of individuals and their communities.

The problems of the time are public, require public solutions, and yet it is the public institutions that are being eroded.

The cause of underachievement lies in the long, cultural tradition of educating a minority. Only a few succeed because that is what our society has preferred. Any analysis of the dominant characteristics of the educational and political systems reveals the institutionalizing of underachievement. Young people fail to fulfill their potential, develop their powers because of principles and assumptions that are constitutive of the education system. Boundaries typically surround the process of learning. Education is too often regarded as a stage in life: to be in education is to be young, to be successful academically, and to be located within an institution—traditionally a school—because colleges specialized in “training.” Such boundaries express a narrow conception of who education is for, excluding most people and limiting the possibilities of achievement.

Traditional conceptions of teaching and learning—insisting upon the didactic transmission of knowledge to passive and solitary individual pupils—have almost certainly diminished rather than enhanced the motivation of most young people, inculcating anxiety rather than joy at the prospect of learning.

Assumptions about the curriculum have usually involved the introduction of unnecessary barriers into the experience of education: organizing learning into bounded subjects and bifurcating knowledge between theory and practice, defining “an education” in the former as the accumulation of abstract understanding. More recently, a curriculum that reverses this traditional emphasis and now insists upon a narrow concept of vocational preparation for work determined instrumentally by the needs of the labor market has been imposed upon the majority of young people.

Not only has education been “institutionalized,” the schools and colleges have typically been conceived as enclosed institutions controlled by their professional communities. Parents or employers or the wider community—the sources of complementary support and motivation—have usually been held at bay. The organizing rules and structures of educational institutions have, moreover, rarely been responsive to the needs of the clients they are designed to serve.
The economic, social, and political transformations of our time are altering fundamentally the structure of experience: the capacities each person needs to flourish, what it is to live in society, the nature of work, and the form taken by polity. The changes raise deep questions for the government of education and for the polity in general: What is it to be a person? Is a person a passive being or possessed of powers that define his or her essential agency? Is there any such thing as society and what is it? An aggregation of individuals or some form of social and linguistic community? What should be the nature of the polity? What is it to be a member and with what rights and duties? What distribution of power and wealth is consistent with justice and freedom? Who should make decisions and how? What forms of accountability and representation define our democracy?

Any effective response will require a capacity for renewal, for learning, from the institutions of our society as much as from each individual confronting the changed circumstances in private life. From either perspective, the problems of the time are public, require public solutions, and yet, it is the public institutions that are being eroded.

There is an urgent need for fundamental change, to create a common purpose and the conditions for individuals and their communities to flourish by empowering their sense of agency and responsibility for the future. The foregoing analysis suggests that to realize such aims will depend upon the creation of a new moral and political order both to support the development of individual powers and to create an open, public culture responsive to change. The defining quality of such a new order, and the key to change, is a society that has learning as its organizing principle. There is a need for reforms that will rescue us from the mistakes of the past and prepare us more adequately for the future. Our priority must be both to change the purposes of education and to embody, in the reform of social and political institutions, the organizing principle of learning.

What we learn from the strategies pursued by disadvantaged authorities is that however important resources are, and they are very important, how much more significant it is to hold a new conception of the purposes and conditions of learning. We cannot learn without being active and motivated; without others (i.e. the support of society); and without shared understanding about justice and rights to equal dignity. This suggests that if we are to establish the conditions for all to flourish, to

Our task is to reenchant the world with a moral and political order, the defining principle of which is learning as inquiry, understanding, and discourse.
be motivated and to take their learning and lives seriously, then reform needs to address the wider public purposes and conditions of learning. The challenge is vast: it implies no less than the reenchantment of the world with the learning society whose principles can dissolve and supplant the dominant paradigm of instrumental rationality, the drive to competitive self-interest, prejudice, accumulation, and bureaucracy that embody Weber’s iron cage of icy darkness stifling the conditions for most individuals and communities to flourish. Our task is to reenchant the world with a moral and political order, the defining principle of which is learning as inquiry, understanding, and discourse. This could provide the possibility of linking together a morality of personal development, setting out principles about how we are to live, with a just polity that can constitute how we are to agree on a future.

This sketch for a theory of the learning society builds upon the ideas and practice being developed “from the inner city.” Reforms do not begin de novo, they have their origins in local communities, which are discovering solutions to dilemmas they confront. Our task is to develop understanding of underlying principles in order to create the basis for their more general application.

The theory builds upon three axes: of presupposition, principles, and purposes.

The presupposition establishes an overarching proposition about the need for and purpose of the learning society; the principles establish the primary organizing characteristics of the theory; while purposes and conditions establish the agenda for change that can create the values and conditions for a learning society.

There is a need for the creation of a learning society as the constitutive condition of a new moral and political order. It is only when the values and processes of learning are placed at the center of the polity that the conditions can be established for all individuals to develop their capacities and that institutions can respond openly and imaginatively to a period of change. The transformations of the time require a renewed valuing of and commitment to learning; as the boundaries between languages and cultures begin to dissolve, as new skills and knowledge are expected within the world of work and, most significant, as a new generation, rejecting passivity in favor of more active participation, requires to be encouraged to exercise such qualities of discourse in the public domain. A learning society,
therefore, needs to celebrate the qualities of being open to new ideas, listening to as well as expressing perspectives, reflecting on and inquiring into solutions to new dilemmas, cooperating in the practice of change and critically reviewing it.

Two organizing principles provide the framework for the learning society. The first principle is that its essential structure of citizenship should be developed through the processes of practical reason. Citizenship establishes the mode of being, in the learning society: the notion of being a citizen ideally expresses our inescapably dual identity as both individual and member of the whole, the public—our duality as autonomous persons who bear responsibilities within the public domain. Citizenship establishes the right to the conditions for self-development but also a responsibility that the emerging powers should serve the well-being of the commonwealth. *Citizenship*, I define as the status of membership of national and local communities which thereby bestows upon all individuals equally reciprocal rights and duties, liberties and constraints, powers and responsibilities. Citizens express the right as well as the obligation to participate in determining the purposes and form of community and thus the conditions of their own association.

---

Citizens express the right as well as the obligation to participate in determining the purposes and form of community.

---

Second, practical reason establishes the epistemology, mode of knowing and acting of the citizen in the learning society. Practical wisdom (or what Aristotle called “phronesis”), describes a number of qualities that enable us to understand the duality of citizenship in the learning society: knowing what is required and how to judge or act in particular situations; knowing which virtues should be called upon. Practical reason, therefore, presents a comprehensive moral capacity because it involves seeing the particular in the light of the universal, of a general understanding of what good is required as well as what proper ends might be pursued in the particular circumstances. Practical reason, thus, involves deliberation, judgment, and action: deliberation upon experience to develop understanding of the situation, or the other person; judgment to determine the appropriate ends and course of action, which presupposes a community based upon sensitivity and tact; and learning through action to realize the good in practice.

To provide such purposes and conditions, new values and conceptions of learning are
valued within the public domain at the level of the self (a quest of self-discovery), at the level of society (in the learning of mutuality within a moral order), and at the level of the polity (in learning the qualities of a participative democracy).

At the center of educational reforms, within the inner city as much as those emerging from the polity itself, is a belief in the power of agency: only an active self or public provides the purposes and condition for learning and development. Three conditions are proposed for developing purpose within the self: a sense of agency, a revived conception of discovery through a life perceived as a unity, and an acknowledgement of the self in relation to others.

Learning requires individuals to progress from the tradition of passivity, of the self as spectator of action on a distant stage, to a conception of the self as agent both in personal development and active participation within the public domain. Such a transformation requires a new understanding from self-development for occupation to self-development for autonomy, choice, and responsibility across all spheres of experience. The change also presupposes moving from

Practical reason involves seeing the particular in the light of the universal; it involves deliberation, judgment, and action.

our prevailing preoccupation with cognitive growth to a proper concern for development of the person as a whole—feeling, imagination, and practical/social skills as much as the

life of the mind. An empowering of the image of the self presupposes unfolding capacities over (a life) time. This implies something deeper than mere “lifelong education or training” (referred to as “access institutions”). Rather it suggests an essential belief that an individual is to develop comprehensively throughout his or her lifetime and that this should be accorded value and supported.

We need to recover the Aristotelian conception of what it is to be and to develop as a person over the whole of a life and of a life as it can be led. This has a number of constituent developments: first, perceiving the life as a whole; the self as developing over a lifetime. Second, therefore, a conception of being as developing over time: life as a quest with learning at the center of the quest to discover the identity that defines the self. Third, seeing the unity of a life as consisting in the quest for value, each person seeking to reach beyond the self to create something of value, which is valued. Fourth, developing as a person towards the excellences; perfecting a life which is inescapably a struggle, an experience of failure as well as success. Fifth, accepting that the
struggle needs to be guided by virtues, which support the development of the self; dispositions which strengthen and uplift (character); valued dispositions. Lastly, acknowledging that the most important virtue is that of deliberation, a life of questioning and enquiry committed to revising both beliefs and action. Learning from being as a means becomes the end in itself, the defining purpose creatively shaping the whole of a life.

Only an active self or public provides the purposes and condition for learning and development.

But we can only develop as persons with and through others; the conception of the self presupposes an understanding of how we live a life with each other, of the relationship of the self to others; the conditions with which the self develops and flourishes are social and political. The self can only find its moral identity in and through others and membership of communities. Self-learning needs to be confirmed, given meaning by others, the wider community; what is of value will be contested; therefore we need to agree with others what is to be considered valuable; to deliberate, argue, provide reasons.

The unfolding of the self depends upon developing the necessary social conditions that can provide a sense of purpose within society both for the self and for others. These conditions are *civitas*, active participation in creating the moral and social order, and a capacity for interpretive understanding.

