

"WE THE PEOPLE" POLITICS

The Populist
Promise of
Deliberative
Public Work



HARRY C. BOYTE

A STUDY FOR THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

Kettering Foundation

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FOREWORD: RESTORING CIVIC AGENCY

EVERYONE WHO WANTS A STRONG DEMOCRACY is indebted to Harry Boyte; he has steered the civic renewal movement away from sentimentality and therapeutic politics by insisting that citizens have to be producers of public goods through public work. This notion of work that produces something tangible has been particularly helpful to the Kettering Foundation as it explores the role of deliberative decision making in democratic politics. Without the production of public goods or some type of public action as deliberation's purpose, it becomes merely one among many techniques for creating mutual understanding or instructing the citizenry in the complexities of governmental policymaking. I have no quarrel with improving understanding among citizens or better public policy “education,” but decision making through public deliberation brings democracy face-to-face with one of its greatest challenges—morally laden disagreements over what action is the right one to take. Overreliance on largely rational means of dealing with disagreements, like negotiating or majority voting, leaves democracy vulnerable to identity-based, value-laden, ideologically inspired disputes. Deliberation addresses this vulnerability because it deals with morally based disputes over what *should be*; in fact, it has sometimes been called moral reasoning.

Since the dawn of history, people have recognized the things that are going wrong in their lives but haven't agreed on what the problems are and certainly not on what *should* be done about them. The foundation uses the word *deliberation* (i.e., moral reasoning) to describe what emerged in our history as a way of making the best possible decisions or judgments on the right action to take under particular circumstances. Deliberation recognizes that such decisions

touch on things deeply valuable to people, intangibles like freedom and justice, which can't be quantified.

Still, the many things we value pull against one another in specific situations, although they are held dear by everyone. For instance, actions that could make us more secure could cost us some of the freedom we also prize. To deliberate publicly is to weigh all that we value against various options for action so that we can make sound judgments, "sound" being decisions as consistent as possible with what we hold dear.

Deliberative decision making exercises the human faculty for judgment, the faculty for moral reasoning. (We get into a lot of trouble when we don't make use of that faculty.) From the perspective Kettering brings to democratic politics, sound judgments are essential any time some type of collective effort is needed. And our country is troubled by any number of problems that can't be met without citizens joining with other citizens. In other words, it is difficult to imagine collective efforts without collective decision making. And making these decisions may involve dealing with morally charged disagreements, disagreements that can't be resolved with expert information alone (there are no experts on what is the right thing to do).

That said, no decision, however reached, is self-implementing. And as Boyte rightly points out, there are many facets to civic agency. Before people decide on what to do or make, they have to identify a problem and determine what actions to consider. They also have to identify and commit resources, find allies, and organize their efforts. Ideally, people are learning throughout, not just about their progress but also about themselves as a citizenry. If they do all of these things in ways that give them greater control or agency, they are practicing democracy at its most basic. But what should we call this politics that is so different from partisan electoral politics and the politics of legislation, although not unrelated? Civic politics? Public politics? I like Boyte's phrase, "'We the People' politics."

At Kettering we sometimes refer to this politics as "deliberative"; it involves collective learning. The ancient Greeks described deliberative decision making as "the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act." Still, there are problems with the phrase *deliberative politics* because even we use the word *deliberation* in different ways. One is for a specific practice, decision making. The other is as an adjective to describe an entire political system, deliberative democracy.

We haven't found a more suitable phrase, and that is why Boyte's "We the People" politics is appealing. We need to look further because what we are trying to convey by using the word *deliberation* isn't the same as what others mean by the term (Jürgen Habermas, for instance).

The main reason for staying with the term *deliberative democracy* is to underscore the connection between learning and democracy. The public learning that gives people civic agency occurs when citizens teach themselves through deliberating. This learning seems to be one of the keys to self-organizing. Certainly learning is a democratic way to bring about change, because it isn't coercive. And all of the practices used in doing collective work, from naming problems to organizing actions, can be occasions for public learning.

Boyte's paper is also valuable because it puts things that would otherwise be abstract, like public learning, civic agency, and public deliberation, in a real-world context. I particularly like his discussion of the Populist Movement before it morphed into the Populist Party and populism came to mean playing class and race cards to win elections. The legacy of populism that was passed down to me is a legacy of common efforts for the common good—cooperative purchasing, for example. The legacy is a memory of men and women joining forces with one another across society's divisions, a memory of people learning together.

These are memories worth holding onto at a time when people aren't sure they have much control over their future. And they are worth holding onto when democracy is in danger of being redesigned to operate without citizens. There will always be, as there always have been, forces that move citizens to the sidelines or dismiss them as unrealistic advocates of a democracy so direct that it doesn't need the institutions of republican government. But what is more worrisome is that efforts to engage citizens may stop short of treating citizens as real civic agents with a responsibility to be the creators of the public world. We can have civic engagement without democratic self-rule. We can have community development without democratic practices. We can have service and volunteerism without democratic problem solving. And we can have engaged universities that don't engage the democratic initiatives of citizens. Boyte's voice calls on us to resist being caught up in these misadventures.

—David Mathews

“WE THE PEOPLE” POLITICS: THE POPULIST PROMISE OF DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC WORK

IT IS AS IF AMERICANS HAVE BEEN LIVING in an apartment building where we decorate our apartments and tend to our window boxes while the building itself collapses. In conventional politics, we are caught up in debating discrete issues—“window boxes” like tax policy. But people have begun to notice the “collapse.”

This essay is written as a stimulus for discussion and debate partly in the context of an organizing effort called “We the People.” Framed by the Constitution’s Preamble, with its premise that the people are the foundational agents and architects of democracy, We the People is a partnership between the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) at Augsburg College and the American Democracy Project operating on 230 college and university campuses. Its aim is to create a movement for culture change that can push back effectively against negative trends which threaten to make education a private not a public good. It seeks to create empowering, sustainable learning cultures in which people develop the knowledge, skills, habits, and values needed to become effective citizens and community builders. Building on a growing number of other examples, We the People is creating a network of people in communities, schools, and colleges dedicated to democratic cultural change. Without such cultures of civic learning and empowerment, Americans will not be able to tackle today’s formidable problems.

