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**Cover art:** Seung Lee, Bamboo #3 (30”x 30” Mixed media 2015)
Editors’ Letter

This journal has long stressed the role of citizens in shaping public life, participating in democracy, and creating better conditions for democratic institutions to flourish. Where others see the creation of public goods as primarily the domain of institutions and experts, for many years we have looked at how communities of ordinary citizens, locally and nationally, can help make democracy work better, that is, at how the public is vital to a well-functioning democracy. As our readers know, we have long argued that democracy is much more than a matter of participating in periodic elections. More broadly, it involves activities from holding neighborhood forums to coaching youth sports and even to leaving the front porch light on. Together, citizens help shape the public agenda and they deliberate over the democratic legitimacy of more formal institutions and policies. Even when they disagree, their collective deliberations, over time, can develop into public will about what ought to be done.

In this issue of the Review, we are looking at matters a little differently. How, we wonder, might formal public institutions work with informal publics? How might they contribute to—or get in the way of—the public’s democratic work? How can organizations and institutions align themselves with the work of a democratic citizenry? These simple questions form the backbone of this issue of the Kettering Review.

These are not questions about how people and institutions can work in lockstep. Rather, we’re asking, How might they better align or complement each other? In a complementary relationship, the various parties can work in the same direction without losing their unique strengths and missions. In a high-crime neighborhood, committed citizens might escort children to school, while a formal institution might analyze data on how effective that initiative is. Both are necessary components of tackling the problem, but citizens are not necessarily in a position to analyze data and institutions are not necessarily responsible for walking children to school every day.

Finding a complementary alignment is obviously difficult. In this issue, we explore the challenges inherent in attempting to work in this manner, the characteristics of organizations that have decided to do so, and a few examples of organizations trying their best to align their work with the work of a democratic citizenry.
The issue starts with an excerpt from the work of the late Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, who makes the case for an expanded notion of what governance means. In her piece, Ostrom highlights how institutional action is necessary but not sufficient to produce vital public goods. She states, “If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service.” This presumption pushes people to the sidelines of democratic life when, in fact, they often have vital contributions to make in the service of producing public goods.

Albert Dzur picks up on this theme of professionalization as he highlights the stories of what he calls “democratic professionals.” In settings as diverse as public schools, local government, and prisons, Dzur shows how professionals across the country are altering their normal routines to better align their work with, and benefit from, the work of others. Dzur shows that these institutional alterations can be challenging, but their promise is immense.

Turning to the work of citizens themselves, our piece by John McKnight tells the story of how he helped form an organization predicated on the idea that people in communities are an enormous, yet often untapped, source of assets, talents, and capabilities that are indispensable as communities struggle to tackle shared problems. Called the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD), the organization is a decentralized network deeply aware of the talents and contributions of ordinary people.

Where McKnight’s work focuses on the power of ordinary people, Bonnie Honig turns to the power of ordinary things, like the usually overlooked and sometimes derelict public telephone booths that still dot New York City in an era when most everyone has a phone in his or her own pocket. But in times of crisis, like Hurricane Sandy, these public things become vital to public life. All the various public things we take for granted are, in fact, items that help create a public world necessary for democracy.

Just as telephones help bring people together, larger networks of communication do so as well, as Lewis Friedland explains in an interview. A veteran communications scholar, Friedland reminds us of how important it is to pay attention to how well particular networks are working—or not working—in bringing people together.
We close the issue with a piece from David Mathews, who reflects on the mismatch between the work of formal, professionally run institutions, which he calls Squares, and the work of informal, loosely organized civic groups, or Blobs. Like Ostrom, Mathews notes that the culture within many institutions is one that views citizens as clients or consumers, as opposed to producers or vital partners. Ultimately, Mathews argues that institutions must learn their way to a new way of being. This learning is not just copying best practices but is accomplished through experimenting with standard professional routines.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue of the Review suggest that productive, complementary relationships between formal institutions and informal civic groups are not just a nice thing or an aspirational goal. As Bamboo #3, the cover art by Seung Lee, evokes, any ecosystem, natural or political, calls for relationships between entities. In politics, the magnitude and complexity of the problems we face calls for such connections and interactions. Luckily, we see in this issue and elsewhere that people are not idle clients or consumers of professionally produced goods and services. Indeed, they are working hard, as they go about their everyday lives, to produce vital public goods. The challenge, which emerges frequently throughout the issue, is to recognize this vital public work and find ways to bring it into productive alignment with the important work of institutions.

Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts
Voluntary associations, often labeled as “private,” serve crucial public purposes.

It seems to me that the problem of achieving a good society is not to move outside of government but rather to broaden our conception of what government means. If we adopt the idea that covenants are the foundation for a self-governing society, then institutional arrangements for governance exist in many forms at many levels. By covenants, I mean the willingness of individuals to come to basic agreement about how they will achieve future tasks, to keep these agreements, and to monitor one another so that temptations to break agreements do not threaten the viability of the agreements. Hobbes did indeed argue that covenants without swords are but words on paper. The need for “swords” has been interpreted in modern times as the need for an external enforcer who is somehow motivated to be an unbiased enforcer. What our recent research has demonstrated rather clearly is that within smaller communities, individuals are willing to monitor and sanction one another to ensure that their covenants are sustained. Many of these agreements have survived wars, pestilence, floods, and major political upheavals.

One of the distorted views stemming from a presumption that “the” government should fix community problems is viewing citizens living in their own communities as helpless and incapable. A second distorted view is that only one government exists in the United States, the one located in Washington, D.C. Such views have not always prevailed. Their recent acceptance may be a source of contemporary problems rather than a solution to them.

Widespread participation in school boards, local councils, and town meetings has been a
There are several problems with this conception. Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients. Both of these are relatively passive roles. Focusing on voting as the primary way a democracy is governed limits citizens to selecting from among candidates and leaves them little else to do. Democracy can be viewed as a process—a way of life—in which citizens take responsibility for as much as possible of what happens around them. Instead, democracy is reduced to elections and electioneering. At the other end of the process, citizens are viewed as clients who receive what others provide for them. Their fate is totally in the hands of others, rather than being something over which they have some control.

Those of us who teach should understand that it is not a one-way process. Teachers do not produce education by themselves. It is teachers, students, students’ families, and students’ peers that coproduce education.

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police officers produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. But ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policymakers think about these problems. The term “client” is used more and more frequently to refer to those who

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Many factors are involved in increasing or decreasing the capacities of citizens to find productive and meaningful civic lives. But among the causes of the decline are the views of governance and of the production of public services that has come to dominance. This view can be visualized as a one-way relationship among the key participants in local governance. The presumption is that public services are produced entirely by a government agency, rather than being coproduced by those whose skills and conditions are being changed and by those who are the teachers, social workers, or government employees more generally. There are several problems with this conception. Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients. Both of these are relatively passive roles. Focusing on voting as the primary way a democracy is governed limits citizens to selecting from among candidates and leaves them little else to do. Democracy can be viewed as a process—a way of life—in which citizens take responsibility for as much as possible of what happens around them. Instead, democracy is reduced to elections and electioneering. At the other end of the process, citizens are viewed as clients who receive what others provide for them. Their fate is totally in the hands of others, rather than being something over which they have some control.

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foundational element of the American heritage. In his view of American governance during the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that local institutions are the essential foundations of a democratic society: “Town meetings are to liberty what elementary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it.” It is at such meetings that people learn the science and art of association.

Many factors are involved in increasing or decreasing the capacities of citizens to find productive and meaningful civic lives. But among the causes of the decline are the views of governance and of the production of public services that has come to dominance. This view can be visualized as a one-way relationship among the key participants in local governance. The presumption is that public services are produced entirely by a government agency, rather than being coproduced by those whose skills and conditions are being changed and by those who are the teachers, social workers, or government employees more generally. There are several problems with this conception. Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients. Both of these are relatively passive roles. Focusing on voting as the primary way a democracy is governed limits citizens to selecting from among candidates and leaves them little else to do. Democracy can be viewed as a process—a way of life—in which citizens take responsibility for as much as possible of what happens around them. Instead, democracy is reduced to elections and electioneering. At the other end of the process, citizens are viewed as clients who receive what others provide for them. Their fate is totally in the hands of others, rather than being something over which they have some control.

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Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients.

actively as coproducers of services. Unless public officials and the suppliers of services take account of the aspirations and preferences of the people they serve, they are apt to find reticent citizens who consider themselves victims of exploitation, rather than active participants in collaborative efforts to realize joint outcomes. Coproduction has a strong potential relationship to efficiency as well as local self-governance.

The relationships among the major participants in local governance are far more complex. Each group undertakes the activities but not in a top-down relationship. In a productive community, these two-way relationships enable participants to work more effectively because they are not just the recipients of commands from above. In a less effective community, participants operate strategically and play one another off against the others.