The conditions for the unfolding self are social and political: my space requires your recognition and your capacities demand my support (and vice versa). The importance of mutual responsibility in developing conditions for all individuals to develop their unique qualities recalls Aristotle’s celebration of civic friendship—of sharing a life in common—as being the only possible route for creating and sustaining life in the city. Such values, arguably, are now only to be found within feminist literature, which emphasizes an ethic of caring and responsibility in the family and community and the dissolution of the public as a separate (male) sphere. It is only in the context of such understanding and support that mutual identities can be formed and the distinctive qualities of each person can be nurtured and asserted with confidence.

The late-20th-century world was silent about the good, holding it to be a matter for private discretion rather than public discourse. But the unfolding of a learning society will depend upon the creation of a more strenuous moral order. The values of learning (understanding) as much as the values that provide the conditions for learning (according dignity
and respecting capacity) are actually moral values that express a set of virtues required of the self but also of others in relationship with the self.

Yet a moral order is a public creation and requires to be lived and re-created by all members of the community. Each person depends upon the quality of the moral order for the quality of his or her personal development and the vitality of that order depends upon the vitality of the public life of the community. For the Athenian, the virtuous person and the good citizen were the same because the goods that inform a life were public virtues. But the authority of a moral order for the modern world will grow if it is an open morality rather than a socialization into a tradition. The development of a moral community has to be a creative and collaborative process of agreeing on the values of learning, which are to guide and sustain life in the community.

The forms of knowing and understanding, as much as—or at least as part of—a shared moral order, are the necessary basis of civic virtue. Historically conditioned prejudices about capacity, reinforced by institutions of discrimination, set the present context for the learning society. The possibility of mutuality in support of personal development will depend upon generating interpretive understanding, that can create the conditions for learning in society: in relationships within the family, in the community, and at work.

In society we are confronted by different perspectives, alternative life forms and views of the world. The key to the transformation of prejudice lies in genuine conversation where the participants are led beyond their initial positions, to take account of others, and move towards a richer, more comprehensive view, a “fusion of horizons,” a shared understanding of what is true or valid. Conversation lies at the heart of learning: learners are listeners as well as speakers.

The presupposition of such agreement is openness: we have to learn to be open to difference, to allow our prejudgments to be challenged; in so doing we learn how to amend our assumptions, and develop an enriched understanding of others. It is precisely in confronting other beliefs and presuppositions that we are led to see the inadequacies of our own and transcend them. Rationality, in this perspective, is the willingness to admit the existence of better options, to be aware that one’s knowledge is always open to refutation or modification from the vantage point of a different perspective. The concept of bildung describes the process through which individuals and communities enter a more and more widely defined community—they learn through dialogue to take a wider, more dif-
differentiated view, and thus acquire sensitivity, subtlety, and capacity for judgment.

Reason emerges through dialogue with others: through which we learn not necessarily “facts” but rather a capacity for learning, for new ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. It is Habermas, who articulates the conditions for such communicative rationality as being, “ideal speech contexts” in which the participants feel able to speak freely, truly, sincerely. The conditions for this depend upon the creation of arenas for public discourse—the final and most significant condition for the creation of the learning society.

The conditions for a learning society are, in the last resort, fundamentally political, requiring the creation of a polity that provides the foundation for personal and collective empowerment. The personal and social conditions described above will be hollow unless bedded in a conception of a reformed, more accountable, and thus more legitimate, political order. The connection between individual well-being and the vitality of the moral community is made in the public domain of the polity: the good learning person is a good citizen. Without political structures that bring together communities of discourse, the conditions for learning will not exist: it is not possible to create the virtues of learning without the forms of life and institutions that sustain them.

Preconditions of the good polity include:
(i) Justice: a contract for the basic structure. The conditions for agency of self and society depend upon agreement about its value as well as about allocating the means for private and public self-determination. Freedom rests upon justice. But this makes the most rigorous demands upon the polity, which has to determine the very conditions on which life can be lived at all: membership, the distribution of rights and duties, the allocation of scarce resources, the ends to be pursued—the good polity must strive to establish the conditions for virtue in all its citizens. These issues are intrinsically political and will be intensely contested, especially in a period of transformation that disturbs traditions and conventions.

(ii) Participative democracy: Basing the new order upon the presupposition of agency leads to the principle of the equal rights of citizens both to participate in determining what conditions the expansion of their powers and to share responsibility for the common good. The political task of our time is to develop the polity as a vehicle for the active involvement of its citizens, enabling them to make their contribution to the development of the learning society. There is a need, in this age of transition, to fashion a stronger, more active democracy. The post-war 20th-century polity specialized politics and held the public at bay except periodically and passively. By providing forums for participation, the new polity can create the conditions for public discourse and for mutual accountability so citizens can take each other’s needs and claims into account. Learning as discourse must underpin the
learning society as the defining condition of the public domain.

A more active citizenship, Mill believed, would be a civilizing force in society: through participation citizens would be educated in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity. The upshot of participation should now be (iii) public action, based upon deeper consent than that obtained from earlier generations. The possibility of producing a fairer world, one which will enrich the capacities and entitlements of all citizens, depends upon the vitality of public, democratic action. The creation of a learning society expresses a belief in the virtue of the public domain and will depend upon the vitality of public action for its realization.

A beleaguered service is variously accused of failing young people who leave school at the earliest opportunity with much of their potential unrecognized and underdeveloped. This happens, it is argued in recent critiques, because education is committed to perpetuating an elite culture which offers little connection with the lives of ordinary children: a more practical curriculum tied to the world of work is proposed as the solution most likely to provide the required motivation to learning for those pupils. But this proposal turns an effect (the school curriculum) into the focus of policy, thus obscuring real (social and political) causes. Moreover the proposal is confused: for unless the vocational reform is for all children then it becomes another policy that will reinforce the social selection it is purportedly designed to overcome.

Education will always “fail” if the capacity of young people has to be sectioned off to match a pyramidal, hierarchical society (the hidden curriculum of which is learned very early by young people), underpinned by a political system that encourages passive rather than active participation in the public domain. A different polity, enabling all people to make a purpose of their lives, will create the conditions for motivation in the classroom. Only a new moral and political order can provide the foundation for sustaining the personal development of all. It will encourage individuals to value their active role as citizens and thus their shared responsibility for the commonwealth. Active learning in the classroom needs, therefore to be informed by and lead towards active citizenship within a participative democracy.

Stewart Ranson is a professor emeritus of the University of Warwick. This article was first published in the journal, Education Management and Administration, vol. 20, no. 2 (1992) and is reprinted here with the permission of Sage Publications.
Our heritage as an American people is at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits, aided and abetted by influential ideological claims, uninviting institutional forms, and a major shift in the balance of practical powers.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted with amazement in reflecting on his travels in America during the early 1830s that the new culture then emerging here from the transplanted root stocks of diverse older cultures took opportunities for active, ongoing, democratic citizen participation very seriously. A passion for democracy was reflected not only in widespread, persisting interest in national and state affairs but also in active, ongoing participation in social and political institutions and issues at local and regional levels. Through formal (elected or appointed) roles on city councils and school boards, and also through informal (volunteer) roles in meeting community needs in various reliable ways, these ancestor Americans, throughout all of our new nation’s regions, expected to participate continuously and effectively in shaping a shared future, and actually did so with enthusiasm.

This is our heritage as an American people—a distinctive heritage we can draw upon today that is very different from those of many peoples in other parts of the world, but also a heritage at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits, especially as these are aided and abetted by influential ideological claims, uninviting institutional forms, and a major shift in the balance of practical powers that has emerged in the years after Tocqueville’s visit. Since the early 1960s, Americans’ shared heritage of direct democracy often has been an influential rhetorical resource for justifying the creation of a wide range of formal and informal opportunities for citizen participation in government and in other future-shaping processes and insti-
tutions. During the same period, however, dangerous habits of daily living have become increasingly widespread—constant busy-ness, fashionable cynicism, reliance on experts, willful ignorance of our nation’s history and of current events, materialism, personal greed,

Daunting concentrations of economic, legal, communicative, and political power discourage many people from democratic citizen participation.

and, especially since September 11, feelings of “ontological insecurity,” generalized anxiety, and personal impotence. These shared bad habits have interacted in a caustic combination with the antiparticipatory rhetoric of “democratic realists,” the seeming inaccessibility of bureaucratic governmental and cultural structures, and the 21st-century daunting concentrations of economic, legal, communicative, and political power to discourage many people from using both traditional and recently created opportunities for democratic citizen participation in America—if they even know these exist.

Thus, our challenge in the 21st century is to renew and expand America’s cultural habits of democratic participation at all levels—national, state, regional, and local—in ways that realistically take in account these various obstacles and work effectively to overcome them. We must guide these efforts with a two-sided goal: (1) to correct and balance otherwise unreliable aspects of representative democracy and (2) to provide existentially vital opportunities for individual growth, valuable experience of community membership, and a shared, well-founded sense of collective efficacy. Our recent history shows that the process of deepening and expanding America’s cultures of democratic participation works not by once-or-always legal fiat or by unidirectional influence (whether top down or grassroots up), but through ongoing mutually influential transactions among all our levels of government and community living. Sometimes these work in close coordination with one another, and sometimes their proponents face off in pitted struggle; but both our complex democratic form of government and our complex democratic culture evolve through creative tensions among diverse opponents and diverse proponents of citizen participation, activated by equally imperative but differing visions.

Moreover, our recent history also shows that effective citizen participation of the kinds that have deep and lasting effects on our wider regional and national cultures does not occur because of individual choices and actions alone, though it does require competent, energetic, democracy-minded individuals who expect
to exercise influence. It also requires valued communities of struggle that can stimulate and support such individual citizen-activists, working through established participatory organizations with their own shared visions and operative structures, and formal or informal institutional ties with government, or at least with other democratic participation-minded organizations working within reliable, well-coordinated coalitions that allow such organizations together to exert effective influence, whether of an occasional or of an ongoing nature. The process seems to work as follows: valued communities of competent, energetic, participation-minded individuals find or revitalize democratic-change organizations and coalitions, and similar individuals who hold representative roles within democratic government and other cultural institutions reach out to or at lease respond to them in order to form a network of cooperative ties. The participatory democratic organizations and coalitions that these collaborating individuals create or revitalize reciprocally influence their own further individuation and growth in leadership capacities, while functioning as “schools of democracy” for the education of new citizen-activists and also as stabilizers of patterns of cooperative ties and coordinated influences that allow these coalitions to last long enough to have real and enduring effects within the wider culture.