I argue that a politics of deliberation and public work, with deep roots in the American populist tradition, can “repair the building” by re-creating civic agency—which is to say,

putting citizens at the center of democracy. Such a politics holds potential for reintegrating governmental and business institutions with the larger civic culture, reviving a sense of government as “us,” and cultivating economic life as the seedbed for creating the commonwealth rather than simply producing private goods.

Civic agency involves people’s capacities to work collectively across differences to cope with common problems and to build a democratic life together. It is part of a constellation of similar concepts including “organic politics,” proposed by David Mathews; “civic capacity,” developed by Xavier de Sousa Briggs; “democratic politics,” advanced by Christian political theorist Luke Bretherton; and “relocalization,” developed by Bill McKibben. All emphasize the open-ended, face-to-face deliberative work of addressing common challenges and creating a shared democratic life.¹

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Civic agency is expressed and developed by public work, a normative, democratizing ideal of citizenship generalized from communal labors of making and tending the commons.² I define public work as self-organized efforts by a mix of people who solve public problems and create things of lasting civic value—both material and symbolic. Public work places citizens at the center, as *co-creators* of democracy, not simply volunteers, consumers, voters, or protestors.

A SEASON OF DISCONTENT

“The world is flooded with laws and policies, councils and committees. It is tragic that most of these deal with the structures of society, rather than the heart of society—the people. But the eternal truth of the democratic faith is that the solution always lies with the people.”

—Marie Ström, *Citizens at the Centre*, 2006³

THE RASMUSSEN POLL OF NOVEMBER 2010 found that only 37 percent of respondents felt that this nation’s best days “are in the future”—down from 48 percent two years earlier.⁴ In a series of conversations with citizens across the country shortly before the 2010 election, Joe Klein of *Time* magazine found that people were more anxious than angry. They were dismayed that recent elections, in which “insiders” were voted out and “outsiders” voted in, had failed to halt signs of national decline, Klein reported. “Topic A is the growing sense that our best days as a nation are behind us, that our kids won’t live as well as we did, that China is in the driver’s seat.”⁵ Conventional politics today is seen as failing to address these larger questions seriously.⁶

When politics-as-usual doesn’t work, one insight of the living democratic tradition is compelling: politicians won’t solve such problems for us. All of us must take ownership of the nation and rise to the occasion of citizenship. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think

them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”⁷

Empowering education is the lifeblood of a democratic society. Such education always has strong deliberative dimensions. Today, in the context of widespread discontent, deliberation has two major contributions, one immediate, the other encompassing.

In the near future, practices and insights developed over the years in the deliberative field hold considerable importance in developing a response adequate to address the feeling that we are losing control over our future. Practitioners of deliberation are called to leadership in catalyzing a conversation among Americans of diverse views about basic questions of democracy: What is citizenship? What is the role of government? How should we all act effectively and wisely on the challenges we face? In such conversations people are brought to consider not only pros and cons of different answers but also the hidden paradigms below them.

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Deliberation, when conceived as a crucial dimension of building civic agency, is also an essential component of citizenship itself in a time of change and challenge. It is a key element in a We the People paradigm associated with the populist tradition, which differs from both the left and the right today. We the People politics focuses on civic agency—the people as the agents of democracy. This involves not simply individual agents but also the building of civically empowering cultures over time in which people see themselves as makers and stewards of the commons and create rooted institutions which nourish such a civic culture, cutting across realms of government, education, businesses, and nonprofits.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF DELIBERATION AND COMMUNAL LABORS

IN THE 1980s, A FOCUS ON THE ALLOCATION of “rights and resources” began to produce growing incivility and rancor. America increasingly resembled a maelstrom of grievances, discontents, and special claims. As Cornel West put it, “Even the very art of public conversation—the precious activity of communicating with fellow citizens in a spirit of mutual respect and civility—appears to fade amid the backdrop of name-calling and finger-pointing in flat sound bites.”⁸ When public talk becomes a clamor for rights, the shared public world sharply erodes. In this context the practice of deliberation, championed by the Kettering Foundation and others, began to spread.

Deliberative democracy takes us beyond the narrow concepts of citizens and politics stressed by conventional liberal theory and interest group politics. Deliberative democracy points us toward a different kind of politics though it is not, by itself, a new stage of active democracy nor is it sufficient to get us there. Deliberation is best viewed as a highly useful but limited effort to create an enclave of judgment and freedom in times of diminished democracy. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, architect of modern deliberative politics, describes deliberation’s limits in this way: Deliberation, he says, “invests the democratic process with normative connotations stronger than those found in the liberal model but weaker than those found in the republican model.” In his view, “the success of deliberative politics depends not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication, as well as on the interplay of institutionalized deliberative processes with informally developed public opinions.”⁹

Deliberative theory and practice descending from Habermas take for granted that public institutions and governance are largely impervious to deep change. Thus, Habermas criticizes

Hannah Arendt as unrealistic for imagining that “the political public sphere should be revitalized to the point where a regenerated citizenry can, in the forms of a decentralized self-governance, (once again) appropriate bureaucratically alienated state power.”¹⁰ He sees deliberation as a communicative practice with little involvement of citizens in public problem solving, which he regards as the purview of the state. In *Between Facts and Norms*, he argues that the capacity of civil society “to solve problems on its own is limited.” The function of deliberation is to move problems to the formal system. He proposes that, “the communicative structures of the public sphere *relieve* the public of the *burden of decision-making*.” Citizens should be “communicatively oriented” rather than “success oriented.” The goal of public deliberation should be “influence,” not “power.”¹¹

