A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
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**Cover art:** R.B. Kitaj, *If Not, Not*, 1975-76. Oil and black chalk on canvas, 152.4x152 cms. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, UK, (© Estate of R.B. Kitaj. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York.)
Editor’s Letter

We at the Review are always proud of our covers—and deeply grateful to the distinguished artists, galleries, agents, and collectors who honor us with the privilege of reproducing their work. Not that they are related to the contents of our magazine, which invariably explore the politics of a public, facing collectively its problems: no summary scrutiny, symbolism, allegory, or judgment is ever to be inferred from or read into those works of art as though they might relate to the subsequent pages of the issue. The cover provides, let us say, just a moment for an utterly different way of understanding or capturing our human condition. The art is, simply, itself.

All of which notwithstanding … we do remember that the American artist, R.B. Kitaj (who grew up in Ohio, though he developed his art in Britain) did say, in reference to his painting, If Not, Not, reproduced on our cover, that when he had once expressed his admiration for T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land,” Eliot had said to him that it was “only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life.” Thus, Kitaj wrote, “So it is with my picture.”

Neither artist, of course, had offered either seriously as a statement of his subject or intention; but Kitaj’s comment stayed with us because, in a sense, every essay in this Review—and the issue as a whole—presents to us, as it were, a “grouse.” Or more reasonably put—for ours are reasonable writers indeed—an articulation of what appear to be profound and well-documented ways in which our U.S. democracy today falls short of, or is seriously impedimental to, the ideal practice of the popular, self-governing democracy that we expect to exemplify.

To insist that our authors are “griping” would be as unfair and mischievous as was Eliot’s characterization of his early-20th-century experience of “The Waste Land.” For they merely face, boldly and frankly, what appear to be disappointments, changes for the worse, in our civic life. Derek Barker, for example, a program officer at the Kettering Foundation (and whose essay here is scheduled for publication shortly in an extended form), is concerned that the extraordinary range of nongovernmental organizations (familiarly referred to as “NGOs”)—associations and institutions, schools and colleges, charities and philanthropic organizations, trade unions, and local and national groups of citizens with recognizable professions, interests, and skills—these all have ceased effectively to be the means by which citizens share among themselves, and with their government, the concerns that affect their lives together as a people. Increasingly, Barker says, these institutions act like bureaucracies, often hand-in-hand with (and sometimes funded by) government! Instead of enabling citizens to determine what might be done to develop their communities and to explore the possibilities of government collaboration, the NGOs act increasingly like government
departments. They are becoming “colonized” by government, typically designing and measuring outcomes in the narrowly professionalized and preestablished patterns of academic technicians. Democratically elected legislatures, he explains, delegate power to bureaucratic agencies and NGOs that tend therefore to “focus on, discreet problem-solving efforts with quantifiable results.”

As though to illustrate the point, Bruce Sievers, who for years has distinguished himself among the most thoughtful of foundation leaders, presents a careful exploration of the development of philanthropy into the modern grantmaking foundations. He enriches this history by embracing it in a careful study of the development of what we call “civil society,” the ways in which we organize ourselves (as distinct from our government) for our social well-being. And he elaborates this concern, regretting that, like commercial enterprises, foundations tend to seek “the highest bang for the buck” but are “not very good at solving complex social problems.”

There is, however, a darker, yet more alarming aspect to this apparent diminution of the public voice in the management of our own affairs as a people. It is articulated, or at least summarized, by the distinguished emeritus professor from Princeton, Sheldon Wolin, in his book recently published by Princeton University Press, Democracy Inc.: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism, the full preface to which we have been privileged to reprint at the center of this Review. Wolin, whose imagination is broad as his knowledge is deep, points out that while the fascist and communist dictators of the 20th century were able “by controlling the state and the economy” to “force their societies into a preconceived totality,” our own circumstances begin to suggest what he calls an “inverted totalitarianism”: a “political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.”