T

hrough the efforts of such visionary citizen-activists, democracy-minded organizations, issue-oriented coalitions, and reliable collaborations with elected and appointed representatives, many formal and informal opportunities for direct citizen participation in American government at all levels have come into existence since the late 1960s. America’s great mass movements of that era—the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, the women’s movement, and the environmental movement—energized and educated an enormous cadre of experienced citizen-activists who learned the hard way that the occasional, informal influence of unaffiliated citizen-activists tends to lack staying power in government and other future-shaping institutions, even though it profoundly affects the activists’ individual lives and has some effect on their larger culture. Many of those who have sustained their activist commitments over time have learned to value the influence-stabilizing, hope-sustaining function of continuing nongovernmental organizations and their movement-shaping coalitions, and also of formal, elected or appointed, insider roles in influencing government policies.

Voluntary organizations have, since the days of Tocqueville’s visit, influenced the future of American society.
Over the past 30 years, state and federal mandates for real citizen participation have effectively stimulated the growth of expectations and capacities among a core group of citizen participants to whom these opportunities seemed important and attractive, helping to foster the emergence of participatory cultures in some American states and urban regions that contrast markedly with the political cultures of other states and regions, in which more limited citizen roles or even “pseudoparticipation” remains the norm.

More often than not, citizen participation has earned little more than empty rhetoric.

There are now many formal, periodic opportunities for real citizen participation in comprehensive planning processes within American cities and their surrounding metropolitan regions through which citizens can make an important difference in shaping their local and regional futures, especially when the state and local cultural preconditions are supportive. There are also many permanent participatory roles for citizens within local governments on planning and zoning boards that approve more limited development plans and variances, and on civic boards concerned with the arts, historical preservation, parks and recreation, and regional transportation. In addition, citizens can take up traditional formal opportunities to serve as elected representatives on city councils, school boards, water district boards, metropolitan planning organizations, and so on.

All of these formal opportunities for real citizen participation can help urban dwellers to grow in their knowledge, skills, and democratic capacities; to expand their networks of social capital; and thus to sustain and give realistic focuses to their hopes for future-forging influence. Equally important, and closely connected, are real though informal opportunities for citizen participation in the kinds of nongovernmental, voluntary organizations that have, since the days of Tocqueville’s visit, influenced the future as well as the daily operation of American society: churches, labor unions, student groups, community service and civic improvement associations, and various issue-focused organizations that devote their energies to protecting nature and promoting social justice. Most visible of all in recent years, especially in times of crisis, cities have been sites for more limited but nonetheless real opportunities to participate in social movements and in value-expressive events that have been organized and supported by coalitions of democracy-minded nongovernmental organizations and sometimes by government officials. These continue to be starting places for raising citizen’s expectations, for building their democratic capacities, and for giving them a voice in local, national, and global futures.
Among cities that have attempted to institute more limited forms of citizen participation or even pseudoparticipation in government, failures have been frequent and their cost has been high, tending to alienate people and to undermine respect for incumbent administrations. San Antonio, Texas, however, is different from other American cities that Berry, Portney, and Thomson analyzed as models of effective citizen participation because it does not provide for official, citywide structures of neighborhood involvement in urban governance. Nonetheless, it is exemplary because an effective citizens' association representing poor, predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods—the Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS)—has succeeded over the past 25 years in becoming a respected player in shaping local and regional politics, thereby overcoming to some extent a long-term and continuing bias in favor of more affluent, better-educated Anglo neighborhoods. COPS is the oldest, largest, and most influential member organization of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), an umbrella organization reflecting a more cooperation-focused transformation of Saul Alinsky's conflict-harvesting community-organizing practices in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Growing out of the Industrial Areas Foundation Training Center that Alinsky and associates founded in 1969, IAF shapes its general principles and its situation-specific strategies by creatively illuminating a tension between “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be.” San Antonio's COPS is organized along “parish” lines and, like other IAF member organizations—typically churches, labor unions, worker cooperatives, and universities—and those decision makers in government, business, and benevolent foundations who are in a position to help them fulfill their felt democratic imperatives to create more equal economic, educational, and civic opportunities. Like those of other IAF organizations, the strategies COPS developed include information, negotiation, and public “actions” that bring large numbers of the members of community-sustaining organizations together in creative, nonviolent ways that attract media attention for the purpose of stimulating public interest and support that can, in turn, be used to influence potentially helpful decision makers. The success of COPS in influencing public policy, not only in San Antonio but also in the Texas legislature through its partnership with other local IAF organizations statewide, offers a powerful example of what community-based organizations, grounded in shared values that can bridge their differences in race and class, can contribute toward solving shared problems and creating “affirmative opportunities.” It is important to note that differences among culturally and linguistically diverse COPS members have not been found to carry with them a “values gap” that makes them unable to understand one another and to work for shared goals, as others have led us to expect. How they reference and employ their values...
may differ initially, which explains the importance of IAF’s evolved conversation-framing process in helping COPS members get to know each other well enough to set shared goals, to strategize with regard to differing strengths and obstacles, and work effectively together to achieve the goals they set.

But meaningful nongovernmental opportunities for real citizen participation in shaping local, regional, state, and national futures exist in America and already have begun to prove their effectiveness. Mass protest events like those organized by Yugoslavia’s Otpor, by the justice-focused movement interlinking students at many US colleges and universities, and by the worldwide movement in opposition to the preemptive war on Iraq can be very effective social instruments for expressing a clear, single-note critique. They also offer citizens a starting place for developing expectations and skills for more extensive democratic participation. However, they are not very useful as sites for developing a positive, alternative vision that draws upon citizens’ more deeply democratic experiences and values.

For this kind of citizen participation in reconstructive social visioning, story-telling gatherings, and issue-specific public colloquies that bring scholars and other citizen-thinkers together can be highly effective. These are the kinds of gatherings that already have become a part of urban planning in America, especially in long-range and comprehensive planning. This is the nature of the “town hall meetings” that were sponsored by Manhattan’s Civic Alliance through its post-9/11 Listening to the City program, which involved thousands of citizens in planning for redevelopment of New York City’s lower Manhattan neighborhoods, especially at the site where the World Trade Center once soared. Because of their issue-focused character and their high-tech-assisted, on-site aggregations of participants’ local knowledge and judgments about the desirability of alternative future plans, such public conversations have offered opportunities for participants to develop democratic skills and capacities for wider and even more effective public future-shaping involvements. At the same time, each event has been existentially important for participants, offering them opportunities to share their stories within constructive channels for their grief and anger.

Citizens from all walks of life were locked in a struggle over their right to participate in a public process.

and providing some small sense of shared control within a nightmare world that suddenly and horribly emerged as out of control. In fact, the Listening to the City gatherings that were called together to find a reconstructive response to the events of that terrible day may represent a pioneering effort to combine
the mass presence of a protest event with the face-to-face experience and opportunity to be heard individually of a town hall meeting.

The Civic Alliance of four major community organizations that sponsored the Listening to the City mass meetings and many other related events came together shortly after 9/11 to begin to plan a response that would give citizens democratic opportunities to be heard. Beginning in February 2002, just five months after the September 11 attacks, the Civic Alliance, with a large presence of architects and urban planners who volunteered to serve as small group facilitators, began to organize and publicize these mass events for civic participation in determining what values and visual images should guide the replacement of the World Trade Center and the design of a memorial to all those who were lost with them. Hundreds of participants turned out for the first of these meetings, and thousands more for those that followed.

From the beginning, however, these ordinary citizens from all walks of life and a wide range of ethnic, racial, religious, and generational backgrounds were locked in a struggle with their elected officials over their right to participate in such a public process. The governor of New York State, the mayor of the City of New York, appointed representatives of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation, and various other national, state, and local officials asserted their legal entitlement to make all decisions concerning the site. Many of these elected and appointed officials expressed their determination to make these decisions on the basis of “expert” advice while paying attention primarily to what they regarded as the undisturbed property rights of the World Trade Center’s primary leaseholder. Of course, they were also aware that their personal political hopes and ideological commitments would be on national display in the rebuilding process. These elected and appointed officials chose a firm of architects to develop six concept designs to guide their deliberations, which went on simultaneously with, but independent of, the public process.

Nonetheless, on July 20, 2002, responding to extensive public outcry as well as pressure from the planning and architecture community and the New York Times, these officials acceded to the proposal to hold a Listening to the City event at which public comments on their six concept designs would be elicited. Nearly 500 professional facilitators, including representatives from all 50 American states and many other countries, arrived a day early for training, and on July 20, they welcomed 5,000 citizen participants to carefully organized roundtable conversations whose results were electronically collected, rapidly analyzed.
with computer assistance, and displayed on large screens at intervals throughout the day. Some participants at the tables had lost family members on September 11. Others included survivors and eyewitnesses, people from the surrounding neighborhoods, and people from other parts of the city and the region who felt directly affected and concerned about the matters under discussion. All felt that they had been heard that day—and in their collective voice, they rejected all six concept designs and the official process by which these designs came into being so unanimously that the designs were withdrawn and the process transformed into one in which public comment became a legitimate, necessary, and influential element. This process eventually led to broad agreement on an inspiring new design for the World Trade Center site, with somewhat different functional components than those that the elected and appointed officials originally had regarded as basic and nonnegotiable.