In the real world of practice, deliberation usually mixes practical problem solving with communication.¹² Nöelle McAfee, a philosopher specializing in democratic theory and practice, distinguishes practically oriented deliberation in groups like the Kettering Foundation, Everyday Democracy, and *AmericaSpeaks* from the “preference-based model” of social scientists, and the “rational proceduralist” model of Habermas and John Rawls.¹³ These distinctions are useful, and also illuminate deliberation’s limits. In his book, *The Deliberative Practitioner*, John Forester generates important insights about deliberative practices in the messy, real-world environments in which [city] planners practice their craft.¹⁴ At the same time, he shows the inadequacy of deliberation to convey co-creation when he describes what is going on during examples of significant change. He warns of the dangers of excessive focus on language: “We always face the danger that we will listen to what is said and hear words, not power; words, not judgment; words, not inclusion and exclusion; ‘mere words’ and not problem-framing and . . . strategies of practice.”¹⁵ Forester uses the phrase *city building in practice* to describe “the politically astute work of these practitioners and the planners and designers like them.”¹⁶ He employs the term, *participatory action research* to convey the richness of bottom-up stories, describing changes that take place: “transformation of done-to into doers, spectators and victims into activists, fragmented groups into renewed bodies.” He calls this “the ability to act together,” arguing that “if we overemphasize the talk and the dialogue . . . we risk missing what is

truly transformative about such work.”¹⁷ Forester’s analyses point to the need for a framework that describes how people build a shared life through everyday labors.

The elements of such a framework are to be found in communal labor practices across the world.¹⁸ For all its variation, communal labor has recurring democratic themes. These include egalitarian and cooperative efforts that cross social divisions; practical concerns for creating shared collective resources, adaptability, and incentives based on appeal to immediate interests combined with cultivation of concern for the welfare of the community. Communal labor

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practices sometimes also include structures of self-organized governance—an element that demonstrates the global roots of participatory democratic decision making.¹⁹ At times, communal labor themes also combine in popular movements that seek democrati-

zation of power, such as the populist farmers and labor movements described below, which assert people’s “building the commonwealth” as the basis for challenges to concentrations of wealth and power.²⁰

Communal labor practices can be contrasted with the idealized and sentimental quality of civic language used by elites to mask their other objectives.²¹ Communal labor has a practical, gritty political quality, mixing immediate interests with cultivation of concern for long-term community well-being. In *Mayordomo*, Stanley Crawford writes about how he and his wife settled in a Mexican community in northern New Mexico in the 1970s. He was elected leader (*mayordomo*) of the communal labor crew on his irrigation ditch (*acequi*), one of about 1,000 in the region that formed the heart of community life. Crawford describes meetings about water rights as a combination of contentious bargaining, negotiation, and defense of narrow interests with calls for attention to community welfare: “The sky rumbled and growled as we argued with each other into the night and heard accusations of cheating and hogging, waiting for the peacemakers to come forth . . . to remind us again of the one community of which

we all formed part, whatever our many differences.”²² These political qualities of public work contrast especially with the sentimentalized use of terms such as *voluntarism* and *service* by elites to serve their own ends. Thus, citizenship was at the center of George W. Bush’s Inaugural Address. “I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort,” Bush proclaimed, “to be citizens, not spectators, to serve your nation, beginning with your neighborhood.”²³ But the nature of such rhetoric became clear after 9/11, when the concept quickly proved a marginal aside, forgotten in the military campaign to overthrow the government in Iraq.

Public work as a democratizing ideal of citizenship can be contrasted with communal labor practices manipulated by top-down elites either directly or symbolically. This manipulation is a global pattern. The Hitler work brigades, putting Germans to work building libraries, schools, and other public goods, was a horrifying example of elite manipulation. Writing about Otavalo communities in Ecuador, Tanya Korovkin describes the differences between *faena*, conscripted collective labor on public projects organized by elites, with *minga*, communal work that effects communitywide improvements like water systems and schools. She shows how *minga* embodies egalitarian norms of exchange and reciprocity and decentralized, self-organizing governance, and how such norms have been used by indigenous Otavalo communities as political resources in struggles against centralizing powers in the Ecuadorian Andes.²⁴ *Minga* practices are also “evoked repeatedly at communal assemblies and provincewide meetings by the new indigenous leaders as part of their campaign to build a new ethnic identity.”²⁵

Similarly, Jacqueline Nzisabira, who works with Idasa, an African democracy institute, describes how communal labor, known in her native Burundi as *ibikorwa rusangi*, underwent change as elites began to manipulate its themes. “When I was growing up collective work was used to cultivate land in Burundi,” Nzisabira says. “Such labors empowered people and created a stronger sense of community.” In recent years, she observes, “there has been a tendency for the government to control the process. The work shifts meaning when it is state-directed, rather than coming from the community.”²⁶

When collective labor becomes public work with deliberative dimensions, both labor and deliberation take on new powers. Deliberative public work creates reflective learning cultures in which citizens come to understand the value of different views and in which they revisit the significance of what they create. It places citizens at the center, thus highlighting the crisis of conventional, polarized politics.

THE DEEPENING DIVIDE

CONVENTIONAL PROGRESSIVE VIEWS EXPRESSED both in the mainstream media and among scholars, either ignored the extensive civic-agency elements of the Obama presidential campaign (crystallized in “yes we can”²⁷) or decried them as sentimental nonsense. Writing for *The New Yorker* after the 2008 election, George Packer was contemptuous. He depicted the “messianic and vaporous” language of the election as simply disingenuous. “Throughout the campaign, Obama spoke of change coming from the bottom up rather than from the top down,” said Packer. “But every time I heard him tell a crowd, ‘This has never been about me; it’s about you’ he seemed to be saying just the opposite.” In Packer’s view, what people voted for in the election was the “ground on which the majority of Americans—looking to government for solutions—now stand.”²⁸

A government-centered view of agency was on full display among progressive intellectuals and political groups in a discussion launched by the late Tony Judt in his lecture at New York University in the fall of 2009. Reprinted in the *New York Review of Books*, the discussion continued through 2010 in a variety of forums.²⁹ Judt posed the question raised in 1906 by the German socialist Werner Sombart, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” Preoccupying scholars and political progressives through the 20th century, the question is based on the premise that socialism, and more recently social democracy, is the only democratic response to social injustices, growing inequality, and public squalor.³⁰

Thomas Spragens has explored the etymology of this government-centered world view, revealing its skepticism of popular participation and power, in his recent book, *Getting the Left Right*. He traces a profound shift that occurred in the left’s paradigm over the last half century as progressive intellectuals and politicians came to substitute social justice for popular agency,

replace respect for work and working people with solicitude and pity for the oppressed and victimized, and replace a populist idiom of “the people” with left-wing language about oppressive structures and oppressed groups, entitlements, and rights.