Institutions of self-governance depend upon the development of a science and the art of association to make the formal institutions of government serve the interests that citizens share with one another in human communities. Formal units of government are those nonvoluntary associations that are more permanently established by law to administer the affairs associated with identifiable territory. Their operation in a democratic society depends upon their being nested in rich configurations of voluntary activities. Voluntary associations, often labeled as “private,” serve crucial public purposes.

In many communities, institutions that might be considered private are effectively governing and managing local common-pool resources and providing sustainable infrastructures. The equation of public government and government with central structures leads to a lack of recognition of the substantial role of individual citizens in public life. The process of governance refers to a much larger universe of discourse both inside and outside of formal governmental units than to what proceeds within the walls of a particular unit. Populations that reach into the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people cannot be governed from City Hall—let alone the White House. They must govern themselves.

Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012) was Distinguished Professor and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University. She also founded, with Vincent Ostrom, Indiana University’s Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. In 2009, Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work on the governance of common-pool resources. This article was originally published in a 1993 issue of The Good Society and is reprinted here with the permission of the Pennsylvania State University Press.
Alignment of an institutional world to the social and personal worlds gives meaning to citizen agency and challenges people to see one another as fellow citizens.

I want us to get a better grip on democracy as a concept because we often set either too low or too high a standard. In some high school and college government textbooks, democracy is achieved merely by following the rules, obeying the law, and showing up to vote (when we feel strongly enough, that is). In other, more philosophical conversations, democracy is attained only when certain cognitive, deliberative, or distributive demands are met that protect decision-making forums from public ignorance, strategic bargaining, and resource inequalities. By contrast, I want to bring things down to earth: to specific places, routines, and above all, to specific people in proximity to one another sharing tasks, information, and decisions. Democracy means sharing power to shape a common public life with others who are not the same as us. This is more demanding than rule-following, obedience, and voting, but it also differs from the philosophers’ standards.

Consent, legitimacy, sovereignty, and myriad other terms used in political theory can sound legalistic and formal, as if democracy were only about laws, regulations, and voting rules. Instead of the legal, regulative, and electoral, however, I want to stress the productive as being the vital core of democracy: we share tasks that constitute us as a people—we produce education, justice, security, and more. We learn how to do this task-sharing activity well or poorly, consciously or not, in schools, workplaces, street corners, hospitals, courtrooms, and many other places. Cognition does not drive democratic work in such places; it follows it. Laws and rules help shape institutions...
that allow citizens to act, of course, but it is the action itself that makes them democratic.

Pessimism pervades contemporary thinking about democracy. In academia, some worry about “oligarchic” and “neoliberal” power while others raise alarms about “populist” and “demotic” influence. Outside the university, widespread distrust of politics and politicians is common, as is a pervasive lack of trust in each other as resources for long-term constructive social change.

I think this pessimism and distrust is deeply rooted in the nonparticipatory and professionally managed public world Americans live in. Yes, we have social movements, but many civil society groups have become top-down hierarchical organizations that mobilize support, fund-raise, and advocate narrowly for an otherwise unlinked membership population. Where once such groups tutored people in the practical communication, interpersonal, and organizational skills useful for effective civic participation, today they are managed by increasingly professionalized staff. Yes, we have politics, but in government, too, public institutions that could welcome, indeed require, citizen contributions simply do not. Courts, for example, once heard most cases through a jury trial made up of citizens acting—for a few days—as part of their government. Now, only one to four percent of state and federal criminal cases reach the trial stage, with the rest plea bargained or settled.

We might suspect, and we wouldn’t be wrong, that the organization of modern life is unfriendly to democracy. We have good reason to be anxious about concentrations of power and non-transparency in our institutions. If we know where to look, however, we will see some powerful examples of democratic innovation that could point a way out of our current situation. Collective work in unassuming, everyday places is happening all around us and inviting us in.

Collective work in unassuming, everyday places is happening all around us and inviting us in.

Innovators are working in education, journalism, criminal justice, health care, city government, and other fields today. They are democratic professionals not because they do democracy really professionally, but because they do professionalism really democratically. They are democratizing specific parts of our public world that have become professionalized: our schools, newspapers, TV stations, police
departments, courts, probation offices, prisons, hospitals, clinics, and government agencies, among others. They use their professional training, capabilities, and authority to help people—in their fields of action—to solve problems together and, even more important, to recognize the kinds of problems they need to solve.

They share previously professionalized tasks and encourage lay participation in ways that enhance and enable collective action and deliberation about major social issues inside and outside professional domains.

Professionalism, broadly understood, has important meanings and implications for individuals, groups, and society at large. To be a professional is to have a commitment to competence in a specific field of action—you pursue specialized skills and knowledge so you can act well in difficult situations. Professionals understand their work as having an important normative core: beyond simply earning a living, the work serves society somehow. Sociologists of the professions stress the ways occupations draw boundaries around certain tasks, claim special abilities to handle them, police the ways in which they are discharged, and monitor education and training. Democratic professionalism is an alternative to a conventional model of professionalism I call social trustee professionalism, yet it is also different from some other approaches critical of professional power, which I call the radical critique.

The social trustee ideal emerged in the 1860s and held prominence for a century among traditional professions such as law and medicine, as well as aspiring professions such as engineering and social work. It holds that professionals have a more general responsibility than just a fiduciary or function-specific obligation to their clients. Of course, professionals are obligated to competently perform their tasks, but they also have general responsibilities that stem from their social status, the trust clients place in them, and the market protection governments have permitted them through licensing and other regulations. As Talcott Parsons put it, “A full-fledged profession must have some institutional means of making sure... competence will be put to socially responsible uses.” For example, the medical profession heals people, but it also contributes to the larger social goals of curing disease and improving public health. And the legal profession, besides defending their clients’ rights, also upholds the social conception of justice.

Social trustee professionals may represent public interests in principle, but in fact, this
A radical critique emerged in the 1960s, drawing attention to the ways professions can be impediments to the democratic expression of public interests rather than trustworthy representatives. Though aware of the benefits of modern divisions of labor that distribute tasks to different groups of people with specialized training for the sake of efficiency, productivity, and innovation, critics such as Ivan Illich and Michel Foucault worried about task monopolies secured by professionals that block participation, shrink the space of democratic authority, and disable and immobilize citizens who might occupy that space.

Professions shrink the space of democratic authority when they perform public purposes that could conceivably be done by laypeople. Professions shrink the space of democratic authority when they perform public purposes that could conceivably be done by laypeople—as doctors aid human welfare and criminal justice administrators serve needs for social order. Critics stress that these services and products have public consequences: how they are done affects people not just as individuals but also as members of an ongoing collective. And sometimes professionals quite literally shrink the space of participation by deciding public issues in institutions, far from potential sites of citizen awareness and action. Think of how health care professionals promote certain kinds of treatment and healing over others and how criminal justice professionals construct complex anger management and life-skills programming for convicted offenders. Professionals can disable and immobilize because, in addition to taking over these tasks, their sophistication in, say, healing or sentencing, makes people less comfortable with relying on their own devices for wellness and social order. Professions are professions by virtue of their utilization of abstract, specialized, representation is very abstract. Serving “the community” is not seen by professionals as something that requires much say from diverse members of actual, present-day communities. Under the terms of the social trustee model, professionals serve the public through their commitment to high standards of practice, a normative orientation toward a sphere of social concern—doctors and health, lawyers and justice—and self-regulation. The model is held together on the basis of an economy of trust: the public trusts the professionals to self-regulate and determine standards of practice, while the professionals earn that trust by performingcompetently and adhering to the socially responsible normative orientation. Those public administrators, for example, who see themselves as social trustees assert quite straightforwardly that they are hired to manage issues for which they have specialized training—public budgeting, town planning, and the orchestration of service provision, among others. If their communities disapprove of the way they do their jobs, they can fire them, but true professionals do not need to listen to their communities.
they can also, if motivated, serve as barrier removers and enablers. Especially in complex, fast-paced modern societies, professional skills and knowledge help laypeople manage personal and collective affairs. What we need is not an anti-professionalism, but a democratic professionalism oriented toward public capability.

So, how might democratic professionals go about their work? While heeding the conventional obligation to serve social purposes, they also seek to avoid perpetuating the civic disenfranchisement noticed by radical critics of professional power. Democratic professionals relate to society in a particular way: rather than using their skills and expertise as they see fit for the good of others, they aim to understand the world of the patient, the offender, the client, the student, and the citizen on their terms—and then work collaboratively on common problems. They regard the layperson’s knowledge and agency as critical components in resolving what can all too easily be seen as strictly professional issues: education, government, health, justice, and more.

Democratic professionals in the United States and elsewhere are already creating power-sharing arrangements in institutions that are usually hierarchical and nonparticipatory. They can help us understand the resources available right now for deep cultural change. To appreciate this, however, we must release ourselves from the grip of the prevailing view of how and where democratic change happens.