Regrettably, most of the spaces planned for the arts and for museums were removed because of fear of controversy; and the power struggle was renewed during the memorial design process, which eventually was handed over to “experts.” How much of the citizen participants’ contribution will characterize the buildings and the memorial that eventually will replace the World Trade Center remains to be seen, and it is clear that more is at stake for both sides of this struggle than the design itself. The key factor in determining the outcome of this struggle seems likely to be the staying power of large numbers of those who thus far have expressed a deep commitment to the public participation process but whose patience has been sorely tested by delay and rejection—nonetheless, these experiences show that, like formal sites of “second-strand” citizen participation within government, all of these informal sites—the courts, nongovernmental organizations, democratic mass movements, and issue-focused gatherings of scholars and other citizen-thinkers—can play valuable roles in shaping local and global futures, and they can become even more effective if they are consciously and creatively interwoven. I do not offer these particular examples as universal models for effecting democratic institutional and cultural change in all other countries, or even in all of the regions of the United States. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Every people have their own particular habits, ways of thinking, manners, etc., which have grown up with them from their infancy, are become a part of their nature, and to which the regulations which are to make them happy must be accommodated…. The excellence of every government is its adaptation to the state of those to be governed by it.” However, contextually differing yet interrelated examples can be found in every part of the world, offering the beginnings of a global general “fund” of city-focused experience of citizen participation in processes of deepening democracy. Draw-
ing on such experiences, citizens of various nations are learning from the “best practices” of citizens of other nations.

Through the process of participating in such “urban schools” of second-strand, Jeffersonian democracy while working to achieve what Dewey called “continuously planning societies,” citizen-thinkers are educating themselves in skills, knowledge, habits, and lifeways for deepening democracy in diverse global contexts. In the process, they may profoundly influence our future—though we can have no advance certainty that their efforts will be effective and no way to know what their benefits and costs to the individuals in question may be. Thus, the question remains: is second-strand democratic participation a wise choice for individual citizens in diverse global contexts, especially in places where it may involve great risks?

In these early years of the 21st century, the names of cities—Seattle, Washington, DC, Lima, Prague, Belgrade, Quebec, Genoa, New York City, London, Paris, Berlin, Jerusalem, Beijing, Baghdad—have come to signify fears, tragedies, and a hopeful but still fragile rebirth of democratic citizen participation in shaping preferable global futures. The great practical and existential questions democratic theorists and democracy-minded citizens worldwide face now focus on how to frame their continuing hopes and life choices in the wake of the great and terrible events these city names evoke. Can democratic citizen participation effectively influence the course of future events on a global scale? Are there any sites of official citizen powers to participate directly and continuously in determining public policy? Can existing participatory democratic opportunities and processes fully develop the democratic future-vision and the practical capacities that citizen-activists will need in order to raise up, inform, and lead broader democratic “publics” that can resist and correct the overwhelming influence of cultural economic elites, multinational corporations, and “democratic realists” on experienced constitutional democracies and the world’s many nondemocratic regimes? If not, how shall we live: are there “postdemocratic” stories that can help us to frame lives that are interesting, or at least tolerable, in the absence of any meaningful influence as citizens in the shaping of world futures—or must we organize ourselves into supportive but ultimately futile cells of nostalgic democratic defiance as a therapeutic alternative to depression and despair?

Reflecting on William James’ insight that the truths we most need to know sometimes cannot be warranted in advance of taking an active hypothetical belief stance concerning them, and on John Dewey’s hope for a worldwide rebirth of faith in democratic living, and Victor Frankl’s Holocaust-born insights about how to live a meaningful, even joyful life during tragic times, I advance here a threefold, “tragically melioristic” thesis. First, recent events show that there is at least a possibility that active citizen participation in efforts to deepen democracy can influence
global affairs, perhaps because many citizens recent determinations to take up wider re-
sponsibilities have been provoked by antici-
pated and actual tragedies that have revealed life’s complex preciousness and simple fragility stimulating feelings of anger and guilt for contributing to or somehow failing to prevent great suffering, and provoked as well by hopes for a global future in which more deeply democratic visions and values prevail. Second, the development during the past 35 years of

The practical capacities of ordinary citizens to collaboratively direct their affairs have grown enormously. The practical capacities of ordinary citizens to collaboratively direct their affairs have grown enormously.

many urban sites for direct citizen participa-
tion in American government at all levels, as discussed in the previous chapter, shows that broadly inclusive, locally contextualized, democratic participatory cultures can emerge and help to build democratic citizen skills and capacities with translocal implications. Third, actively nurturing these systemic possibilities, deep emotions, and emerging capabilities into more significant, future-forging influence will require more effective institutions of com-
munication, education, mutual support, and cooperation at all levels, which in turn will require countless individuals to adopt a “hypothetical faith” that citizen participation can deepen democracy in global contexts.

In many respects, our present era echoes the bleak days in the depths of the Great Depression, as the Nazis prepared to seize Europe, when John Dewey battled that era’s influential proponents of a limited, “formal” democracy. Then, as now, “demo-
cratic realists” claimed that it is neither feasible nor desirable to involve citizens more actively and directly in the daily operation of democratic institutions and processes. Now, as then, advocates for democracy’s “first,” representa-
tive strand treat the constitutional principles and formal institutions that arose during the Age of Revolutions in America and Western Europe as solely definitive of democracy, even though the practical capacities of ordinary citizens to collaboratively direct their affairs in which Jefferson placed his hopes for a “sec-
ond,” deeper strand of democracy have grown enormously since that time. At present, how-
ever, actual capabilities for democratic citizen participation are being undermined in their emergence and in their influence by expert-guided global institutions and transnational economic, political, and military processes controlled by a small group of supremely pow-
erful actors who seek to make client-states of almost all of the world’s countries and who see no value in preserving diverse cultures, species, and aspirations for the future.

Against popular and intellectual main-
streams of his own time, Dewey argued that American democracy’s constitutional prin-
ciples and institutions derive their justification and their efficacy from citizens’ democratic values, habits, and daily involvements in self-
governance. Lacking these, formally democratic principles and institutions are ungrounded, hollow, and readily subvertible by powerful antidemocratic forces. In “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” his 1939 speech for a celebration in honor of his 80th birthday, Dewey wrote:

The depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics. We acted as if democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany—or some other state capital—under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so—which is a somewhat extreme way of saying that we have had the habit of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonably faithful in performing political duties.

Dewey argued that representative democracy needs to be balanced by what I have called “second-strand,” actively participatory democracy—by democracy as a “way of life”—and then he argued that even this analysis does not go deep enough. “Of late years we have heard more and more frequently that this is not enough: that democracy is a way of life. This saying gets down to hard pan. But I am not sure that something of the externality of the old idea does not cling to the new and better statement.” Dewey’s deeper point was this: democracy’s future depends upon individual persons joining Jefferson and his transgenerational inheritors in continuing to make personal commitments of time and energy that have real “opportunity costs” and that depend for their efficacy on a critical mass of others making well-timed, convergent commitments even amid uncertainty and danger.

In fact, the efficacy of democratic personal commitments in times of crisis depends upon their pervasiveness throughout the habits and relations of daily living; this must be our ultimate focus.

In any case, we can escape from this external way of thinking only as we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections, and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.

Dewey’s point was that the democratic quality of institutions ultimately depends on the dispositions, habits, and experiences in self-governance of the individual persons they serve and should reflect.

Judith Green is a professor of philosophy at Fordham University. This essay is drawn from her book, Pragmatism and Social Hope, and published here with the permission of Columbia University Press.
How has it come to pass that the people are not, in any sense, ruling in common, in parts of the globe that have long traveled under the sign of democracy?

Democracy has historically unparalleled global popularity today yet has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow. Perhaps democracy’s current popularity depends on the openness and even vacuity of its meaning and practice, an empty signifier to which any and all can attach their dreams and hopes. Or perhaps capitalism, modern democracy’s nonidentical birth twin (and always the more robust and wily of the two) has finally reduced democracy to a “brand,” a late modern twist on commodity fetishism that wholly severs a product’s salable image from its content. Or perhaps, in the joke on Whiggish history wherein the 21st century features godheads warring with an intensity that ought to have been vanquished by modernity, democracy has emerged as a new world religion—not a specific form of political power and culture but an altar before which the West and its admirers worship—and through which divine purpose Western imperial crusades are shaped and legitimated.

Democracy is exalted not only across the globe today but across the political spectrum. Along with post-Cold War regime changers, former Soviet subjects still reveling in entrepreneurial bliss, avatars of neoliberalism, and never-say-die liberals, the Euro-Atlantic Left is also mesmerized by the brand. We hail democracy to redress Marx’s abandonment of the political after his turn from Hegelian thematics (or we say that radical democracy was what was meant by communism all along); we seek to capture democracy for yet-untried purposes and  ethos; we write of “democracy to come,” “democracy of the
uncounted,” “democratizing sovereignty,” “democracy workshops,” “pluralizing democracy,” and more. Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas—we are all democrats now. But what is left of democracy?

Democracy requires the maintenance of precise conditions, rich supplements, and artful balances. . . . It is hard to know why democracy is so popular today.

It cannot be said often enough: liberal democracy, Euro-Atlantic modernity’s dominant form, is only one variant of the sharing of political power connoted by the venerable Greek term. \(\text{Demos} + \text{cracy} = \text{“rule of the people”}\) and contrasts with aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny, and also with a condition of being colonized or occupied. But no compelling argument can be made that democracy inherently entails representation, constitutions, deliberation, participation, free markets, rights, universality, or even equality. The term carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves, that the whole, rather than a part or an “Other,” is politically sovereign. In this regard, democracy is an unfinished principle—it specifies neither what powers must be shared among us for the people’s rule to be practiced, how this rule is to be organized, nor by which institutions or supplemental conditions it is enabled or secured—features of democracy that Western political thought has been haggling over since the beginning. Put another way, even as theorists from Aristotle, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Marx through Rawls and Wolin argue (differently) that democracy requires the maintenance of precise conditions, rich supplements, and artful balances, the term itself does not stipulate them. Perhaps this is another reason why contemporary enthusiasm for democracy can so easily eschew the extent to which its object has been voided of content.