The Tea Party and its allies have put challenges to excessive reliance on the state in the middle of the nation’s public debate. Progressives often characterize groups like the Tea Party as simply radical individualists—a “libertarian mob” in the words of Mark Lilla.³¹ But in fact they raise substantial questions about basic tenets of progressive opinion, and include, in the intellectual arguments that accompany them, a challenge to a pervasive, if often invisible, displacement of popular agency. Thus Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, argues in *The Battle*, that

the nation is divided between “makers and takers.” The first camp includes a majority—70 percent, he says—dedicated to values of free enterprise, hard work, and “earned success”; the rest, an intellectual elite comprising 30 percent of the nation and those who follow them,

are rooted in higher education, communications, entertainment, and politics, and seek an expanding government modeled more or less explicitly on European-style social democracy. Brooks envisions “not a fight over guns, gays or abortion” but rather “a new struggle between two competing visions of the country’s future. In one, America will continue to be an exceptional nation organized around the principles of free enterprise—limited government, a reliance on entrepreneurship and rewards determined by market forces.” Brooks argues that this vision is not about getting rich but about what he calls the pursuit of happiness through earned success:

Earned success is the creation of value in our lives or in the lives of others. Earned success is the stuff of entrepreneurs who seek value through innovation, hard work, and passion. Earned success is what parents feel when their children do wonderful things, what social innovators feel when they change lives, what artists feel when they create something of beauty.

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In contrast, he sees the statist vision dominant among the knowledge class “grounded in expanding bureaucracies, a managed economy, and large-scale income redistribution.” He argues that “these visions are not reconcilable. We must choose.”³²

From the vantage point of civic agency, there are major holes in Brooks’ argument, as John de Graaf and David Batker contend in their forthcoming book, *What’s the Economy for Anyway?* While Brooks claims to justify his vision as the “pursuit of happiness,” there is evidence, from the United States and around the world, that his individualist, hypercompetitive view of “earned success” produces more anxiety and depression than happiness, according to the authors. More generally, while Brooks champions people’s “right” to make unlimited amounts of money with as little interference as possible, this “right” is challenged not simply by modern secular progressives but in profoundly diverse faith traditions. Brooks imagines agency as control over one’s own labor, neglecting cooperative effort with others in everyday activities of building the commons, and also in popular movements that deepen democracy. He makes no mention of the democratic contributions of broad movements like the freedom struggle, and the women’s, labor, and farmers movements. Nor does he imagine or describe roles for government as a meeting ground and instrument for our collective empowerment and purposes, the theme of the Constitutional Preamble itself. Citizenship and the commonwealth disappear, like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Other conservative thinkers, more attuned to the role of citizens, grassroots action, and the commonwealth, still share the critique of the knowledge class. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and William Schambra, director of the Bradley Center, are examples. While they are not cheerleaders for hypercompetitive achievement, both criticize the domination of the knowledge class. David Brooks argues:

When historians look back on this period, they will see it as another progressive era. It is not a liberal era—when government intervenes to seize wealth and power and distribute it to the have-nots. It’s not a conservative era, when the governing class concedes that the world is too complicated to be managed from the center. It’s a progressive era, based on the faith in government experts and their ability to use social science analysis to manage complex systems.

In David Brooks' view, the architects of this progressive approach are "a large class of educated professionals, who have been trained to do technocratic analysis, who believe that more analysis and rule-writing is the solution to social breakdowns, and who have constructed ever-expanding networks of offices, schools and contracts."³³

Similarly in Schambra's view, the Obama administration represents the triumph of the "policy approach," in which "governing means not just addressing discrete challenges as they arise, but formulating comprehensive policies aimed at giving large social systems—and indeed society itself—more rational and coherent forms and functions." In such a policy approach, "the long-term, systemic problems of health care, education, and the environment cannot be solved in small pieces. They must be taken on in whole." This task, in Schambra's description of the policy approach, is assigned to "experts professionally trained in the natural or social sciences, which alone enable us to fully grasp social complexity and to design appropriate interventions."³⁴

**A VIEW OF CITIZENSHIP IN WHICH
CITIZENS ARE THE CENTRAL AGENTS
HAS A POLITICAL TRADITION IN
AMERICA—POPULISM, WHICH CROSSES
LINES OF LEFT AND RIGHT, COMBINES
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Both Brooks and Schambra champion citizenship to redeem democracy. Brooks has begun to call for what amounts to a citizenship movement in his *New York Times* column:

A revived patriotism to lift people out of their partisan cliques . . . [to] ask Americans to live up to their best selves . . . to build institutions to support the leaders who make the hard bargains. As in the civil rights era, politicians won't make big changes unless they are impelled and protected by social upsurge.³⁵

A view of citizenship in which citizens are the central agents has a political tradition in America—populism, which crosses lines of left and right, combines deliberation and public work, and focuses on building civic agency.

POPULIST ROOTS OF WE THE PEOPLE³⁶

TODAY, THE TERM *POPULISM* IS MOST OFTEN USED to describe leaders who champion “the people” and rail against the establishment. In the 1980s, Reagan was called a populist for his calls to take power away from big government and return it to the people.³⁷ The 2006 U.S. elections were interpreted as resurgent populism on the Democratic side. “Incoming Democrats Put Populism Before Ideology,” read the headline in the *New York Times*. During the presidential campaign of 2008, Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, described Barack Obama as an authentic populist because of his strong emphasis on popular empowerment—civic agency—and revival of citizenship. “We are going to re-engage in our democracy in a way that we haven’t done for some time,” Obama promised. His aim, he said, was “not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation. . . . It must be about us. It must be about what we can do together.”

After the 2008 election, Sarah Palin claimed the mantle of what David Broder called “perfect-pitch populism.”³⁸ The equation of *populism* with *demagoguery* has caused intellectuals like David Brooks to shun the term. While politicians are meant to play a role, populism holds far more meaning than that assigned to it by the rhetoric of politicians—and the amnesia about the richness of the tradition is itself a dramatic symptom of the erosion of agency.