Drawing on the historical precedents of abolition, women’s suffrage, labor reform, civil rights, and student movements, discussion of...
Less noticed are the alterations democratic professionals make to their institutions as they break down internal hierarchies and foster physical proximity between people, encourage coownership of problems previously seen as too complex for laypeople, and seek out opportunities for collaborative work. We fail to see these activities as politically significant because they do not fit our conventional picture of democratic change.

Democratic professionals have leverage on the social world, but it differs from that of the political actors and movement organizers we are used to. The energy involved is not a large burst, but a slow burn fueled not by a shift in public consciousness, but through load-bearing work that fosters relations of proximity within classrooms, conference rooms, and administrative offices, all of them spaces newly reopened to the public as civic spaces. This proximity in public space—getting close enough to see and understand others as fellow citizens—is taken for granted, and yet it is in astonishingly short supply. We live in a democracy, but it is very easy to go through life without ever working democratically on a public problem with others who differ from oneself in terms of race, class, or education.

They regard the layperson’s knowledge and agency as critical components in resolving what can all too easily be seen as strictly professional issues.

While our default perspective is crucial for understanding some types of democratic action, it is state-centric and privileges resources that are exogenous to daily life. In this first path to democratic change, political action appears as a burst of collective energy that then dissipates after certain legal or policy targets are met: slavery abolished, voting rights for women established, the eight-hour workday guaranteed, military conscription for Vietnam ended. A large enough number of people temporarily leave their everyday routines to join a collective effort. For this reason, some scholars call democratic movements “fugitive” since at the end of the protest or campaign, most people return home, leaving the business of government to insiders.

democratic change typically focuses on the power of people joined together in common cause to press for major legislative action. Core factors in the process include leadership; mobilization; organizational capacity; consciousness-raising; forms of protest such as strikes, marches, and sit-ins; and electoral pressure on political parties and candidates.

While our default perspective is crucial for understanding some types of democratic action, it is state-centric and privileges resources that are exogenous to daily life. In this first path to democratic change, political action appears as a burst of collective energy that then dissipates after certain legal or policy targets are met: slavery abolished, voting rights for women established, the eight-hour workday guaranteed, military conscription for Vietnam ended. A large enough number of people temporarily leave their everyday routines to join a collective effort. For this reason, some scholars call democratic movements “fugitive” since at the end of the protest or campaign, most people return home, leaving the business of government to insiders.
Bringing laypeople together to produce justice, education, public health and safety, and government—when done routinely in the normal social environment—helps backfill the erosion of contemporary public life. In part, it is accomplished by repairing our frayed participatory infrastructure: the traditional town meetings, public hearings, jury trials, and citizen oversight committees. It also requires remodeling these old forms and creating new civic spaces. Democratic professionals who share load-bearing work in schools, public health clinics, city governments, and even prisons are innovators who are expanding, not just conserving, American democracy.

Managers, officials, and mid-level professionals all too easily seal themselves off from clients, taxpayers, and patients; they serve and treat people without fully understanding them. They privilege speed, efficiency, and cost containment, and employ hierarchies and divisions of labor. These internal arrangements create distance between organizations and citizens, neglecting the democratic value of proximity. To restore it, institutions must edge closer to the public work already being done by lay citizens and community groups. To borrow concepts from Max Weber, proximity requires adjusting formal institutional rationality to accommodate, appreciate, and act upon the substantive rationality of citizens.

David Mathews aptly calls this process alignment and has shown how institutions and citizens alike gain from collaborative rather than technocratic working relations. Alignment, Mathews points out, demands more than being “accountable” or “transparent” or “professional” to citizens on terms defined by professionals, but it “doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties.” Rather, it means an organization must rethink a social trustee orientation and recognize the value of citizens’ attempts to solve problems on their own. Given the right kind of institutional culture, alignment can result in some organizational activities actually being steered by values and objectives brought in by laypeople. Alignment of an institutional world to the social and personal worlds gives meaning to citizen agency and challenges people to see one another as fellow citizens.

Institutions must edge closer to the public work already being done by lay citizens and community groups.

Albert Dzur is a professor of Political Science with a joint appointment in Philosophy at Bowling Green State University. Dzur won the Brown Democracy Medal, which honors the best work being done to advance democracy, for his 2018 book Rebuilding Public Institutions Together: Professionals and Citizens in a Participatory Democracy. Material reprinted from this work (Copyright © 2018 by Cornell University) is used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.
A History of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute: Unintentionally Creating a Movement

By John McKnight

**Our work is about revealing, connecting, and celebrating this invisible world where power is produced by citizens connected around their own vision.**

This piece is adapted from remarks John McKnight gave in January 2018 as an invited guest to a Kettering Foundation retreat. Along with Jody Kretzmann, McKnight is the founder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD). Originally housed at Northwestern University, ABCD is now located at DePaul University’s Steans Center for Community-Based Service Learning. In his remarks, McKnight reflects not on what ABCD does but on how ABCD became the kind of institution it is today.

In 1969, Northwestern University was forming an urban research center. I had graduated from that university in 1949 with a bachelor’s degree. The university invited me to cofound their new research center even though my post-graduate work had been in neighborhood organizing and civil rights activism.

On arrival, I talked to the center’s 24 academics about their research. It was very impressive, but it also offended me because their work focused exclusively on the needs, problems, and dilemmas of people in neighborhoods. They showed no recognition of the capacities, strengths, and achievements of the local people with whom I’d been associated for years. This “half empty” focus seemed unscientific to me. It would be like a physician who knew about only the lower half of the body. Therefore, I decided that it would be good if we did some research about neighborhood people and their capacities, civic achievements, problem-solving abilities, and creative inventions. In exploring
knocked on doors and asked, “Can you tell us what people who live on this block or neighborhood have done together that made things better?” We collected hundreds of their stories and analyzed them in terms of what neighbors had used when they made things better.

Our basic finding was that people drew from five neighborhood resources no matter what the story was about. We called those resources “assets,” and they were:

• The talents and capacities of the local residents
• Their voluntary clubs, groups, and associations
• Their local institutions—for profit, not-for-profit, and government
• The land and other physical assets
• The process of exchange—sharing, bartering, trading, buying, and selling

Based on this finding, we published a book called *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Neighborhood’s Assets*. The book describes what the five neighborhood assets are and shows how they can be identified and how they can be used through their connection.

After four years doing this research, we were happy to be finished with the project and to have published the book. We were ready to go on to something else. However, a change came into our lives. Very quickly there was a huge demand for the book and an overwhelming request for us to make presentations, conduct consultations, and do trainings. Because there were just two of us, we were turning down three or four groups every week. That seemed like a tremendous loss. However, we knew a lot of neighborhood practitioners who knew how

They showed no recognition of the capacities, strengths and achievements of the local people.

As we began this research effort, an incredibly creative community organizer, Jody Kretzmann, joined me. Together, we took a four-year learning journey. We visited about 20 cities and, together with some graduate assistants, we talked to more than 2,000 neighborhood people. We knocked on doors and asked, “Can you tell us what people who live on this block or neighborhood have done together that made things better?” We collected hundreds of their stories and analyzed them in terms of what neighbors had used when they made things better.

Our basic finding was that people drew from five neighborhood resources no matter what the story was about. We called those resources “assets,” and they were:

• The talents and capacities of the local residents
• Their voluntary clubs, groups, and associations
• Their local institutions—for profit, not-for-profit, and government
• The land and other physical assets
• The process of exchange—sharing, bartering, trading, buying, and selling

Based on this finding, we published a book called *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Neighborhood’s Assets*. The book describes what the five neighborhood assets are and shows how they can be identified and how they can be used through their connection.

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to work in the world of assets and the citizen base of society. We invited 24 of these people to join us at the university for several days. We shared with them the core findings of our research, and it resonated with the work they were already doing. While only two of the attendees had doctoral degrees, the group decided to call themselves the Faculty of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. Since their formation, they have been the key actors in precipitating an international ABCD movement.

As we began, the faculty shared some basic premises. First, the center of our purpose is to enhance the power of citizens to be the producers of the future. Second, we can help people see that there are local community-building assets that they may not recognize. Third, the productive use of their assets depends on the connection of the local assets that are not connected. In addition, we came to see that there was a decision-making process in many neighborhoods that was unusually fruitful and usually unrecognized. It involved local residents asking three questions in this order:

1. Once we have identified all our neighborhood assets, how can we connect them in ways that will help us achieve our goals and become more powerful?
2. Now that we know what we can achieve with our own assets, what can we also do if some outside institutional support is added?
3. Once we know what we can do with our assets and the support of outside assets, what else will we need?