How has it come to pass that the people are not, in any sense, ruling in common, for the common, in parts of the globe that have long traveled under the sign of democracy? What constellation of late modern forces and phenomena have eviscerated the substance of even democracy’s limited modern form? If it is hard to know with certainty why democracy is so popular today, it is easier to adumbrate the processes reducing even liberal democracy (parliamentary, bourgeois, or constitutional democracy) to a shell of its former self.

First, if corporate power has long abraded the promise and practices of popular political rule, that process has now reached an unprecedented pitch. It is not simply a matter of corporate wealth buying (or being) politicians...
and overtly contouring domestic and foreign policy, nor of a corporatized media that makes a mockery of informed publics or accountable power. More than intersecting, major democracies today feature a merging of corporate and state power; extensively outsourced state functions ranging from schools to prisons to militaries; investment bankers and corporate CEOs as ministers and cabinet secretaries; states as nongoverning owners of incomprehensibly large portions of finance capital; and, above all, state power unapologetically harnessed to the project of capital accumulation via tax, environmental, energy, labor, social, fiscal, and monetary policies, as well as an endless stream of direct supports and bailouts for all sectors of capital. The populace, the

“Free” elections, have become circuses of marketing and management, from spectacles of fundraising to spectacles of targeted voter “mobilization.”

demos, cannot fathom or follow most of these developments, let alone contest them or counter them with other aims. Powerless to say no to capital’s needs, they mostly watch passively as their own human needs are abandoned.

Second, even democracy’s most important if superficial icon, “free” elections, have become circuses of marketing and management, from spectacles of fundraising to spectacles of targeted voter “mobilization.” As citizens are wooed by sophisticated campaign marketing strategies that place voting on a par with choosing brands of electronics, political life is increasingly reduced to media and marketing success. It is not only candidates who are packaged by public relations experts, more familiar with brand promulgation and handling the corporate media than democratic principles; so also are political policies and agendas themselves sold as consumer rather than public goods. Little wonder that the growing ranks of CEOs in government are paralleled by the swelling of academic political science departments with faculty recruits from business and economics schools.

Third, neoliberalism as a political rationality has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principles—of constitutionalism, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion—with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy. It is through a neoliberal rationality that rights, information access, and other constitutional protections, as well as governmental openness, accountability, and proceduralism, are easily circumvented or set aside; and, above all, that the state is forthrightly reconfigured from an embodiment of popular rule to an operation of business management. Neoliberal rationality renders every human being and institution, including the constitutional state, on the model of the firm; and it hence supplants democratic principles with entrepreneurial ones in the political sphere. In addition to dethroning the demos in democracy, this transformation permits expanded executive state powers at the very moment of declining state sovereignty—about which, more in a moment! Having reduced the political substance of democracy to rubble, “neoliberalism” then snatches the term for its own purposes,
with the consequence that “market democracy”—once a term of derision for right-wing governance by unregulated capital—is now an ordinary descriptor for a form that has precisely nothing to do with a people ruling themselves.

“State” is forthrightly reconfigured from an embodiment of popular rule to an operation of business management.

But capital and neoliberal rationality are not the only forces responsible for gutting liberal democratic institutions, principles, and practices. Rather, fourth, along with expanded executive power, recent decades have witnessed the expanded power and reach of courts—domestic as well as international. A variety of political struggles and issues, including those emerging from domestic social movements and international human rights campaigns, are increasingly conferred to courts, where legal experts juggle and finesse political decisions in a language so complex and arcane as to be incomprehensible to any but lawyers specializing in the field. At the same time, courts themselves have shifted from deciding what is prohibited to saying what must be done—in short, from a limiting function to a legislative one that effectively usurps the classic task of democratic politics. If living by the rule of law is an important pillar of most genres of democracy, governance by courts constitutes democracy’s subversion. Such governance inverts the crucial subordination of adjudication to legislation, on which popular sovereignty depends; and it overtly empowers and politicizes a nonrepresentative institution.

Fifth, along with the domination of politics by capital, the overtaking of democratic rationality with “neoliberal” rationality, and the juridification of politics, globalization’s erosion of nation-state sovereignty, as well as the detachment of sovereign power from nation-states, is also crucial to the de-democratization in the West today. If nation-state sovereignty was always something of a fiction in its aspiration to absolute supremacy—completeness, settled jurisdiction, monopolies of violence, and perpetuity over time—the fiction was a potent one and has suffused the internal and external relations of nation-states since its consecration by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. However, over the past half century, the monopoly of these combined attributes by nation-states has been severely compromised by ever-growing transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, resources, commodities, violence, and political and religious fealty. These flows both tear at the borders they cross and crystallize as powers within them, thus compromising nation-state sovereignty from its edges and its interior.

When states remain fiercely agentic amidst their eroding sovereignty, when they detach
from the unique double meaning of sovereignty in democracies—popular and supervenient—there are two especially important consequences. On the one hand, democracy loses a necessary political form and container; and, on the other, states abandon all pretense of embodying popular sovereignty and hence carrying out the will of the people. With regard to the first, democracy, rule by the people, is only meaningful and exercisable in a discreet and bounded entity; this is what sovereignty signals in the equation of popular sovereignty with democracy. Democracy detached from a bounded sovereign jurisdiction (whether virtual or literal) is politically meaningless: for the people to rule themselves, there must be an identifiable collective entity within which their power sharing is organized and upon which it is exercised. Of course, the vastness of the nation-state already limits the kinds of power sharing that makes democracy meaningful, but when even this venue gives way to postnational and transnational fields of political, economic, and social power, democracy becomes incoherent.

With regard to the second, states detached from sovereignty become rogue states in both their internal and external dealings. The reference point for ordinary exercises of state power is neither representation nor protection of the people (the latter being the classic liberal justification for state prerogative power). Rather, faintly echoing the raison d’etat of the old realists, contemporary states substitute for pursuit of the prestige of power a complex role as actors within, facilitators of, and stabilizers for economic globalization. In this context, the people are reduced to passive stockholders in governmentalized states operating as firms within, and as weak managers of, a global order of capital without, an order that has partly taken over the mantle of sovereignty from the states. (Nothing made this more glaringly apparent than state responses to the finance capital meltdown in the fall of 2008.)

Finally, securitization constitutes another important quarter of de-democratizing state action by Western states in a late modern—and globalized—world. The ensemble of state actions aimed at preventing and deflecting terrorism in Israel and India, Britain and the United States are often mischaracterized as resurgent state sovereignty; but, like state bailouts of capital, they are actually signs of the detachment of state from sovereign power and have everything to do with this loss of sovereignty. Facilitated by neoliberal “displacements” of liberal political principles (liberty, equality, the rule of law) for an emphasis on costs, benefits, and efficacy, the security state reacts to eroding and contested state sover-
eignty with a range of inadvertently de-
democratizing policies, from suspended rights
of movement and information access to
racial profiling to increased zones of state
secrecy and permanent undeclared wars.

But, if “actually existing democracy” is in a
woeful state, let us consider what, if anything,
remains of democracy’s raison d’être. As is well
known, ancient Athenian democracy excluded
80-90 percent of the adult Attican population
from its ranks—women, slaves, free foreign
residents, and others who did not meet the
strict lineage requirements for citizens. These
exclusions of Western democracy in its cradle
were extreme, but not the exception. Democ-
racy as concept and practice has always been
limned by a nondemocratic periphery and
unincorporated substrata that at once materi-
ally sustain the democracy and against which
it defines itself. Historically, all democracies
have featured an occluded “inside”—whether
slaves; natives; women; the poor; particular
races, ethnicities, or religions; or (today)
illegals and foreign residents. And there is also
always a constitutive “outside” defining de-
mocracies—the “barbarians” first so named by
the ancients—and iterated in other ways ever
after, from communism to democracies’ own
colonies. Thus has an overt antiuniversalism
always rested at the heart of democracy, sug-
gestting that if the imperial dream of universal-
izing democracy materialized, it would not
take the shape of democracy!

If premodern, republican democracy was
premised on the value of ruling in common-
rule by the common for the common—and
hence centered on a principle of equality—
the promise of modern democracy has always
been freedom. Modern democracy has never
pledged equality except in the most formal
sense of representation (one person—one
vote) or equal treatment before the law (not
a necessary entailment of democracy, rarely
secured in practice, and irrelevant to substan-
tive equality). Rather, it is Rousseau’s difficult
wager—that we surrender ungoverned indi-
vidual liberty for collective political power,
and this in order to realize our individual
freedom—that lies at the heart of democracy.
Indeed, individual freedom remains democ-
ry’s strongest metonymic associate today,
even while its promise of rule by the people is
often forgotten. Only democracy can make us
free because only in democracy do we author
the powers that govern us.

In modernity, freedom understood as
self-legislation is presumed a universal human

For the people to rule
themselves, there must
be an identifiable
collective entity within
which their power
sharing is organized and
upon which it is
exercised.

unincorporated substrata that at once materi-
ally sustain the democracy and against which
it defines itself. Historically, all democracies
have featured an occluded “inside”—whether
slaves; natives; women; the poor; particular
races, ethnicities, or religions; or (today)
illegals and foreign residents. And there is also
always a constitutive “outside” defining de-
mocracies—the “barbarians” first so named by
the ancients—and iterated in other ways ever
after, from communism to democracies’ own
colonies. Thus has an overt antiuniversalism
always rested at the heart of democracy, sug-
gestting that if the imperial dream of universal-
izing democracy materialized, it would not
take the shape of democracy!