I discovered the deeper meanings of populism firsthand in 1964, when I was 19, working as a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in St. Augustine, Florida, during the civil rights movement. One day I was caught by five men and a woman

who were members of the Klu Klux Klan. They accused me of being a “communist and a Yankee.” Reaching for a term I vaguely knew about from my father, on the executive committee of SCLC, I replied, “I’m no Yankee. My family has been in the South since before the Revolution. And I’m not a communist. I’m a populist. I believe that blacks and poor whites should join to do something about the big shots who keep us divided.” There was silence. Then an older man said, “I read about that. There’s something in it.” For a few minutes we talked about what such a movement might look like. Then they let me go. When he learned of the incident, Martin Luther King Jr., head of the SCLC, told me that he identified with the populist tradition and assigned me to organize poor whites, which I did on and off for seven years.³⁹

These organizing experiences taught me the contagious effect of the newly discovered *collective power* of historically marginalized African Americans. Poor whites I worked with often remarked that blacks “had really got their act together—we should do the same thing.” For white southern students in the movement, its examples of popular power also offered the possibility of redemption not only for blacks but also for themselves and their families.

In his identification with populism, King was influenced by figures such as the labor leader, A. Philip Randolph; Ella Baker, the first executive secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and Bayard Rustin, the organizer of the famous March on Washington. They were all grounded in the noncommunist popular organizing movements of the 1930s, in which “populism” came to life. Saul Alinsky, often described as the architect of modern community organizing with roots in these movements, eschewed all partisan labels. He described himself only as a populist.

As a democratic tradition and philosophy, populism has three elements. It builds civic agency. It is based on a reconstructed public narrative in which values of equality, respect for working people and work, inclusion, and participation are central. And it is civically educative, developing people’s public identities, imaginations, and skills. The black freedom movement was strongly populist in all these ways. It taught what the political theorist Margaret Canovan has called “political sobriety,” distilling what she believes Hannah Arendt was getting at with

her concept of “the people” as contrasted with the mob or the mass. Canovan describes political sobriety as “institution-building from the ground up,” infused with “an exceptional degree of political realism and common sense, together with a remarkable capacity to exercise self-restraint and put shared long-term interests above private interests and short-term impulses.”⁴⁰

SCLC taught political sobriety through citizenship schools across the South in which people learned skills of community organizing and developed the mental disciplines of political realism and common sense. Andrew Young called these “the invisible foundation of the whole movement.”

Populist dynamics of culture making and development of popular agency—wedding popular power to egalitarian communal values and civic learning—makes populism an alter-

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native to the politics of state-centered technocracy, on the one hand, and market-oriented politics on the other. It also highlights similarities between the left and the right—it is no accident that Paul Krugman and Milton Friedman agreed on a view of the person as *homo economicus*, an uprooted, narrowly self-interested rationalist.⁴¹

The first explicitly populist movement in America emerged in the late 19th century among small farmers. Populism resurfaced as a broad movement during the 1930s to mobilize civic energies to meet the challenges of the Great Depression and the fascist movements of Europe. “The people,” seen by intellectuals in the 1920s as the repository of crass materialism and parochialism, were rediscovered as a source of strength and hope. And as noted, key architects of the black freedom movement like Randolph, Baker, and Rustin, were shaped by the 1930s movement. Each wave builds on earlier ones. Each also adapts to the challenges and resources of the age in which it rises. I believe that we are on the threshold of another great populist movement whose centerpiece is civic agency. Before elaborating on what the movement might look like in the 21st century, it may be useful to analyze the criticisms of populism.⁴²

Critics charge that the populist idea that it is “the people” who drive change—is ill-defined compared to the rigor of class-based or interest group politics. Many on the left charge further that populism is *reformist*, focused on practical ends, with only vague long-term goals, such as “breaking up concentrations of wealth and power.”⁴³ Yet if one is skeptical about sweeping utopian blueprints for the future or precise definitions of who should lead the process of change, these features are decidedly strengths, not weaknesses. The very porousness inherent in the concept of “the people” allows creation of an inclusive narrative, as populist movements seek allies. Similarly, populism’s practicality—a “politics of getting things done,” as Stephanie DeWitt has put it—comes from its grounding in the gritty concerns and everyday problems of building and sustaining actual communities.⁴⁴

The agent in populism, “the people,” is not indeterminate. It is simply a different sort of category than that which defines “class” or “interest group.” It expresses itself in a different idiom than do the charts and statistics that dominate conventional social science. And it practices a different sort of politics than that reflected in political campaigns based on selling things to voters who are conceived of as consumers. Populism uses the language of what Mary Dietz has called “roots.” Populist movements grow from the sense that an elite group is endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted group of people, its memories, origins, common territory, and ways of life. People are understood through language, stories, symbols, oral traditions, foods, music, and ways of remembering. A people may have a moment of birth, sacred texts, and foundational spaces. A people can also have dual—even contending—stories and identities, as conveyed in W.E.B. Du Bois’ great work, *The Two Souls of Black Folks*.⁴⁵

In a study that compared Russian and American populism, Italian historian Gianna Pomata⁴⁶ held that Russian populism was “a way into the future . . . that would not destroy the ancient folkways but rather give them new value and meaning. . . . The Populists advocated the defense of the Russian agrarian tradition and of Russian village life, with its spirit of equality and solidarity.” In the 20th century, populism gained renewed support as a potent alternative to Stalinism. In the mid-1930s, it was ruthlessly suppressed by Stalin, who saw populists as his chief enemies. The Stalinist doctrine advanced the need “to annihilate the influence of

Populism as the worst of the enemies of Marxism and of the whole cause of the proletariat.” As Pomata noted, the “impenetrable silence” that fell on populism affected subsequent European intellectual and political life as well as Soviet historiography.⁴⁷

In the United States, the Populist Party grew from two decades of movement building in the rural South and Midwest after the Civil War. It began in 1866 with the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. In the 1880s, a huge network of black and white farmers’ alliances spread across the South and Midwest. These groups shared with the Grange an emphasis on civic development. They organized neighborhood gatherings, newspapers, lecture circuits, and reading circles.