Most institutions tend to start with the third question, which is identified through a “needs survey.” These “needs” are conditions that institutions claim to fix or remedy. Therefore, they are the principle producers of the outcome. In this process the citizen is at the edge of the undertaking and is actually disempowered. Citizens are empowered when they decide what is to be done, how it will be done, and who will join them in doing it. Here, we bow to the insight of the great theorist of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville.

In the context of citizen power, the response for institutions is not “Let us serve you” or “We can coproduce with you.” Rather, the response is, “How can we support you in ways that will enable you to be more powerful than you were when we started our relationship?”

So we began with these common premises. However, we had no plan. We dispersed throughout North America and manifested our common ABCD premises in the domains where we acted. In essence, ABCD happened because we did neighborhood research, summarized it in a workbook, experienced a tremendous demand for the book’s orientation, and we couldn’t meet that demand. ABCD emerged as the 24 local practitioners dispersed.

Today more than 125,000 copies of Building Communities from the Inside Out have been sold, and many have been given away. The faculty
want to manage anything, and we think of it as a method of moving away from community toward a technological society. Whenever management emerged as a possibility, we just didn’t do it. We believed it was not a part of the path we were walking.

Second, we never coded our language. We always stuck to the vernacular, which was the language of the neighborhoods where we worked. The mark of a professional is that he or she has a specialized coded language. However, people in neighborhoods know by stories while people in institutions know by studies and coded theories. Thus, our book and publications are in the vernacular, which frankly doesn’t fit well with the language of a university. However, if we had chosen to communicate in the language of the university, we would have had very little influence locally and a movement would not have emerged.

Third, we didn’t want to make any money from what we were doing because citizenship isn’t a market. It isn’t the world of money that motivates citizens to do their work. The money world is based upon scarcity and competition. The effective citizen world is based upon trust and collaboration.

At the same time, we have run into obstacles along the way—both institutional and cultural. Three institutional obstacles stand out: funders, governments, and universities. Funders usually wanted us to see things in terms of deficits and needs. They generally reward research that quantifies deficits. Governments were usually seeking to use asset-based citizen efforts for their own program purposes—not to enable or support more
powerful citizens. Universities live in a world of numbers and coded language that serves other institutions well but does not serve neighborhoods well.

There were at least three cultural obstacles as well. First is the intensive focus on leadership rather than “connectorship.” Every neighborhood story we heard was not mainly about a leader. Rather, the core was associated citizens precipitating connections that weren’t there before they acted. The second cultural obstacle is the ever-growing fear of the “other” manifested by so many people at the local, state, and national level. Collective action is difficult when everyone is a potentially dangerous stranger. The third cultural obstacle is the commodification of functions that once were performed by citizens in their communities. Today, many people believe they can buy a good life. This consumer conviction is an obstacle to understanding that we have the capacity to make a good life.

What did we learn in the last 25 years? First, we tried to analyze why ABCD spread in a movement-like form. We are unsure, but our speculation is that it happened because, without thinking about it, our work was simple, doable, and universal in its understanding of locality.

The second thing we learned is that if you think of yourself as being amid a movement, you think differently from if you think of yourself as being part of an institutional entity. Movement thinking understands that you are surrounded by hundreds or thousands of citizens who are connecting in their neighborhoods around untold visions, interests, concerns, and causes. Just because you can’t see these many citizens doesn’t mean they aren’t there. When they begin to cohere and manifest their convictions together, they become visible and we call them a movement.

The third thing we learned is that there is no substitute for face-to-face relationships if citizens are to achieve their goals in local places. A developing threat to this understanding is the idea that personal relationships between citizens can be replaced by computers. Face-to-face means that you are entering the world of the personal and intimate, which is exactly the opposite of the electronic world. Two people in contact electronically are literally out of “touch.” They can’t shake hands or feel whether you are trustworthy.

The fourth thing we learned is the most wonderful of all. There is an enormous untapped base of citizens who have incredible capacities. Citizens can be replaced by computers. Face-to-face means that you are entering the world of the personal and intimate, which is exactly the opposite of the electronic world. Two people in contact electronically are literally out of “touch.” They can’t shake hands or feel whether you are trustworthy.

There is an enormous untapped base of citizens who have incredible capacities.
is this invisible world that has been the homeland of the people in the ABCD movement. We have been a part of a process that reveals the local power of a culture of contribution. Our work is about revealing, connecting, and celebrating this invisible world where power is produced by citizens connected around their own vision.

Finally, a few words from Jody Kretzmann, my great colleague in initiating ABCD. He has recently experienced a stroke, so his words are limited and yet profound. Speaking of walking the ABCD way, he said, “How would you be so you are aware of all the possibilities? Look for capacities in unexpected places. Be surprised. Welcome everyone. Invite them in. Move slowly and quietly. Be open to what’s there, and don’t be looking for something that isn’t there. Don’t look through conceptual glasses like a scholar. Never be a boss. Toss the ball to others and assume they have the gifts to run with it. Remember that a story is a neighborhood’s way of knowing. Finally, respect everyone as being like you.”

John McKnight is a professor emeritus at Northwestern University and Cofounder of the ABCD Institute at DePaul University. Building Communities from the Inside Out, a book coauthored with Jody Kretzmann, is the basic guide to an asset-based approach to community development.
Without public things there is nothing to occasion the action in concert that is democracy’s definitive trait.

Democracy is rooted in common love for, antipathy to, and contestation of public things. Without public things, action in concert is undone and the signs and symbols of democratic life are devitalized. In the United States, the president must wear a flag pin, it seems, but the pin’s signifying power is underwritten by a national park system, public cemeteries, public education, and more. Without such public things, democracy is reduced to procedures, polling, and policing, all necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient conditions of democratic life. If we leave to democracy merely the practice of electoral majoritarianism and deliberative proceduralism while divesting democratic states or publics of their ownership of or responsibility for public things, we risk reducing democratic citizenship to repetitive (private) work (what Lauren Berlant calls “crisis ordinary”) and exceptional (public) emergencies (what we can call “crisis extraordinary”). From a public-things perspective, it is notable that one of the first things the Occupy movement did at Zuccotti Park was to establish a communal library. Without public things, we have nothing or not much to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest. There is nothing to occasion the action in concert that is democracy’s definitive trait. What Christopher Breu says about the commons is true for democracy as well: There can be “no common without the commons” or, as he also says, “no subjects without objects.”

Public things are part of the “holding environment” of democratic citizenship; they furnish the world of democratic life. They do not take
care of our needs only. They also constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship.

At the very least, public things press us into relations with others. They are sites of attachment and meaning that occasion the

Public things underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity that still survive.

inaugurations, conflicts, and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenships and democratic sovereignties.

New York’s Central Park was built in an awful swamp, but on it were lavished incredible skills, craftsmanship, design, and materials. This and, in particular, the use of Alhambra style tiles whose colors do not stop at the surface but run all the way through, stands as a great metaphor for public things whose powers run all the way through us. And this lavish care was no accident. As Joshua Cohen explains, “Olmsted had spent the 1850s working as a journalist, writing about slavery and aristocracy. He thought that the conflict between North and South in the United States was part of a global fight between democratic and aristocratic models of society. There’s an aristocratic criticism of democracy that goes all the way back to Plato, that when you try to do things for everyone you end up with lowest-common-denominator crap. Olmsted saw building Central Park as a way of proving the aristocrats wrong. It was built by a democratic society for a democratic society—for the people—and was incredibly beautiful. His bet was that people would be drawn to it.” And they have been. At their best, public things gather people together, materially and symbolically, and in relation to them diverse peoples may come to see and experience themselves—even if just momentarily—as a common in relation to a commons, a collected if not a collective, to redeploy Michael Oakeshott’s distinction.

In political theory, where collectivity is the point of departure, we can see how collectivity postulates successful acts of collection and recollection, and that such self-collection occurs in relation to objects. In political theory, we might attend, in particular, to the power of public things to stimulate the object relations of democratic collectivity. Those public things are the infrastructure of democratic life, and they underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity that, for the moment, still survive. The ubiquitous flag pins that even the American president must wear are underwritten by the public things of democracy: schools, prisons, water treatment plants, wars, transportation, and more.

In Undoing the Demos, Wendy Brown comes close to commenting on this. She notes the undoing of the demos by way of privatization and by new habits of rational calculation that, she says, have taken the place of public things and civic-mindedness. But her primary focus, notwithstanding her discussion of the demise of the public university, is on the educational goods the public university has the power to deliver and on the demos that needs to be educated, and not on the powers of the public
thing as such. She charts the loss of the idea of a people united in deliberation and action to build a collective, democratic present and future. She faults neoliberalization, as a result of which markets are everywhere, market rationality governs everything, and the basic terms of democratic life have been lost. Looking for ways out of the problem, Brown is drawn to Rousseau’s paradox of politics, in which he says that a good people and good law or institutions presuppose and require each other. In the period of founding, good law is required to found a people but good people are needed to found good law. How to break out of the impasse of the paradox? In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau imagines a miraculous lawgiver who appears on the scene for long enough to get the social contract going by convening the people, setting the agenda, and giving good law. I will suggest here that the lawgiver’s role may be played by public things.