If premodern, republican democracy was
premised on the value of ruling in common-
rule by the common for the common—and
hence centered on a principle of equality—
the promise of modern democracy has always
been freedom. Modern democracy has never
pledged equality except in the most formal
sense of representation (one person—one
vote) or equal treatment before the law (not
a necessary entailment of democracy, rarely
secured in practice, and irrelevant to substan-
tive equality). Rather, it is Rousseau’s difficult
wager—that we surrender ungoverned indi-
vidual liberty for collective political power,
and this in order to realize our individual
freedom—that lies at the heart of democracy.
Indeed, individual freedom remains democ-
ry’s strongest metonymic associate today,
even while its promise of rule by the people is
often forgotten. Only democracy can make us
free because only in democracy do we author
the powers that govern us.

In modernity, freedom understood as
self-legislation is presumed a universal human

For the people to rule
themselves, there must
be an identifiable
collective entity within
which their power
sharing is organized and
upon which it is
exercised.

unincorporated substrata that at once materi-
ally sustain the democracy and against which
it defines itself. Historically, all democracies
have featured an occluded “inside”—whether
slaves; natives; women; the poor; particular
races, ethnicities, or religions; or (today)
illegals and foreign residents. And there is also
always a constitutive “outside” defining de-
mocracies—the “barbarians” first so named by
the ancients—and iterated in other ways ever
after, from communism to democracies’ own
colonies. Thus has an overt antiuniversalism
always rested at the heart of democracy, sug-
gestting that if the imperial dream of universal-
izing democracy materialized, it would not
take the shape of democracy!

If premodern, republican democracy was
premised on the value of ruling in common-
rule by the common for the common—and
hence centered on a principle of equality—
the promise of modern democracy has always
been freedom. Modern democracy has never
pledged equality except in the most formal
sense of representation (one person—one
vote) or equal treatment before the law (not
a necessary entailment of democracy, rarely
secured in practice, and irrelevant to substan-
tive equality). Rather, it is Rousseau’s difficult
wager—that we surrender ungoverned indi-
vidual liberty for collective political power,
and this in order to realize our individual
freedom—that lies at the heart of democracy.
Indeed, individual freedom remains democ-
ry’s strongest metonymic associate today,
even while its promise of rule by the people is
often forgotten. Only democracy can make us
free because only in democracy do we author
the powers that govern us.

In modernity, freedom understood as
self-legislation is presumed a universal human

For the people to rule
themselves, there must
be an identifiable
collective entity within
which their power
sharing is organized and
upon which it is
exercised.
desire, if not, as Kant, Rousseau, and Mill had it, the quintessence of being human. Indeed, it is modernity’s birth of the a priori free moral subject that establishes democracy as the only legitimate modern Western political form. This is the figure of the subject that made and continues to make democracy’s legitimacy literally incontestable.

Modern democracy’s normative presumption is self-legislation attained through shared rule of the polity; the sovereignty of the subject is linked to the sovereignty of the polity, each securing the other. But legislation of what, rule of what? What powers must we govern, what must we legislate together, what forces must we bend to our will to be able to say we are even modestly self-governing or self-legislating? Answers to these questions have divided democrats across the ages. At one end, liberals make elected representation for lawmaking the core of the matter, along with sharp limits on the transgress of individual activities and ends. At the other end, Marxists insist that the means of existence must be collectively owned and controlled as a first condition of human freedom. Radical democrats emphasize direct political participation, while libertarians would minimize political power and institutions.

Popular assent to laws and representatives is insufficient to fulfill democracy’s promise of self-legislation. Instead, we would have to seek knowledge and control of the multiple forces that construct us as subjects, produce the norms through which we conceive reality and deliberate about the good, and present the choices we face when voting or even legislating. Power understood as making the world and not simply dominating it—or better, domination understood as fabrication and not only rule or repression of the subject—requires that democrats reach deep into diverse and polyvalent powers for the grounds of freedom. And yet, the notion of democratically ruling all the powers constructing us is absurd: it approximates pulling democratically up by our own bootstraps or grasping from without the psyches through which we experience and know the world.

So democracy, to be meaningful, must reach further into the fabrics of power than it ever has, and, to be honest, must give up freedom as its prize. From this angle, democracy is only an (unreachable) aim, a continuous political project democratization commits it signatures to struggling for a share in the powers that make, order, and govern them but is perpetually unfinished.

If the imperial dream of universalizing democracy materialized, it would not take the shape of democracy. . . . Democracy is only an aim, a continuous political project.

So continued belief in political democracy as the realization of human freedom depends upon literally averting our glance from powers immune to democratization, powers that also give the lie to the autonomy and primacy of the political upon which so much of the history and present of democratic theory has depended. Alternatively, this belief entails thinking and practicing democracy with a realist’s acute attention to powers democracy
has never before tried to theorize, address, or subdue.

Do we want humans to be free? There is one last contemporary challenge for those who believe in popular rule, perhaps the most serious challenge of all. As we have already

We surrender ungoverned individual liberty for collective political power, in order to realize our individual freedom.

said, the presumption of democracy as a good rests on the presumption that human beings want to be self-legislating, and that rule by the demos checks the dangers of unaccountable and concentrated political power. But, today, what historical evidence or philosophical precept permits us to assert that human beings want, as Dostoyevsky had it, “freedom rather than bread”? All the indications of the past century are that, between the seductions of the market, the norms of disciplinary power, and the insecurities generated by an increasingly unbounded and disorderly human geography, the majority of Westerners have come to prefer moralizing; consuming; conforming; luxuriating; fighting; simply being told what to be, think, and do over the task of authoring their own lives. This was the conundrum for the future of liberation first articulated by Herbert Marcuse in the middle of the last century. And if humans do not want the responsibility of freedom, and are neither educated for nor encouraged in the project of political freedom, what does this mean for political arrangements that assume this desire and orientation? What extreme vulnerability to manipulation by the

powerful, along with domination by social and economic powers, does this condition yield? Plato worried that improperly ordered souls in charge of their own political existence would author decadence and unchecked licentiousness, but there is a more evident and worrisome danger today: fascism authored by the people. When nondemocrats are housed in shells of democracies, clutched with anxiety and fear in an increasingly unhorizoned and overwhelming global landscape, and ignorant of the workings of the powers buffeting them and organizing their desires, how can they be expected to vote for, let alone more actively pursue, their own substantive freedom or equality, let alone that of others?

On one side, then, we face the problem of peoples who do not aspire to democratic freedom and, on the other, of democracies we do not want—“free” peoples who bring to power theocracies, empires, terror- or hate-filled regimes of ethnic cleansing, gated communities, citizenship stratified by ethnicity or immigration status, aggressively neoliberal postnational constellations, or technocracies promising to fix social ills by circumventing democratic processes and institutions. Contouring both possibili-
ties is the problem of peoples oriented toward short-run gratifications rather than an enduring planet; toward counterfeit security rather than peace; and disinclined to sacrifice either their pleasures or their hatreds for collective thriving.

Rousseau so deeply appreciated the difficulty of getting a corrupted people oriented toward public life that his commitment to democracy is often regarded as having impaled itself on the project of converting such a people into democrats. Today, it is difficult to imagine what could compel humans to the hard work of ruling themselves or even contesting the powers that dominate them.

Does the poor fit of popular rule with the contemporary age add up to a brief for abandoning struggles for democracy and soliciting creativity in developing new political forms? Or does it, instead, demand sober appreciation of democracy as an important ideal, always unavailable to materialization? Ought we to affirm that democracy (like freedom, equality, peace, and contentment) has never been realizable, yet served (and could still serve) as a crucial counter to an otherwise wholly dark view of collective human possibility? Or perhaps democracy, like liberation, could only ever materialize as protest and, especially today, ought to be formally demoted from a form of governance to a politics of resistance.

I am genuinely uncertain here. What I am sure of, however, is that this is not a time for sloganeering that averts our glance from the powers destroying conditions for democracy. Encomiums from left philosophers and activists to “deepen democracy,” “democratize democracy,” “take back democracy,” “pluralize democracy,” or invest ourselves in a “democracy to come” will only be helpful to the extent that they reckon directly with these powers. We require honest and deep deliberation about what constitutes minimal thresholds of democratic power sharing; whether and why we still believe in democracy; whether it is a viable form for the 21st century; and whether there are any non-chilling alternatives that might be more effective in holding back the dark.

Is there some way the people could have access to the powers that must be modestly shared for us to be modestly self-legislating today? Is the freedom promised by democracy something humans want or could be taught to want again? Is this freedom likely to yield the good for the world? What kind of containment or boundaries does democracy require, and, if these are not available, is democracy still possible?

Wendy Brown is the Heller Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. This essay was first published in the book, Democracy in What State? It is included here with the permission of Columbia University Press.
In order to deliberate, in order to create community, in order to forestall the war of all against all, we have to face our histories; our traumas; our ghosts; our fears of one another; and our fears about what we will find within ourselves.

Recently you have been writing about what you call the bildung tradition, stretching from Goethe through Dewey to the present. Bildung, of course, is the German word for “education,” but you don’t mean just cognitive education about facts and science, do you? It also involves what you call “moral imagination.”

Yes, Noëlle, bildung is “education of a special kind.” Broadly, bildung is the characteristic way in which a living being develops. In his study of plants, Goethe discusses the bildung of the plant; it’s the plant’s pattern of growth—what the plant typically looks like over time. Goethe argued that we use our imaginations in a special way to grasp a plant’s bildung. Once we become familiar enough with a plant we can “see” it whole. We grasp the plant’s bildung so that when we see a living plant we can also see, with our imagination, the whole life of the plant—how it has developed, what it will grow to be, and how it will perish.