Economic efforts aimed at freeing

farmers from the domination of

banks and railroads through coop-

erative purchasing and marketing

produced policy ideas like pro-

gressive income taxes and easier

credit. Organizing generated what

Lawrence Goodwyn has called

a “movement culture,” based on

an ethos of respect, cooperation, self-help, and a vision of a “cooperative commonwealth” to

replace the dog-eat-dog capitalism of the late 19th century.

The movement culture founded in cooperatives and other democratic experiences created a sharp divide within the general electoral effort that went under the “populist” banner. In regions of the country without such grounding, Goodwyn describes a “shadow movement” that used similar rhetoric but was far more insubstantial and became easy prey to simplistic magic-bullet solutions, like changes in monetary politics.

In its more rooted versions, the populist movement included tentative interracial alliances, always in tension with the ancient legacy of racism that permeated Southern culture.⁴⁸ The black historian Manning Marable recounts a part of his family’s oral history about his

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great-grandfather, Morris:

During the 1880s, many black and white farmers in Alabama joined the Alliance, a radical agrarian movement against the conservative business and planter elite. Morris was attracted to the movement because of its racial egalitarianism. Throughout Georgia and Alabama, black and white Populist Party members held joint picnics, rallies, and speeches. Populist candidate Reuben F. Kalb actually won the state gubernatorial contest in 1894 [though electoral fraud prevented his taking office]. On the periphery of this activity, in his small rural town, Morris Marable became sheriff with the support of blacks and whites. He was intensely proud of his office, and completed his duties with special dispatch. . . . Morris carried a small Bible in one coat pocket at all times and a revolver under his coat. In either case, he always planned to be prepared.⁴⁹

This populist history ripples out in many directions. Thus, for instance, David Mathews, a pioneer of the deliberative movement, proudly traces his family's political lineage to the same movement that attracted Morris Marable. Mathews' ancestors were leaders in the Alabama and Texas branches of the Populist Party. In the 1898-1899 session of the Alabama legislature, his great-grandfather, James Waldrum Mathews, opposed the planter-sponsored constitution that effectively disenfranchised poor black and white farmers alike.⁵⁰

At the core of democratic populist economics is civic independence, an economic vision that distinguishes populism from both socialism on the one hand and unbridled market capitalism on the other. Eric Foner has observed that the relative absence of a strong socialist or labor party did not signal a void, but rather the rise of a different kind of vision:

The world of the artisan and small farmer persisted in some parts of the United States into the 20th century, and powerfully influenced American radical movements. . . . These movements inherited an older republican tradition hostile to large accumulation of property, but viewing small property as the foundation of economic and civic autonomy. . . . Not the absence of non-liberal ideas but the persistence of a radical vision resting on small property inhibited the rise of socialist ideologies.⁵¹

In recent decades these themes have been largely forgotten among intellectuals in America, as in Europe. As Goodwyn pointed out in *The Democratic Promise*, by the 1960s, progressive historians had reduced “populism” to a caricature of backward-looking nativism and parochialism, a portrayal with virtually no relation to the actual movement. More broadly, populism challenges not only concentrations of wealth and power but also the culturally uprooted, individualized positivist thinking characteristic of professional systems, which produces a view of big institutions as set in stone and impervious to change.

Populism contrasts with fatalistic views about the very possibility of agency in modern times and the collective amnesia that accompanies it. In an important recent analysis of the concept of agency, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mishe note how rarely attention is given to the “practical-evaluative dimension of agency” in 20th-century scholarship and theory. In this dimension, the main locus of agency

lies in the *contextualization* of social experience . . . [through which] actors gain in the capacity to make considered decisions that may challenge received patterns of action. . . . By increasing their capacity for practical evaluation, actors strengthen their ability to exercise agency in a *mediating* fashion, enabling them (at least potentially) to pursue their projects in ways that may challenge and transform the situational contexts of actions themselves.

The authors observe that attention to navigational capacities to act in and on a fluid world “has been overshadowed by an emphasis upon clear and explicit rules of conduct, concepts that permit relatively little scope for the exercise of situationally based judgment.”⁵² Put differently, the “iron cage” of technical rationality, described by theorists as diverse as Max Weber, George Orwell, and Michel Foucault, has worked its effects on theories of action, as well as on those who develop them.

Neglect of popular agency is illustrated by dominant stories about social change. In the United States, the sense of agency that infused the movements of the New Deal has been replaced by pity for the poor in the iconography of the New Deal’s official public history, the Roosevelt Memorial in Washington.⁵³ Charles Euchner’s recent *Nobody Going to Turn Me*

Around: A People's History of the March on Washington reminds us how much a similar process has recast the freedom movement. Conventional histories shift the very memory of that great people's movement to a focus on leaders like King. And across the world in South Africa, as Allan Boesak shows in his splendid book, *Running with Horses*, the immense popular movement of the 1980s called the United Democratic Front, bringing an end to apartheid, has been largely deleted from official histories.

Themes of culture, agency, and popular power are always contested. But in democratic populism, as people defend their ways of life they develop in democratic ways. They become more conscious of other groups' interests, more inclusive in their understandings of "the people," more expansive in their vision of future possibilities, and more aware of the richness of popular histories of struggle in the past. Anyone involved in broad organizing or populist movements, such as the American civil rights movement, has seen this. I saw it in East Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1960s working with poor white textile workers. Moved by a sense of shared conditions and interests, their first major initiative, after achieving some victories that won new resources from City Hall, was to create an alliance with the blacks across the railroad tracks. They conveyed a generosity of spirit that flowed directly from experiences of empowerment.

If attended to, cultural discontents provide immense resources for democratic change and popular agency. This highlights the importance of what might be called *cultural organizing*,

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efforts that explicitly challenge elite-centered public narratives of a society's history. Thus the intellectual historian Scott Peters unearthed what he calls a "prophetic counter-narrative" in higher education, which animated the idea that land-grant colleges were "democracy colleges" in the 1930s. Faculty, staff, and students in land-grant colleges and universities worked in sustained, egalitarian partnerships with communities, sometimes using the language of public work to describe their efforts.⁵⁴ New Deal cultural movements of the 1930s also affirmed

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work and working people generally in partnership with, rather than in opposition to, government. New Deal public works programs emphasized their civic and public contributions. FDR, in his message to Congress calling for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), declared, "More important than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work. The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, who are now walking the streets and

receiving private or public relief, would infinitely prefer to work."