I have argued elsewhere that Rousseau’s problem of beginning is not a one-time thing, but a quandary that besets every democracy every day, as new members immigrate and are born into it, and established members are every day reimpresse (or not) into its norms anew, with varying degrees of success. If, on Rousseau’s account, we need a miracle (Rousseau’s lawgiver) to get started, then we need one every day, on mine. For Brown, though, we are further

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Talk of public things calls to mind which of the demos’s bodies are policed in public venues and which are assumed to belong there.

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and further removed from such miracles now. Rousseau’s paradox reasserts itself ever more powerfully under neoliberalism because of the evisceration of the public university system, whose mission of civic education is undone not only by underfunding, which requires ever more fund-raising from private sources (which drives the university’s research and priorities according to values that may be dear to the donor but are often alien to the institution and far from any true democratic needs), but also by neoliberalism’s cultivated hostility to anything that is not clearly instrumental, profitable, and practical from the perspective of late capitalism. Without the public university’s commitments to liberal arts education, we are thrust back into the insoluble paradox, albeit now with no miracle in sight. Says Brown, “Hence, another variation on Rousseau’s paradox: to preserve the kind of education that nourishes democratic culture and enables democratic
particular statement of it contains one of her explicit references to public things as such: When there is only *homo oeconomicus*, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good. Here, the problem is not just that public goods are defunded and common ends are devalued by neoliberal reason although this is so, but that citizenship itself loses its political valence and venue [sphereism again; italics in the original]. Valence: *homo oeconomicus* approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way. Venue: Political life, and the state in particular, . . . are remade by neoliberal rationality [and] . . . the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty [is eliminated].

Is Brown’s case so compelling because it is so obviously true? Perhaps better, we can say that her powerful writing makes what is true about it into something that suddenly seems inescapably obvious. We have seen public universities trade in faculty governance and accountability for private donors, market incentives, and industry benchmarks. We have seen those who once appreciated an institution’s uniqueness turn, instead, to talk about its “branding.” We have witnessed the craze for “massive open online courses” (MOOCs) as the next big thing, and the sight of universities as unabashed chasers of the next big thing, and we have heard the silence that followed the apparent collapse or normalization of the craze that was originally touted as foretelling the transformation of education.

All of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object.

are, Brown laments, limited to mere “reform and resistance,” both of which, she thinks, do little or nothing to remediate the bleak conditions under which democracy labors fitfully to survive today, a labor that, Brown intimates, has already been rendered nugatory.

Brown’s analysis of the wholesale conquest of democratic life by neoliberal reason and, more importantly, of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*, is compelling and stark. This rule, we require the knowledge that only a liberal arts education can provide. Thus, democracy hollowed out by neoliberal rationality cannot be counted on to renew liberal arts education for a democratic citizenry.” Without the vision and aspirations nurtured by such education, we
into service delivery. Thus, when Toni Morrison charts the transition in her political lifetime from US subjects being addressed as “citizens” to being addressed as “taxpayers,” most of her readers will experience the jolt of recognition that underwrites Brown’s theoretical arguments. But the power of the case may also be its limitation. The overtaking of the contemporary mind by neoliberal rationality is so powerful in Brown’s account that it is difficult to understand where resistance could come from and how a politics of alternative movements could take hold. That is precisely the problem Brown wants to chart. With her jeremiad, she seeks to awaken a public to the problem, but she risks becoming its captive. She mentions, in passing, some alternative movements and intimations of possible alternative politics, and this suggests that other things may also be afoot, but she does not give them any real weight, and it is hard to imagine them getting a grip on, much less interrupting, the incredible powers of the new episteme charted by her. These alternative political movements are always there, but Brown says that they only surface episodically. When they do surface, they politicize what neoliberalism naturalizes or economizes and they do so, often, by way of objects. Inequality was politicized by Occupy, which began with the occupation of a hybrid public/private space, an act quickly followed by the installation of a public library.

In a way, focusing on the objects rather than the subjects of democracy might help to highlight anew the inequalities of race and the operations of white supremacy in the US context. Talk of the demos or the people distinguishes who is in and who is out, but it often obscures unequal memberships. Talk of public things, however, immediately calls to mind which of the demos’s bodies are policed in public venues and which are assumed to belong there. American streets are open to free use by some citizens, but when frequented by others those same streets quickly turn into sites of surveillance or control. Hoodies in malls, homeless people in parks, ethnic minorities in the “wrong” neighborhoods, Muslims going to the mosque, black protesters sitting at whites-only lunch counters, black teenage girls swimming in a communal pool, dragged out because they are “too loud,” then tackled by grown men in police uniforms, dead bodies left lying in the road. These incidents, familiar from decades of headlines and history, remind us how public things are asymmetrically policed, restricted, and controlled these days without the brazenness of “Whites Only” signs but often no less volubly or effectively. Everyone knows. That is why those excluded or marginalized, and their
allies, demand access to public things—because that access looks like citizenship; and it is. But all too often, as soon as access is won, the value of the public thing or, more accurately, its desirability among whites, goes down. This is a reason to struggle more mightily for public things, not a reason to give up on them. It is a reason to invest our best in them, as was done with New York’s Central Park, something everyone wants to be part of. Democratic sovereignty is an effect, I want to say; public things are its condition, necessary if not sufficient. They are the basis of democratic flourishing, prods to action in concert.

It may be that we depend on public things and they depend on us. And this may mean that Rousseau’s paradox, or something like it, is inescapable and irresolvable. But this does not mean we are necessarily defeated by it; there are ways for democratic activists to work within the paradox, to be energized by it. Brown also imagines the call that inaugurates action as a kind of speech act. But the call may come from the object world as well.

Take, for example, public telephones. After Hurricane Sandy, pay phones, normally treated as part of New York City’s ruined landscape, emerged suddenly to become communications lifesavers, relics with an afterlife. As Ben Cohen noted in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Natural disasters tend to vindicate the pay phone,” which is “mounted high and sometimes behind glass stalls [and so] generally remains serviceable during power outages, even amid flooding.” Cohen goes on in his article to focus on the only problem would-be users of public telephones faced after Sandy (coin overload), missing the irony of a situation in which the immediate problem is seen as being too much money (coin overload) rather than too little (too little money provided to maintain public things). As a result, the real story—the democratic story of public things—is only intimated but left untold. The real importance of so-called pay phones is that they are, as indeed they were once called, public phones, situated on the streets and available to everyone.

Dealing with the effects of flooding, a blackout, and downed cell towers, stormstruck residents of New York City eager to get in touch with friends and loved ones rediscovered the public telephones they had been blithely passing by for years. Said one new user of the old technology quoted by Cohen, “It’s funny what’s hiding in plain sight. . . . It’s invisible, but when you need it, it’s there.” Was she just talking about the phones? What is funny, invisible, but hiding in plain sight is the very idea of public things, things that conjoin people. Shared among users from all kinds of backgrounds, classes, and social locations, the public thing calls out to us, interpelling us as a public. It is all too funny that, in this particular case, the public thing that is calling out to people is in fact a telephone. Will we answer its ring? Many did so, in the aftermath of Sandy, coming together to share the phones, taking messages for strangers, offering change. But with the passing of the emergency,
the sound of the public phone became less audible.

We might see the quaintness of the old-fashioned phones as a synecdoche for the quaintness, in our mostly neoliberal context, of publicness itself. I imagine that is how it would look to Brown, and it does so to me, too, a lot of the time. But the public phone harbors another possibility as well. We could say that the emergency of the storm brought out a kind of craving for the public thing, the thing that hides in plain sight, but when you need it, it’s there. This is different from the mass consumerist need to all be in love with the same private object—the newest iPhone, say—and to have one, of which there are millions. When people own objects privately, they experience the objects’ personal and perhaps fetishistic magic (otherwise, why would we bother owning anything?) but privately owned objects lack the political magic that is my focus in these lectures. That is why Arendt says about

The emergency of the storm brought out a craving for the public thing that hides in plain sight.

such things that “This enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public . . . for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant.” Thus, it is not exactly that objects lose their thingness in neoliberalism (they may or may not); the concern here is that they lose their political thingness. That political thingness is as precious and necessary for the body politic as is the personal magic of the transitional object for the individual in Winnicott’s object-relations theory. It is not that the object exerts a personal magic on all of us in common, but that all of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object. We may think this happens in relation to objects like the iPhone, and it may; we cannot rule that out. But the consumer need for such commodities—the fetish—is more like the ruin, the remnant, of the democratic desire to constellate affectively around shared objects, public things. The ruin testifies to a not quite lost past; might it also bode a possible future?