“Certain tendencies in our society,” writes Wolin, “point away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and towards what I have called ‘managed democracy.’” Now of course, it is the assumption of democracies that when oligarchies of the rich and the powerful do show signs of taking over authority in the state—and diminishing thereupon the sense of freedom and equal authority of a people determining their collective destiny—it is precisely then that the voice of the people will be assertively heard. Yet though it may be easy to argue, this is sometimes hard to illustrate through much of our history. And to Nina Eliasoph, the cause (or fault) is not merely a tendency among those with power to exercise it, but an apparent reluctance, or at least a timidity, among a mass of well-intentioned citizens who yet seem hesitant to express their political judgments publicly, or to weigh, with others, the potential
or likely outcomes that might attend formal discussion of ways in which their problems might be addressed.

Eliasoph in fact spent many months recording conversations she heard on significant public topics—community problems needing to be addressed in one or another way that would affect different groups of citizens variously. Interestingly, she chose to talk with specific groups of citizens, each of which typified a different kind of interest or commitment, or hobby and practice, within the communities that she examined: some, for example, she characterized as “volunteers,” people who commonly contribute their time for the benefit of others, beyond themselves; others included, for example, those whose shared a focus on and energies in organized kinds of social relaxation that might be associated with music and dance; and so on. Yet the outcome, from every group, was not that its participants were indifferent to or failed to understand the import of decisions that had to be thought through and resolved, but that they consistently tried to avert the challenge of speaking “too seriously”—or perhaps controversially—on what we might call “public” or “political” matters that could challenge the social norms that had been accepted for their lives. “The fault,” as Shakespeare once pointed out, “is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings!” Only in very small and heterogeneous (what Eliasoph nicknames “backstage”) groups did her interviewees seem willing to talk about what were in fact, as they should be seen, serious and sometimes controversial public issues.

So it is perhaps useful to be reminded, at the close of this Review, by paragraphs from the closing chapter of Theda Skocpol’s Diminished Democracy, insisting that citizens can see, have seen, and should see themselves as responsibly, challenged by working in assemblies, groups, missions, even lobbies, to better the opportunities and the conditions of their lives, their communities, and their government.

All of the essays presented in this issue of the Review are excerpted from recently published or about to be published longer works; and we make no editorial pretense that to have read merely these pages is to know the wisdom that their pages transcribe. But as David Mathews acknowledges in his “… afterthoughts,” we try to keep track of what others are finding. “We have seen enough evidence to be concerned,” he concludes. And we hope that our readers, too, will therefore find their own follow-up concerns.

Robert J. Kingston
When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1832, he was struck by the vitality of its civic sphere. As he wrote in *Democracy in America*, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite…. Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France … count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.” For Tocqueville, the key features of democracy in America were patterns of association through which citizens developed habits and mores of citizenship. If Tocqueville returned to the United States today, he might be surprised by recent developments in our civil society. A different kind of structure has emerged to dominate the civic landscape: non-governmental organizations, commonly referred to as NGOs, accomplish a wide variety of social tasks that include grantmaking, service delivery, and political advocacy; and they address all kinds of social and public needs, from alleviating poverty to supporting the arts. Such formal organizations may be more efficient than ever in accomplishing these technical tasks, but this essay will consider how well they are enabling the civic work that is essential to strengthen democracy.

Following the Eastern European democratic developments that were symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the concept—with a long history in political philosophy—of civil society reemerged in academic scholarship, political journalism, and democratic activism around the world. In the 1990s, “civil society” was to embrace a vast range of voluntary organizations and associations seen as distinct from both government and for-profit corporations.
Civil society includes not only formal organizations, but also all sorts of other associations, of varying sizes and structures, from bowling leagues, to churches, to large-scale philanthropic foundations; political theorists characterized this overlooked realm as a social space for voluntary collective action that could combine the virtues of both government institutions and free markets, while avoiding each of their weaknesses. In liberal democracies, civil society offered the potential to mediate the excesses of market economies in a noncoercive way, independent of government. In the failed communist regimes, civil society made sense of how common citizens had managed to organize and even assert themselves against repressive governments in a way that maintained social solidarity. A 1994 essay in *Foreign Affairs* captured the sense of excitement, describing the civil society concept as an “associational revolution” in the civil sector, comparable in importance to the development of the nation-state.