That message pervaded the CCC. "We knew our work was important because we were told this by the supervisor every day," recalled James Ronning, a CCC worker. "Work was hard and often exhausting. Men lived in barracks. But as they built national parks and landscaped agricultural areas, planted trees, and worked on flood control projects, participants always knew that they were contributing to the commonwealth. "We have this park that was a wilder-

ness before,” said Robert Ritchit, from Hansell, Iowa. “I had something to do with that. I was part of the country and of history.”

Vice President Hubert Humphrey championed a decentralized democratic economy and heralded such themes throughout his career. Thus in a Senate debate in 1952, Humphrey declared that the purpose of small business was not low prices but survival of independent producers as the foundation of democracy. As he put it, “Do we want an America where the economic market place is filled with a few Frankensteins and giants? Or do we want an America where there are thousands upon thousands of small entrepreneurs, independent businesses, and landholders who can stand on their own feet and talk back to their Government or anyone else?” Small businesses and family farms were important because they produced “good citizens, and good citizens are the only hope of freedom and democracy.” Near the end of his life in an interview with Bill Moyers, Humphrey reaffirmed his commitment to the Preamble’s theme that “we the people” are the agents of democracy.⁵⁵

Populism has a rich democratic history. But bringing back civic populism—We the People politics—on a large scale confronts many obstacles in our time.

WE THE PEOPLE POLITICS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

THOUGHT ABOUT THE OBSTACLES to We the People politics in September 2010 during a televised Town Hall meeting, which brought together President Obama and a group of people who had voted for him. The opening question set the tone. An attractive, middle-class mother of two, the chief financial officer of a veteran's organization, expressed her disappointment. "I'm exhausted from defending you, defending your administration, defending the mantle of change that I voted for, and deeply disappointed with where we are right now," she said. "I have been told that I voted for a man who said he was going to change things in a meaningful way for the middle class. I'm one of those people, and I'm waiting, sir. I'm waiting. I don't feel it yet." A young law school graduate followed. "Like a lot of people in my generation, I was really inspired by you and by your campaign and message that you brought, and that inspiration is dying away," he said. "It feels like the American dream is not attainable to a lot of us."

The president dutifully listed all the things that he and the administration had tried to do. The media mavens said it wasn't enough. As Dan Blatz put it in the *Washington Post*. "The president's challenge is to restore confidence in his own leadership."

No one mentioned the elephant in the room. People didn't vote "for a man who said he was going to change things." The country elected a president whose message was "yes *we* can." That is also the message of the Preamble to the Constitution. The Preamble doesn't say the president—or government—will solve our problems. It says:

We the people . . . in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

This was a central thread in Obama’s presidential campaign. “This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose,” Obama said in 2007. As he campaigned in the Iowa caucuses, he described his experiences as a community organizer. “In church basements and around kitchen tables, block by block, we brought the community together, fought for new jobs, and helped people live lives with some measure of dignity.” “Active citizenship,” Obama said “. . . will be a cause of my presidency.”⁵⁶

I imagined what a difference it would have made if one or two participants in the 2010 Town Hall meeting had reminded the president, the media, and the nation of “yes we can.” I also thought of the wisdom in Pogo’s quip, “we have met the enemy and he is us.” We are all, in part, architects of a consumer culture that encourages us to look to supermen to fix things for us, and to focus on what we can get out of it.

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Matthew Crawford has described the dynamics that got us here in *Shop Class as SoulCraft*.⁵⁷ Through the 20th century, work of all kinds became increasingly degraded, detaching “manual” from “mental” labor and eroding the agency of workers. Self-directed activities were “dissolved or abstracted into parts and then reconstituted as a *process*.” As Frederick Winslow Taylor, the guru of scientific management, put it, “all possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying out department.”⁵⁸ Spiced with his own experiences in mind-numbing “intellectual work,” Crawford’s narrative shows how white collar and

intellectual labor, celebrated as the “new knowledge economy,” has become subjected to the same logic.⁵⁹ “It was learned that the only way to get [workers] to work harder was to play upon the imagination, stimulating new needs and wants.” For this purpose, “consumption, no less than production, needed to be brought under scientific management—the management of desire.”⁶⁰

Civil society itself illustrates these dynamics. In a recent study for the Kettering Foundation, Richard Harwood and John Creighton found that even leaders of nonprofits with strong community-serving missions, such as strengthening local schools and helping vulnerable

children, feel enormous pressure to turn inward, evaluate success by using narrow definitions of service delivery, and avoid real partnerships with lay citizens in their work. Derek Barker, who terms this dynamic the “colonization of civil society,” describes how intellectuals have long assumed these trends to be an irreversible, one-way process. But, as he points out, there are examples of institutions

“*realigning* their identities and routines with the habits and civic norms of communities,” changes often based on deliberative and public work practices attentive to the rich capacities and civic assets of communities.⁶¹

Civic agency themes are beginning to take root in many settings. Moreover, a new generation of political leaders has abandoned the role of savior or Superman to embrace what might be called civic populism, partnering with citizens in addressing public problems. This shift often involves changes in public agencies themselves in order to function more as partners, meeting grounds, and catalysts of citizen effort rather than simply sites of “customer service.”

A NEW GENERATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS HAS ABANDONED THE ROLE OF SAVIOR OR SUPERMAN TO EMBRACE WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED CIVIC POPULISM, PARTNERING WITH CITIZENS IN ADDRESSING PUBLIC PROBLEMS.

In the Twin Cities area, for example, Elizabeth Kautz, Republican mayor of Burnsville who is now also president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, has pioneered the redesign of city agencies to continuously involve citizens in the public work of building the city of Burnsville. Democrats R.T. Rybak, mayor of Minneapolis, and Chris Coleman, mayor of St. Paul, have also created partnerships with citizens on a myriad of issues, from fixing potholes to rethinking education as the work of whole communities.⁶²

The emerging movement to strengthen higher education's role in building democratic society is key to long-term civic revitalization. Some schools like Augsburg College, the new home institution of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, have sustained and strengthened many of the practices and elements of the old land-grant tradition, with inclusive, diverse student bodies and strong connections to place. The American Democracy Project prepares students to become empowered, effective community builders, infused with a strong sense of "stewardship of place."