Sometimes the ruin speaks. The desire for a democracy of public things has been in recent decades rechanneled into commercial formats, but it is not extinguished. The signs are there:
The desire remains. The aspiration is alive, but they require redirection and sustenance.

In the aftermath of Sandy, there were demands for better cell phone towers to secure coverage in emergencies. But no one called for better support for the public telephones that served the public so ably this time. Why not? This response (the response of Brown’s *homo oeconomicus*, undoubtedly) is rather like the decision to build more roads for cars a century ago, in place of investing in public transportation. But the ruin calls for a different response. Why not commit instead to preserve the pay phones in appreciation of the fact that the ones in New York City, that most palimpsest-like of all cities, seem miraculously to work? But not only miraculously, or at least not miraculously in the usual sense: Someone has been tending to them, maintaining the critical communications infrastructure of the city undeterred by the fact that most city residents have withdrawn from it, preferring their own private communications devices, until they fail. Why not turn pay phones from relics of a lost past into the stable new infrastructure of a possible new future of public things? True, in such a scenario public phones may become mere emergency phones, which would be ironic since “emergency” has fast become the only public thing left to us.

On the other hand, though, as long as we have a public thing, the space is arguably open for the return of other public things. In the ruins of public things, the return of other public things remains imaginable and realizable. Almost.

Public phones hide in plain sight, but when we need them, they are there. We just need to answer their call.

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Networks make all communication possible today; they structure and shape it.

Curious about what the communications scholar Lewis Friedland would have to say about social networks in politics today, Kettering Review coeditor Noëlle McAfee conducted an interview with Professor Friedland, reflecting on the evolution of his network theory over the past twenty years.

Noëlle McAfee: You are known for your work on communication networks. Could you say a bit about what you mean by networks, especially in the context of everyday politics?

Lewis Friedland: To begin with, we need to define what a network means. Fortunately, today almost everyone understands that a network is a collection of nodes, which can be anything (actors, organizations, events) and the connections among them, which are edges or, more colloquially, the lines we see in the now ubiquitous tinker-toy diagrams. So far, pretty simple. But to add our first layer of complication, many of our commonsense, everyday entities can also be analyzed as networks: our families, work and peer groups, religious and community organizations, neighborhoods, cities, and so on. For those of us who work on civic and public life, all of these are potentially relevant. We might think of the pattern of interconnections among these different elements as the infrastructure of civic life, the pattern of potential connections through which all possible communications flow. In the context of everyday politics, the kinds of connections a group or neighborhood has make a huge difference in whether they have civic capacity (sometimes under the rubric of social capital), what kind, and how much.
In my own work, I make a three-part distinction: “Community” is the substrate of all of those relationships that are relevant to a given domain or problem. Usually this is a geographic area but, of course, increasingly, our relationships are online (although, for most people, most of the time, online relationships are partly extensions of geographic relationships, past or present). So all of our potential relationships (more formally the set of all of them) are contained within this framework of communities. Within those, there are civic relationships, or networks, which are actual or potential. By civic networks, I mean those through which we connect to others in order to accomplish something through association. There is a lot to say about this on the normative side, of course—Are all relationships of association properly civic? What are the ideal civic relationships in a democratic society? But for now, let’s just say that civic relations are a subset of community relations. We can engage civically only with others with whom we can potentially connect. Finally, we come to what you’ve referred to as everyday politics. There are many dimensions of everyday politics. Some focus on deliberation, and this activity grows directly out of our civic networks, others on power, which crosscuts community and civic life. But networks are relevant to any form of politics, deliberative or conflictual, because they are the paths through which we form goals and interests with others.

By civic networks, I mean those through which we connect to others in order to accomplish something.

experience the boundaries of groups, and, not least, define ourselves as members of different communities, which may or may not have common interests or resources.

**NM:** What’s your ideal for how communicative networks should function? I mean this very broadly. Some theorists might think they should transmit individual preferences so that political systems can aggregate them. Others might think that they should allow for interest groups to get their voices heard. What do you think they should do?

**LF:** That’s a good and a hard question today. My ideal of how communication networks should work in a democratic society is very close to Dewey’s idea of a great community bound by communication, filtered through Habermas’s more formal analysis of communicative action. Communication networks in a democracy should provide a means for smaller publics to form and find common interests,
define their differences with others, and, in some broad sense, work them out. If you read *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey clearly had this hope for the then-emerging medium of radio. Of course, it didn’t turn out that way, as radio evolved into television and then the mass communication system we have today, which is, essentially, an aggregation of publics whose tastes have been shaped by mass consumption.

**NM:** I’m glad you brought up Dewey who, as I understand him, believes communication is crucial for people to begin to fathom the problems that beset them, identify the sources of those problems, and come together as a public to address these problems. Since Dewey, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas continues this kind of project, right?

**LF:** Yes. In fact, when I invoke communicative action, what I mean is that Habermas outlines the formal conditions through which publics can sustain an argument, query each other, and reach a consensus. In his *Between Facts and Norms* and elsewhere, he draws on Bernd Peters’ model of “sluices,” which allow aggregated public opinion to flow upward. When the internet was in its infancy in the 1990s, many people (myself included) believed that it might serve as precisely this kind of medium, allowing for greater horizontal dialogue among many different types of groups and interests, which then would be aggregated “upward” through representative democracy, filtered again through the medium of congressional debate, and then turned into law and policy. I and others did caution that a certain degree of “blue-sky” rhetoric always accompanied new communications technologies, starting with (at least) the telegraph, but that was more of a note. Of course, it didn’t turn out that way. The internet, or more precisely, social media-driven communication platforms that most people now use most of the time to communicate with others have funneled us into ever narrower communities of like others, which, in turn, become easily manipulable by strategic political actors and even hostile foreign powers.

That said, I have understood (as does Habermas) that public opinion always has the possibility for both strategic and manipulated communication. To think realistically about how communicative networks ideally work, we need to also understand how they can and are distorted, whether unintentionally, through real

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**Facts and Norms** and elsewhere, he draws on Bernd Peters’ model of “sluices,” which allow aggregated public opinion to flow upward. When the internet was in its infancy in the 1990s, many people (myself included) believed that it might serve as precisely this kind of medium, allowing for greater horizontal dialogue among many different types of groups and interests, which then would be aggregated “upward” through representative democracy, filtered again through the medium of congressional debate, and then turned into law and policy. I and others did caution that a certain degree of “blue-sky” rhetoric always accompanied new communications technologies, starting with (at least) the telegraph, but that was more of a note. Of course, it didn’t turn out that way. The internet, or more precisely, social media-driven communication platforms that most people now use most of the time to communicate with others have funneled us into ever narrower communities of like others, which, in turn, become easily manipulable by strategic political actors and even hostile foreign powers.

That said, I have understood (as does Habermas) that public opinion always has the possibility for both strategic and manipulated communication. To think realistically about how communicative networks ideally work, we need to also understand how they can and are distorted, whether unintentionally, through
misunderstanding, or intentionally through deception, lying, propaganda, or what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt has analyzed as “bullshit,” which is when actors no longer even pretend to address the truth. Arguably, that is the dominant characteristic of the current regime of public opinion in the US, and it is a precursor to authoritarianism. All of this means that simply specifying ideal relationships is not, in my view, very useful. Understanding the full range of possible distortions is more important today than ever.

NM: Are such distortions in tension with a network model, especially when there are very different kind of entities—from neighborhood associations to bureaucratic agencies—with different motivations and imperatives? It seems like more often than not these entities are at loggerheads, not in network.

We might think of the pattern of interconnections as the infrastructure of civic life.

LF: Well, first of all, being at loggerheads and networked relations are by no means opposites. Networks make all communication possible today; they structure and shape it. So even conflict (maybe especially conflict) is networked. As early as 1995, I wrote about the possibilities of networked civil society, mostly positively, assuming that if networks were the growing medium of communication, they would also, by definition, be the primary medium of association, and, by extension, associated action. And I think this was and still is true. It’s just that the Deweyan and even Tocquevillian strains of networked association—the ability to collaborate and do what Harry Boyte has called public work—are not the only, or even dominant ones. To address your question about neighborhood associations, my friend and colleague Sandra Ball-Rokeach and her students have done marvelous work exploring how community networks of communication in very diverse communities use different forms of networks and different media of communication to come together in broader neighborhoods and communities to accomplish common aims. And of course, the term bureaucracy itself has an older ring about it in an era of “flat,” i.e., networked organization. But in the end, networks are still just the patterns through which humans are connected to accomplish certain ends. Some are associative and public. Some are administrative, strategic, and bureaucratic. And some are simply nefarious.