Nongovernmental organizations do seem to be ideally positioned to fulfill the democratic promise of the civil sphere itself. For although NGOs lack the coercive power of government, they are distinct from other civic associations in that they are organizations—corporate entities in effect—with hierarchical structures, specialized tasks, and professional staff. As the most organized entities of civil society, NGOs were thought to be potentially able to direct large-scale financial resources toward social tasks without expanding government. They should have the potential for entrepreneurial risk-taking and innovation similar to for-profit corporations, but directed toward public-serving missions. They could enlist everyday citizens as volunteers, while maintaining the knowledge and specialization necessary to address complex and pressing social problems. Management theorist Peter Drucker had prophesized in the *Atlantic*,

“The right answer to the question ‘Who takes care of the social challenges of the knowledge society?’ is neither the government nor the employing organization. The answer is a separate and new social sector.” NGOs might allow democracy to have its cake and eat it too: technical expertise without government bureaucracy; vast financial resources without burdening taxpayers; collective power brought to bear on public problems without the need for legislation.

Interestingly, however, NGOs are defined not by what they are, but rather by what they are not: they are nongovernmental. This means that no particular NGO has any necessary connection to democracy, except to the extent that performing social tasks independent of government is assumed to be inherently democratic: each NGO has its own discrete tasks and issues, a majority of which have no larger democratic intent. There may thus have been little reason to expect that any particular NGO would have greater legitimacy than government or produce any democratic benefits. Still, the role of the NGO sector in democracy might be greater than the sum of

NGOs are defined not by what they are, but by what they are not.

its parts, because it suggests a shift in power away from government and toward organizations that are no less public in their mission, but less bureaucratic in their administration. Although NGOs had no inherent democratic role, advocates thought they were ideally positioned as instruments through which citizens could act collectively. At least in the early 1990s, the assumption was that an active
and engaged citizenry was ready to assert itself and fill this new space that was apparently opening in civil society.

A decade later, NGOs have continued to proliferate, amass vast resources, and bring technical expertise to bear on a wide range of social problems; yet there is little evidence that they have made a meaningful dent in the political problems that confront democracy as a whole. In practice, ironically, organizations in the civil sector are increasingly looking more and more like their government and corporate counterparts. Like government agencies, nonprofit organizations operate through top-down planning and bureaucratic routines; like companies in the corporate sphere, civil society organizations are shifting to specialized knowledge professions and using a narrow language of economic efficiency.

In the early 20th century, Max Weber had prophesied that a culture of instrumental rationality and efficiency would require a class of specialized civil servants with expertise in bureaucratic administration. Robert Michels, in his famous study of European social democracy movements, theorized an “iron law of oligarchy,” necessitating that all organizations inevitably develop hierarchical structures. The breadth and depth of the examples now suggest that the influence and power of organizations has reached such an advanced stage that these trends can indeed be understood as a “colonization” of civil society. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of a “lifeworld” of social interaction that provides the foundation for the legitimacy of the “systems” of the market and the state. This lifeworld, however, could be—indeed, has often been—colonized by either the deadening required routines of government bureaucracies or the corrosive forces of market competition and the power of for-profit corporations. Habermas suggests that governments and markets both have important roles in modern society, but that they both present threats to the lifeworld that sustains them. Colonization is neither intentional nor violent, but the end result is a single politic in which civil society and government are increasingly similar in their underlying logic, institutional challenges, and professional culture, leaving the organization of the civil society itself equally disconnected from and unable to command the confidence of citizens.

Although legislatures may be democratically elected, the modern administrative state delegates enormous decision-making power to centralized bureaucratic agencies. One of the basic tenets of scholarship on bureaucracy is that institutional self-interest is the central imperative of all agencies: to accomplish their missions, institutions must maintain their funding streams and political power. Any shift of power to citizens may imply a loss of power for the agency, and citizen participation in decision making is likely to be viewed as risky, unpredictable, and disruptive. In contrast, proponents of NGOs as democratic actors assume that
their location in civil society will allow greater opportunities for citizen participation and lead to a relatively “grassroots” character. Yet despite the democratic potential suggested by civil society theory, there is no inherent reason that NGOs should be concerned with democracy, per se. The majority of NGOs have specific tasks and fields of expertise, such as grantmaking, fundraising, technical assistance, advocacy, or education. Only a few have missions focused on or related to democracy itself and little organizational imperative to consider how they relate to citizens or contribute to the civic capacities of the communities for whom they perform their specialized services.