By and large, our educational systems fall far short in educating students in the skills and habits of deliberation, critical thinking, complex reasoning, and collaborative work across differences that animated America's founding ideal of citizenship. The We the People initiative responds to the failures of both K-12 and higher education systems. Its goal is to create civic, political, and education reform by developing learning cultures—inside and outside formal education—that equip people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for them to become active citizens and community builders.

We need wide discussion on how such building blocks might add up to a renewed We the People politics, a politics that democratizes governance while it recognizes the vital roles of government, values the public conditions and purposes of work, challenges concentrations of power in economic and professional systems alike, and develops civic agency.

We need the populist politics of deliberative public work.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 297.

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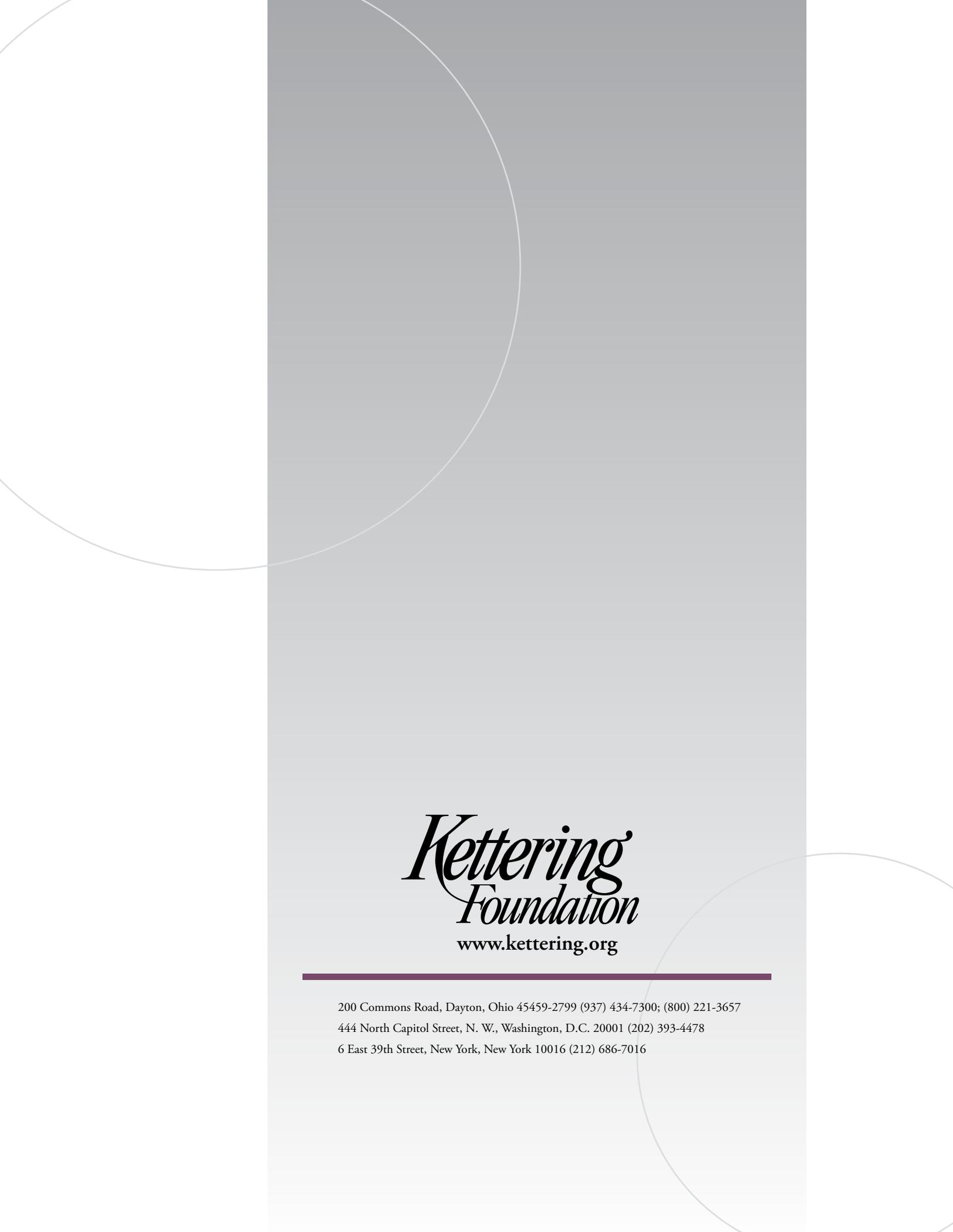
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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115, 116, 123.

¹⁸ Here are a sampling of communal labor terms: in South Africa in Sesotho, *letsema*; in isiZulu, *ilimo*; in Afrikaans, *gemeenskapswerk*; in Xhosa, *dibanisani*; in the Sudan, *naffir*; along the East African coast, in Swahili, *kidole kimoja chawa*; in Europe, *meitheal* (Ireland), *dugnad* (Norway), *talkoot* (Finland); in Asia, *huan gong*, (China), *ture* (Korea), *gotong-royoung* (Indonesia and Malaysia); in North America *ga-du-gi* (Cherokee); *bee* (as in quilting bee, or town-hall-raising bee) and also *barn-raising* (English).

- ¹⁹ See John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2009).
- ²⁰ See Harry C. Boyte, "The Commonwealth of Freedom: Response to Beltrán," *Political Theory* Vol. 38, No. 6 (2010): 870-876.
- ²¹ Paul Dekker and Loek Halman, eds., *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2003), illustrates depoliticized citizenship.
- ²² Stanley Crawford, *Mayordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 168.
- ²³ George Bush quoted in Michael Schudson, "How People Learn to Be Civic," in E. J. Dionne and Kayla Drogosz from "The Promise of National Service," in Dionne, Drogosz, and Litan, eds., *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 270.
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