NM: I know you’ve done a lot of research on the ground. I’m wondering if you have any examples to share of community networks that function well
shifted focus to issues of racial justice. So, there are many examples of unified civic problem solving across various lines in the US. James and Deborah Fallows take an in-depth look at community and civic problem solving in almost 30 US communities in their recent book *Our Towns*. The problems that many of these cities faced were similar—a lack of good jobs, young people leaving, decaying infrastructure, downtowns drying up, health-care access and the opioid crisis—and many of them have found strong, enduring ways to work across political and other divides, like class and race, to find solutions.

But, and I want to stress this, when we think about networks, or problem solving, the larger context matters enormously. Civic problem solving in a US that is facing global competition and critical global warming, increased immigration and rapid demographic change, continuing racial conflict, health-care crises, and, not least, extreme political contention is politically and those that don’t. Are there things that citizens and organizations can do to make networks function better politically—I mean to address common problems?

LF: If we were discussing this several years ago, I would have had a different answer to this question. When communities were facing the problems that were typical of the post-WW II period, problems with the decline of social capital that Putnam famously analyzed, or problems of deindustrialization—but not under our current conditions of extreme polarization—then mobilizing civic and community networks was a plausible solution to a broad range of issues. And this is still true. My longtime collaborator Carmen Sirianni in his forthcoming book *Sustainable Cities in American Democracy* shows that civic problem solving is alive and well on the environment and climate change in places like Seattle, where publicly supported community gardens have long brought different parts of the community together, or Portland with its strong bicycling associations. Of course, these are medium-large, progressive cities with deep traditions of active neighborhood and civic engagement. Chicago took the lead on the first climate action plan in 2006-08, but of course, much civic activism in that city has
just not the same as it was even 10, much less 20 or 30 years ago. And those of us who work in this area have to have a deeper sense of historical context. This is one point I want to make about networks and communication. Networks are pathways of connection, but also disconnection, and these are shaped by these larger political, economic, and social patterns. There is nothing special about networks per se, nor about communication.

**NM:** Have you noticed ways in which various entities, especially those with different motivations, can best align to produce better functioning politics?

**LF:** I have been doing research (with an extraordinary group of colleagues) on Wisconsin’s political communication ecology, contention, and democracy for more than six years. Wisconsin was ground zero for the mobilization of anger and resentment in 2010-11 that exploded nationally in 2016. So, we have had a laboratory to observe what happens to civic life when there is a crisis in civil society and how this is then extended to public life and legitimacy more generally. In *It’s Worse Than It Looks*, Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann, longtime non-partisan observers of Washington, concluded that political polarization is asymmetric. We’ve observed something similar in Wisconsin, where the Republican Party, starting with the election of Gov. Scott Walker in 2010, sowed anger and division in the state and accelerating with Act 10, which decertified public workers’ unions, on through to measures making it more difficult for many groups, particularly minorities, to vote. The ability to create a better functioning politics is not independent of the party system or how it operates. Many of us, and I include myself, have focused for many years on civil society as if it were partly (or even wholly) independent of politics and parties. I think this was a mistake not simply of omission, but one that required an active and abstract separation of politics and civil society. That’s completely untenable now. Bringing about a better functioning politics will require, in my view, a more realistic and grounded understanding of how conflict is actively generated in our political system, not just as a by-product of disagreement, but with the active, strategic intention of groups and parties. Those of us hoping to reconstruct or repair civil society, in Jeffrey Alexander’s term, need to more deeply examine the forces that are actively and intentionally tearing it apart.

Networks are pathways of connection, but also disconnection, shaped by larger political, economic, and social patterns.
To really be effective in strengthening democracy from the grass roots up, institutions have to behave themselves in ways that promote the kind of democracy they advocate.

My job every year is to write a piece for Kettering’s three annual periodicals: Connections, Kettering Review, and Higher Education Exchange. Each piece is about a specific area of the foundation’s research on democracy. This year, the focus is on nongovernmental institutions, which include foundations, civic organizations, and universities. The question behind this research is, What role should these institutions be playing in our democracy?

We are looking specifically at problems of democracy that are found in the relationship between the large, professionally run, hierarchical institutions, which we have called “Squares,” and the smaller, often ad hoc civic associations that inhabit what we have described as the “wetlands” of the democratic ecosystem. We have called these organic associations of citizens “Blobs” because they are often loosely organized. There are significant difficulties in the relationship between the Blobs and Squares, even when they try to work together, and these difficulties weaken democracy.

One of the problems is that the large, professionally staffed institutions may not recognize the importance of the smaller associations of citizens, or Blobs, as the cellular building blocks of democratic life. Because some may only involve a handful of citizens and have none of the structure of a Square, they may seem insignificant. Another more serious difficulty is that even when the Blobs are recognized as valuable, Squares may dominate or colonize them in their efforts to help them—although they do so quite unintentionally. That “colonization” can
turn the Blobs into little Squares, which robs them of their civic legitimacy and effectiveness. Even though the Blobs are essential to democracy working as it should, Kettering has not been able to find any Squares that are fully able to prevent this colonization. The heart of

Blobs are responsive to the intangibles that people hold dear, such as the feelings of security that come from having personal control over their future.

the problem, as I will try to explain, is that what the culture of the Squares considers valuable is nearly the opposite of what the culture of the Blobs prizes. And the culture of the Squares dominates the relationship between the two, leading to colonization.

All three of this year’s publications address this problem. In Connections, you will read about institutions that are experimenting with what it would mean to align their work with the work of Blobs. In the Kettering Review, you will find some thoughtful scholars exploring this problem, identifying both challenges and opportunities. And in the Higher Education Exchange you will hear from those in academe who have been wrestling with this problem in their own work.

Kettering discovered this problem when asked by some grantmaking foundations why their funding in certain communities was often ineffective in solving problems. The grantmakers knew that grassroots associations of citizens could be effective in combating community pathologies like drug abuse and crime. And the grantmakers wanted to help them, but something was going wrong. That was when Kettering discovered the colonization of the Blobs, which undermines their authenticity and legitimacy.

Edgar Cahn drew on our research in his book No More Throw-Away People. He then turned the foundation’s findings on the Blobs and Squares mismatch into a clever animation, The Parable of the Blobs and Squares. Cahn noted that the Blobs have the energy and networks that can be useful in combating many community problems. Squares, on the other hand, know how to manage money and organize institutional action. They have equipment and professional expertise. The problem, as Cahn explained, is that “no matter how much the Squares promised to reach out in the community and get at the root causes of the problems, the Squares never got there.” They couldn’t “mobilize the energy of the community.”

The Squares try to meet this challenge by giving money to the Blobs. Naturally, this has
meant that the Blobs have had to show financial accountability. Many Squares have also insisted on measurable results. “Grassroots groups,” Cahn wrote, “were taught to develop mission statements and strategic plans in order to remain ‘true’ to mission. Neighborhood leaders were trained in how to be board members, how to conduct ‘proper’ meetings, [and] how to write and amend by-laws.” The sad result was that the Blobs lost the very qualities that made them effective at the grass roots.

Blobs play an essential role in democratic life in a number of ways. They convert energy, even cynicism, into constructive action. They connect and engage people. They also promote values that are essential to a democratic culture, norms like cooperation and respect. Blobs are self-generating because human beings are social creatures. People are continuously building ties to one another and forming all kinds of Blobs, from neighborhood associations to street gangs. We ignore their importance—good or bad—at our peril.

The relevance of the problem of the relationship of Blobs to Squares today was impressed on us by one of our international residents, Tendai Murisa from Zimbabwe. Tendai is attempting to create a civic organization in his country that will strengthen democracy from the grass roots up. He is trying to create a Square that is Blob friendly. Despite criticism that his understanding of democracy is impossibly utopian, Tendai knows that there are many Blob-like associations in Africa to work with. He has in mind citizen groups that aren’t registered officially yet already exist. They pool financial savings for economic development, form bereavement societies, protect the environment, and enhance village security. He wants to create an institution that will listen to and learn from what these Blobs are doing. At Kettering, Tendai is asking, How can both established NGOs as well as newly created ones be more supportive of Blobs without colonizing them?

What Tendai is asking resonates with similar questions we have heard from many other Squares. These days, major nongovernmental institutions—from academic ones to those in philanthropy—believe that democracy is in trouble and that they need to do more to be of assistance. But they aren’t sure what they should do or how. Part of the difficulty is that they are all Squares and, as should be expected, they have Square-ish norms and cultures. This makes relating to the Blobs a challenge. The way Squares work is very different from the way the Blobs do democratic work. It is as though the two are gears on the same machine that don’t mesh.
The solution for how to mesh the gears is elusive because the obvious answers don’t work. It can’t be for the Squares to become more “Blob-ish” because their cultural norms are appropriate for what they do. And it certainly isn’t for the Blobs to become more “Square-ish.” The culture of Squares properly values things such as efficiency, good management, and professional expertise. However, the culture of the Blobs has different values, which leads to different ways of working. Blobs are responsive to the intangibles that people hold dear, such as the feelings of security that come from having personal control over their future. They identify problems in terms that reflect what is deeply important to people, not in terms that professionals use. Blobs do their work mostly by connecting small groups of people rather than by building organizations. They foster collective decision-making that spurs myriad complementary actions.