People are a lot more complex than plants; but like plants or any other living thing, people need a proper environment in which to flourish. One of the conditions of our flourishing is to have the kind of imagination that lets us understand the natural world. Since we are part of that world, this kind of imagination will help us understand ourselves, other people and how we all flourish. Goethe was careful to specify that this imagination is not about day dreaming or making up things, or creating imaginary worlds. Goethe’s imagination lets us know what’s going on in the world by allowing us to grasp change through time.
Goethe thought change was everywhere and all the time. Because we can see things as they move through time, imagination brings the past and the future into play in our every experience. We are always both seeing and “seeing.”

People with lively intellects create a life together—create a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all.

The complex seeing that we do, even when we are looking at plants, has a normative dimension to it. We can see the plant under the best of circumstances and, if we know enough, we can also see it under less than ideal circumstances. People are much more complicated, but for Goethe our flourishing requires a “lively intellect” that is open to listening and learning; an intellect that does not come at things with preconceived notions and fixed categories or judgments. The lively intellect gets beyond the fixed and final, or the correct and familiar, to watch for the surprising and novel; to see what could be if we changed our way of thinking about things or if circumstances were different. Education in the bildung tradition creates a lively intellect that is able to see other, richer possibilities for people’s lives; to see how one’s current social institutions are blocking human flourishing in one way or another.

And in this context, flourishing is not about being successful by current social standards but about exercising one’s intellect in a lively manner. Goethe called it opening new organs of perception. Dewey called it growth—the endless enrichment of experience. Understanding more about other humans, and other living beings and their lives, gives us a much better understanding of ourselves. The enrichment is endless because as it ramifies, we are changed; and, as we are changed, more enrichment becomes possible. Remember, all this is happening in a context. Enrichment is endless because it is endlessly connected to other people and more broadly therefore to the living world.

So you have been thinking of this tradition as helping people question and challenge what is familiar, so that they do not just accept the status quo as it is. I can see how this pertains to our moral reasoning, but what about our collective political reasoning about the shape of our communities?

There is a direct connection between the two, Noëlle. In your book, Democracy and the Political Unconscious, on democracy you talk about how people are alienated from one another and from elected officials. I have a vivid memory of attending a meeting of my local school board to speak about an issue...
that had the community so engaged that the event was held in a school auditorium to accommodate everyone. At the very beginning of the meeting, before any discussion of the issue by those in the auditorium, the school board took a vote on the issue to be discussed. It was a stunning moment for me. I felt shut out; I felt we who had come to speak had been shut out. I think what happened was what pragmatist Alfred Prettyman would call a social “smother”: a distance is created between the parties involved when a power imbalance is used to close down discussion. I think a smother can happen even between two people: for a smother to be possible one person has

We have to cultivate our ability to make delicate distinctions; to perceive aspects of good and evil not previously noticed.

merely to be requesting something of the other that the other might ignore or belittle.

This is how I think of alienation. If a community is riven by such smothers, it really isn’t a community; it remains bunches of people who are more or less in tension with one another. Growth is not happening, cannot happen. The process of forging a common understanding of our collective situation and of solving our common problems, as you point out in your book, requires that people come together to listen and learn from one another. Dewey said that democracy is “a name for a life of free and enriching communion” which can be achieved when we practice “the art of full and moving communication.”

When Dewey talks about democracy in such terms, I understand him to be discussing how people with lively intellects create a life together—create a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all. The first rule of such an effort is never, ever to smother. Full and moving communication—communication that touches the heart and induces action—only happens when we give one another room enough. If “never smother” is the first rule, then “how to avoid smothers” is the first problem.

So how do we keep from inadvertently smothering?

We have to cultivate our ability to make delicate distinctions; to perceive aspects of good and evil not previously noticed; to take into account that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn. We have to be attuned to the impact of trauma on people’s lives; how unresolved effects of past evildoing leave people unable to engage in full and moving communication. With Shannon Sullivan, for example, we should pay attention to how the ghosts of racial injustice in the United States currently haunt and infect the lives of white people, blocking full and moving communication between whites and the other races that make up our community. In situations of evildoing, all parties are affected. Seeing what possibilities exist for healing and reconciliation is a task of moral imagination that prefigures “collective political reasoning about communities.”

This sounds like a tall order.

Yes, but here’s where we can start! An important dimension of the activity of moral imagination is what I have come to call “tarry-
ing with the negative.” Many people who have trauma in their history, or who are haunted by Sullivan’s ghosts, simply want to forget about it. It is especially easy for people with privilege or power to avoid or deny the significance of past evildoing. I have heard white people express the opinion that slavery and racism are things of the past that no longer have an impact on the present. I have heard white people, apparently without any qualms, say that efforts to create racial parity in employment or admissions are reverse discrimination. Such instances exhibit an inability to make the delicate distinctions which Dewey mentions. It is essential that white people tarry with the negative dimensions of our history in the United States. It can be difficult, embarrassing, frightening, disgracing, debilitating, aggravating, and disheartening for white people to do this. But if it is not done we will not be able to deliberate with one another; we will not be able to achieve community. Our public spaces will not accommodate or contain all of the people.

Perhaps the first steps in any deliberation across racial lines need to be about being open to the traumas of race in the United States. Whites who do not tarry with the negative may not be taken seriously as deliberators, problem solvers, or community builders; and if tarrying with the negative is the way to avoid smothering, then the immediate problem is how to tarry with the negative without being overwhelmed.

In your work, you’ve developed the idea of apprenticeship—not apprenticeship towards mastery but an apprenticeship of transformation. The former you say is about developing power over something, while the latter, making us vulnerable, changes our relationships with others. Why would one want to go this second path?

I have come to see apprenticeship as a central element in the bildung tradition. But I first came across the idea in the work of Elizabeth Spelman, where she recommended that white women become apprentices to women of color in order to begin to overcome the problems of exclusion as they existed in feminism in the 1980s. I expand her idea by using the bildung tradition; and I enrich the moral dimension of the bildung tradition by sharing Spelman’s concerns about white supremacy—which of course was a concern totally absent at the founding of the tradition. You’re right that my idea of apprenticeship switches our focus from mastery to transformation and growth.

In the part of Pennsylvania where I live the tool and die industry is a major presence. Many young people aspire to become apprentices in that industry in order to master the technology and art required by it. An apprenticeship of mastery is not a bad thing: such mastery is essential for our survival and our flourishing. Mastery becomes a problem, however, when it becomes a dominant way of life, a dominant value for people within a community. If the most important goal becomes mastery and the control that it requires, then people are no longer listening to one another. Instead, they are trying to figure how to
gain and keep advantage over one another. Deliberation becomes impossible . . . and community fragments. As Hobbes suggested, life then becomes a war of all against all, in which alliances are matters of convenience rather than respect. I’m afraid that politics in the United States at this time is mostly such a war and I’m afraid that our society, more broadly, is exhibiting its qualities. The huge shift in wealth from a broader to a more concentrated distribution cannot but exacerbate the behaviors associated with a Hobbesian world.

So, valuing mastery may be necessary for flourishing but it isn’t sufficient; it can’t be the whole story. People who exhaust their energies in acquiring the money to build walls, gates, moats, and security fences between themselves and the war of all against all would be much safer, in the long run, if they spent time tarrying with the negative. We’ve got to become apprentices to one another.

We are immeshed in one another’s problems. We are formed by one another’s problems. We create one another’s problems. We are one another’s problems.

In order to deliberate, in order to create community, in order to forestall the war of all against all, we have to face our histories; our traumas; our ghosts; our fears of one another; and our fears about what we will find within ourselves. In general, white people in the United States don’t get much practice in tarrying with the negative. Our position of superiority has not given us the resources to face this challenge. We have weakened ourselves by supposing we are self-sufficient, by supposing we are above or beyond the influence or impact of history—of our very own history. When confronted with that history we’re at a loss for how to respond to its effects; we’re immobilized by our own isolation.

Apprenticeship undercuts isolation. It implicitly acknowledges that we are historical beings and being historical means we are connected to others; we have common histories. We live our histories at every moment. At every moment of deliberation, of community building, of personal decision making, of passing our fellow citizens on the street we are negotiating with our histories. What do we cherish, what do we retain, what must we remember at this moment, and what can we put off for another time? This negotiation richly takes place when we think of ourselves as apprentices to one another.

The short answer to your question about why we should follow the path of apprentice-
ship for growth and transformation is so that we can avoid being consumed by the war of all against all.

*Would it make sense to think of a deliberative public as a kind of apprentice?*

Yes, I think it might make sense to think of a public as an apprentice. Apprenticeship can apply at various levels. Individuals can be apprentices, but we have already seen that individuals can be riven by the histories that are embedded in them. We are complex. We can contain within us the same kind of conflicts that range across groups of us—so, we can say that groups can be apprentices to one another. You have written about how both individuals and groups of people can be torn about what to do; I agree. Therein might be more complexity; and there will surely be more voices involved in a more public discussion; but the principle remains the same. There is continuity here; just as Dewey observed that we do not begin to talk to ourselves until we have first learned to talk with others, we might observe that individuals are not torn between courses of action or conflicting ideals until and unless their environment contains such tensions.

Some people find it difficult to accept that a public can be formed out of a bunch of heterogeneous individuals. And that’s understandable, given the power of our Western cultural tradition of individualism. Often we think of individuals as little atoms, or ping pong or billiard balls, composed of interests and desires which move us to action and to bump into one another. Enticed towards individualism, we see these interests and desires as—well—“individual!” With this model, a public becomes a fleeting thing, forming only when significant numbers of individual interests or desires come into alignment. But, this tradition is undercut by what we have been talking about here. It fails to take into account that as individuals we are living history. We are immebed in one another’s problems. We are formed by one another’s problems. We create one another’s problems. We are one another’s problems. Before being individuals we transact with one another in myriad ways. We are potentially a public before we’re anything else!

*At the Kettering Foundation we’ve been thinking about what makes some communities “learning communities” and others not, how some political communities seem to thrive and find solutions to “wicked problems,” while others stagnate, no matter their resources. How might the bildung tradition help us understand this phenomenon and cultivate more civic learning—or what you even call “public apprenticeship”?