"Figuring out" means learning together, which involves more than copying or imitating.

As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel Prize-winning research, despite their differences, the Squares need the Blobs because even the largest and most powerful institutions — hospitals, school systems, governments, and NGOs — can’t do their jobs as efficiently as they need to without reinforcement from what citizens contribute through the work they do in Blobs. The example I often use is in healthcare. Hospitals can care for you. But only people can care about you. Blobs organize this caring and make it available in many ways to those who are ill.

Kettering’s first and perhaps natural impulse was to respond to questions like Tendai’s by reviewing what our foundation, which is Square-ish, has done to relate to Blobs. We went through boxes of files to recover our history. Yet as soon as we started down this path, we stopped suddenly in our tracks. We stopped when we realized that Kettering would appear as a model to copy with best practices to emulate. Whatever we did, our experience (that is, our mistakes) taught us not to do that. Our reaction has to do with the importance of learning in a democracy. Following a model or copying best practices can be imitative, and that can inhibit learning. Coming to Kettering, Tendai was intrigued by the idea of not following a foreign model or copying best practices but finding his own answers. He was open to looking at the way democracy benefits from and grows through collective learning.

Democracies depend on collective learning because they do not accept any authority about what should be done except for that of the citizenry itself, “We the People.” This understanding of the citizenry as the ultimate authority in a democracy is evident in the roots of the word. The *demos* is the citizenry or a collective body, as in a village. And *cracy* is from *kratos*, which is supreme power, the kind Zeus has. This means that when there are problems, citizens have to “figure out” what to do themselves through...
collective decision-making in civic groups or representative assemblies. “Figuring out” means learning together, which involves more than copying or imitating.

On problems such as making the relationship between the Blobs and Squares mutually beneficial, answers have to come from collective learning, and that requires experimentation to see what might work. Finding ways to deal with the Blobs-Squares mismatch is going to take a lot of experimenting along with the ability to fail successfully; that is, the ability to learn from inevitable setbacks and failures.

What might these experiments look like? When gears don’t mesh, they have to be realigned. There need to be experiments to better align the work of each so they won’t clash as much and might even become mutually supportive. After all, there are things that Blobs can do that Squares can’t. And vice versa.

As I mentioned before, the ways Squares work are not the same as the ways Blobs work—and for good reason. Yet, whether done by Blobs or Squares, most every kind of work involves carrying out certain tasks—identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating or learning from what happens. Nothing exceptional about that. However, understanding the differences between the ways Blobs and Squares carry out these tasks is a necessary step toward realignment.

These are some of the differences. Citizens don’t usually identify problems in the expert terms often used by the institutions we have called Squares. As I discussed, people name problems in terms of the things that humans hold dear—their family’s safety, their freedom to act, the amount of control they will have. The options for actions to solve problems that citizens consider go beyond the things that can be done by institutions, such as the actions that families and civic associations can take. People make decisions about which options are best but not usually by methods institutions use, such as cost-benefit analysis. In the best cases, people decide by using the kind of deliberation that exercises the human faculty for judgment. The resources citizens draw on to act, such as personal talents and collective experiences, are different from institutional resources. Citizens also organize their work less bureaucratically than institutions do. And they evaluate results differently, using the things they hold valuable as standards rather than just quantitative measures.

Despite these differences, realigning ways of working to reinforce one another seems possible. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on
If realigning ways of working is possible, despite requiring considerable experimentation, Tendai’s question boils down to one of how to develop cultures in Squares that will support experimentation with Blobs. Tendai found an institutional cultural impasse in some of his early efforts to create an environment in which people could learn from their own experiences and those of others rather than following an approved development model. And he is certainly not alone.

Democracy has many different meanings and, as an institution experiments with its role, the meaning may, and probably should, evolve and grow richer. This growth is learning. The evolving understanding of democracy makes settling on predetermined results difficult.

To complicate matters even more, it makes a difference whether institutions have in mind problems in or within a democratic country, which range from poverty to crime, or problems of a democracy, which prevent democracy from functioning because they are systemic. For example, citizens being unable to exercise power and make a difference in the political realm is a basic, fundamental problem of democracy. (That, by the way, is what many people say today: they can’t make a significant difference.)

I am not suggesting that experiments by Squares in realignment be controlled by a rigid definition of democracy, but rather that returning time and time again to the question of what democracy is and what it requires is essential to experiments in realignment. An understanding of democracy, even an evolving one, gives consistence and coherence to the experiments; they can fit together and build on one another. And what the Squares learn from an extra load of new duties. Either would be extremely difficult. Instead, realignment asks only that the professionals in institutions do what they usually do a bit differently, so their work reinforces what citizens working together in Blobs do.

Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn’t require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties.

It wouldn’t be too difficult for Squares to take into consideration the names people use when they describe how problems affect what they consider valuable, and it shouldn’t be hard to consider what citizens could do as actors. Neither would it seem impossible for Squares to take note of the way people go about making up their minds as they deliberate on controversial issues. Recognizing the resources Blobs use when they act—people’s experiences and talents, their ability to form associations—isn’t a big stretch. Respecting ways of organizing that aren’t centralized and bureaucratic? Why not? How about evaluating results using the things people hold dear as the standard? Why not do that along with quantitative measures? There are all kinds of opportunities for Blobs and Squares to mesh what they do.
the experiments should expand and enrich their understanding of democracy.

One of the most important changes in the concept of democracy may have to do with the role of citizens. Squares are “built” to see citizens more as clients, people to be served, or consumers of services. Blobs, on the other hand, are “built” to see citizens as producers because they usually do most of the work. A crucial issue in realignment is for Squares to find ways to treat citizens as producers in their own right and not just as the beneficiaries of the many things they provide. In the case of institutions of education, for example, the benefits include public service, publicly relevant research, and community engagement. These services are all commendable, yet they tend to treat citizens as objects of the good work of others rather than actors doing their own work. What would it mean for colleges and universities or other Squares to relate to citizens as producers? The answers aren’t clear. Finding them will take a lot of experimenting.

Such experiments could change the Squares themselves in constructive ways and not just in how they relate to the Blobs. A similar cycle can begin by institutions asking themselves whether the way they are going about their work is consistent with the way they are coming to understand democracy. To really be effective in strengthening democracy from the grass roots up, institutions have to behave themselves in ways that promote the kind of democracy they advocate. This process of reflecting and adjusting ways of acting is a process of constant learning, which is consistent with the way a democracy makes positive changes. It is also one way to change institutional cultures.

Despite the obstacles, building and perpetuating institutional cultures that support democratic experimentation is crucial.

As I have acknowledged, the dominant culture in a Square admirably suits what Squares do: produce, solve problems, provide services. The usual expectations of Squares aren’t unreasonable. There are good reasons to have goals, timetables, and definite outcomes. Squares also speak admiringly of being innovative, taking reasonable risk, and “thinking outside the box.” So, what I have just stated could be written off as reformulations of what Squares already do. But that would minimize the real obstacles to realigning with Blobs.
Blob-ishness can be, and often is, very off-putting to Squares. Blobs have purposes but not necessarily detailed plans and measurable goals. A bottom line or tangible outcome may be elusive. There may be no goal line to mark completion of an initiative or even to mark progress. What appears to be an endless journey can be maddening to Squares.

Even experimenting and learning from it can be troubling for Squares. In some institutions, experimenting may be impossible because their professionals don’t have permission to fail, as one school superintendent sadly told us. Furthermore, experiments dealing with the systemic problems of democracy don’t suddenly, or perhaps ever, yield to instant breakthroughs. It is necessary to play the long game. Dealing with such inevitabilities requires patience, tolerance for ambiguity, and acceptance of unresolvable tensions. Few of these may be valued norms in Square-ish cultures.

We are hoping to find others who share a concern about the Blobs-Squares mismatch. Because Kettering’s research is done with not on others, our first priority is always to find allies. Writing this piece for our publications is one way we hope to find them.

One thing does seem clear, looking ahead. Despite the obstacles, building and perpetuating institutional cultures that support democratic experimentation is crucial, particularly at a time when democracies and hope-to-be democracies around the world are facing more systemic problems than they have since World War II. Tendai’s question couldn’t be more on target, the challenge of the Blobs and Squares couldn’t be more relevant, and a culture that fosters experimentation and learning couldn’t be more valuable.

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