It would be a wonderful project for someone who is very familiar with how a learning community works to see whether activities of apprenticeship are characteristic of interactions there. And, conversely, to see if stagnating communities are home to social smotherers and lack the openness that characterizes activities of mutual apprenticeship. If such outcomes were forthcoming, then the bildung tradition could serve as a model for the development of the kind of deliberation that leads to the formation of a genuine “public.”

Or should we say, to the rediscovery or reactivation of the public that is already present.

Bill Bywater is a professor of philosophy in the department of philosophy and religious studies at Allegheny College. Noëlle McAfee interviewed Professor Bywater in June 2011.
The ability to make sense of what is happening to us, and then to determine how to act, is a social process of creating a shared sense of our world.

Our most useful insights are often hidden even though they are in full view. We see them, yet we don't always recognize them. That has happened to the Kettering Foundation in a year's overview of our long history of studies of the public and public education. The relationship between the public and public education is an inescapable subject for a foundation concerned with how our democracy can work better, or, more specifically, how citizens can shape their future. Our insights from this research didn't become clear until we linked elements in our own thinking and saw not only connections, but also an emerging narrative, a story of the journey we have been on in our evolving research.

The direction we at Kettering have taken has been influenced primarily by what we have learned from the experiences of citizens, working in their communities, often with institutions. But going into all those details would make the journey itself difficult to follow, and it is the journey that we want to illuminate. To mark our trail, the Review has used familiar benchmarks, published authors whose work is more accessible than our interfoundation musings and reflections. The Kettering Review may be an ideal vehicle for drawing together many of these authors into a coherent and, we think, compelling story.

Obviously, the first books we read dealt with schools, which were the logical place to concentrate because they are the dominant institutions for the formal instruction of students. For decades the foundation has been studying the public schools, but eventually
we found it necessary to put schooling into the larger context of education. So without in any way turning away from the schools, we recognized that other institutions also mold the lives of young people. Our primary focus is always citizens, and we were struck by how often they separate schooling, which they consider to be the business of professionals, from education broadly defined. We also found it helpful to distinguish between the instruction of young people and the cultivation of the ability to learn, from and with others. Education is essentially the cultivation of learning. But where, then, does learning occur, other than in schools? That question led us to look at communities and how they influence what young people learn. This progression marked the first part of our journey.

There is a literature that marks this evolution in the foundation's thinking, and John Dewey's work is central because, early on, he pointed out that schools capture only a fraction of life. Yet the schools, he wrote, tend to isolate control of education, keeping educators apart from the freer and more flexible modes of social interaction. More recently, anthropologist Hervé Varenne has pointed out that schools deal with only some of the many types of knowledge, specializing in “literacy and numeracy”—which is academic language for reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Like Dewey, Kettering has seen cases in which the schools have become isolated from the public they were created to serve. We have also seen communities where the public has lost a sense of ownership and responsibility for these institutions. Citizens don't believe they have ownership because they can't influence what the schools do; control seems to be in the hands of educational bureaucracies. So people don't believe the public schools are really their schools. And that is not only a problem for schools but also for democratic self-rule.

Later we became more aware of exactly who these other educating institutions are. Lawrence Cremin, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian (and a former Kettering trustee), was useful in identifying a variety of educating institutions in his three-volume study of American history. He showed that the country has always educated through families, along with churches, libraries, museums, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio and television stations, newspapers, and military organizations. We found a similar perspective on all that educates in the work of Varenne, who documented the pervasiveness of “education writ large,” as Cremin would say.

As we continued on this journey, we also realized that communities have other educational resources that aren't confined to institutions like museums and libraries. People like Bob Cornett in Georgetown, Kentucky, reported discovering educational resources in such unlikely places as farms for retired racehorses. That discovery led us to identify scores of non-school educators who are using local resources to educate. Some are educating through community projects to reintroduce chestnut trees into Appalachia or to build a fish tank on the Gulf Coast. In this issue of the Review, Judith Green calls attention to opportunities for civic education in numerous nongovernmental organizations and coalitions located in our communities. The implications for democracy? People are regaining control through the things they make to prompt learning in youngsters—and those “things”
are usually in communities. The work of making things together fosters a concrete, tangible understanding of self-rule that can be a counter to the hollow, vacuous concept of democracy that troubles Wendy Brown.

The foundation had indeed moved a step forward in its thinking when we made a distinction between education as teaching and education as the promotion of learning. We were careful not to overdraw the contrast because good teaching aims to inspire learning. We distinguished between transferring information from generation to generation (one definition of instruction) and acquiring the ability to make sense of what is happening to us and then determining how to act. The latter is a social process of creating a shared sense of our world. People construct knowledge out of their experiences by assessing those experiences in terms of what they value.

In looking for a literature to mark this turn in our journey, we found a 2004 *Phi Delta Kappan* article by retired teacher and school administrator Marion Brady. He argues that the main task of education is “to help students make more sense of the world—they themselves, and others.” This was very much like what some citizens described as their objective in using community resources to educate. Brady’s notion resonates with Bywater’s argument for an education that fosters “moral imagination”—an intellect that sees the possibilities in life.

A n obstacle to this kind of learning, however, remains a perhaps unintended yet dominating influence of what has been described as “technical rationality.” Technical rationality privileges scientific or objective evidence over subjective human experience, which is essential in the social construction of knowledge, our making sense of the world. We had learned about the effects of this technical rationality when citizens and leaders talked about problems with “accountability standards” being used to judge the performance of schools and other institutions. The standards are based on measurable outcomes that are compatible with the way technical rationality defines knowledge. But the standards do not necessarily reflect what citizens want to know, nor are they consistent with what people think institutions need to do to be accountable. Furthermore, the standards don’t recognize what citizens can do to educate; and they don’t leave much room for citizen accountability.

This is another quite serious problem for a democracy, but despite this obstacle, we have continued to look for evidence of the kind of learning that Brady, Bywater, and others have found essential in preparing a new generation for the future. And we have found this learning going on in an array of educating institutions in communities where we had begun the second phase of our journey. We followed this logic: if a primary function of education is learning to learn, if there are resources throughout a community that can be used to foster learning, and if the schools alone shouldn’t be held accountable, then who is responsible for preparing the next generation for the future? This brought us squarely to communities.

It was only a small—but conceptually enormous—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community itself as an educator; that is, as an accountable political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, significantly strengthening the hand of the citizenry.
The impetus for this phase of our journey had come from a radical notion that communities are not simply locales full of resources that can be used to educate; they are, themselves, the primary educators, and the schools exist to support them—not the other way around! This idea turns the current school-community relationship on its head. It assumes that a community exists to do more than provide services and protect the physical well-being of residents. Communities also offer people opportunities to develop to their fullest potential. And that requires communities to educate.

Why is this notion so startling? Why don’t communities regularly connect their educating institutions in a way that takes advantage of all the resources that could be used to promote learning? Some of the obstacles are obvious: institutions are typically organized like silos, each with a separate, specialized function. Institutions also tend to be organized bureaucratically for efficiency. Most formidable of all, people in communities often disagree considerably over matters of education. Nonetheless, the foundation has seen the potential in communities where, as one citizen put it, “everybody in town is trying to educate our kids.”

Having come to see communities themselves as educators, we wanted to look more closely at what determines the way a community goes about educating. We got a clue about where to focus our attention from a report on neighborhoods in St. Paul, Minnesota, that were using local resources to educate. According to the authors, the ultimate purpose of the projects was to change the culture of learning in the community. Some cultures support academic development much more than others; and what a culture supports has everything to do with what happens in schools and beyond.

A culture may say that everyone should be contributing to the education of our young people. Changing a culture, however, is a formidable task. Cultures are slow to form and difficult to change. So even though we are convinced that a culture that values learning is important, we aren’t confident that we know how to get to the place where everyone would be educating the kids. One or two projects won’t do the job. Cultural change takes persistent effort over many years. That’s when we reread Donald Schön, Chris Argyris, Stewart Ranson, and others who have written about learning systems or practices that can be changed.

Change seems to require an unconventional attitude about success and failure. We have seen projects in communities that succeeded, but people soon quit working. Similarly with projects that failed, people became discouraged and quit. So whether a project is a success or a failure doesn’t necessarily affect what happens next. High-achieving communities, on the other hand, are persistent; they take both in stride, and they learn from their mistakes. They know how to fail successfully.

Ways of learning can change if communities reevaluate their goals as they progress in the work. (Typically, goals or standards remain fixed, and progress is measured against them.) Systems can change if communities also assess or learn about themselves, not just about their projects. Making these changes would significantly alter the way a community goes about involving, if not everybody, a large number of people and organizations in the business of “educating the kids.” Unless a community is learning itself as it tries to enrich the learning
of young people, the community is not likely to keep up the effort required to change its culture.

The journey that took us from schools to education writ large, and to learning, then on to communities and their cultures of learning, and finally to systems or ways of learning could be nothing more than a series of vignettes. But when the foundation put them all together, they fit into a coherent picture. And the story of the journey taken as a whole is a powerful story of how education and democracy are interrelated and interdependent. Of course, not everybody has traveled in the same direction we have or come out at the same place. And certainly we aren’t the only ones to have taken this journey. Nonetheless . . .

Even though we aren’t finished traveling, the view is clearer where we are now. There is more to the connection between democracy and education than is reflected in the platitude that schools serve democracy and therefore have a claim on public funds. That is true, but it isn’t true enough. The platitude doesn’t extend to all of public education; and it doesn’t recognize the contributions of citizens, aside from funding. Nothing in it suggests that communities are educators accountable for how they educate, or that communities might make use of all their educational resources, particularly those as improbable as horse farms. Little encourages schools to find ways to ally themselves with other community educators or to recognize the barriers—legal and professional—that stand in their way when they do try to collaborate. That is why the journey isn’t over. There are miles to go.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.