More important, civil society organizations may actually face real disincentives to involving citizens. The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community, by Richard Harwood and John Creighton, has examined this problem through a series of focus group conversations with leaders of a small but representative sample of community-based NGOs that have recognizable community-serving missions, such as strengthening local schools and serving vulnerable children. The study reveals that even organizations with such clear connections to the life of particular communities face overwhelming disincentives to any genuine partnering with citizens in their work. The authors of the study describe “a profound and airtight gestalt of inwardness, planning and professionalism” as the dominant mentality in the nonprofit world.

Such leaders’ perspectives may help deepen our understanding of the challenges they face. Even when organizations might want to strengthen their relationships with citizens, according to Harwood and Creighton, they face a series of difficult trade-offs in their core missions, and naturally tend to protect their own interests. The overwhelming central imperative for nonprofit executives is the stability of the organization.

These organization executives report that in an era of scarce funding, resources must be devoted to ensuring the survival of the organization and achieving its core objectives before pursuing “secondary” goals, such as building civic capacity in the communities where they are working. In many fields, programs are typically dependent on grant money (especially from government agencies and large philanthropic institutions)

Citizen participation is seen as an unpredictable endeavor.

for year-to-year survival. This means that often organizations must define themselves in terms of the funders’ agendas rather than the expressed interests of their community. In this climate, according to the Organization-First study, leaders are essentially conservative and hesitate to do anything risky, even if this limits their ability to experiment and innovate. From this perspective, citizen participation is seen as an unpredictable endeavor that could backfire, bringing conflict to the surface and complicating implementation of the NGO’s primary agenda.

The “inwardness” phenomenon might seem to be somewhat surprising in the context of widespread talk about civic engagement within the NGO sector, and the emergence of organizations that identify themselves as “community based” or “grass roots.” A cornerstone of the “NGO-as-democratic-actor” hypothesis is that the civil sector should offer more opportunities than government for citizen participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs. However, when organizations engage citizens (or talk about civic engagement), the evidence suggests that they do so in largely self-serving ways. Organizations may, for example,
use language of civic engagement to refer to outreach and public relations efforts, such as panel presentations to bring about greater awareness of and build support for their programs. They may convene citizen advisory panels that appear to be receptive to community input but in reality have little decision-making opportunity. Boards of nonprofit organizations have the potential to provide opportunities for citizens to provide substantive input, but often consist of elites with connections to funding organizations. As Harwood and Creighton write, when raising questions about engagement or deliberation, “almost any activity an organization undertook involving convening leaders, facilitating discussions or gathering input was considered an apt example.” Civic engagement is most likely understood in ways that maintain the organization’s power, rather than a sustained and authentic relationship with citizens. Their overwhelming imperative is to accomplish discrete tasks with maximum efficiency. Their location in the civic rather than the government sphere does not appear to offer any distinct advantages in allowing citizens to experience cooperation or build trust with one another.

With government struggling to maintain the confidence of citizens, in the last few decades a movement for greater accountability has swept the field of public administration. Various concepts of accountability (and corresponding devices) have been embraced, but they all assume that the proper role for citizens in a democracy is not making decisions themselves so much as delegating decisions to institutions that can demonstrate their effectiveness. One of the most common means employed by government agencies to cope with a lack of confidence in their programs is to provide what would seem to be objective data that demonstrates their effectiveness. Thus the idea of “performance measurement” using standardized metrics has gained popularity. Nowhere are the unintended consequences of performance measurement more evident than in the politics of public education, especially in relation to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, mandating that states develop standardized testing and implement harsh punishments for school systems that do not meet those standards. Critics have argued that rather than improve school quality, NCLB constrains teachers’ ability to innovate in the classroom and instead creates incentives to “teach to the test.” Such data may be accurate in a strict sense, but they seem to tell citizens very little about the overall quality of the schools; and it is argued, ironically, that the ultimate effect may be to undermine educational quality without addressing the underlying lack of confidence.

If the initial assumptions about NGOs as democratic actors were correct, such organizations in civil society should be able to act with the scale of government but with greater flexibility and additional opportunities for innovation. However, like government agencies, NGOs have structural incentives to demonstrate visible successes. They too may be inclined to focus on discrete programs at practical problem-solving efforts with quantifiable results, at the expense of larger efforts to strengthen the capacity of communities to solve their own problems. Authentic relationships with citizens tend, perhaps for good reason, to be seen as requiring more sustained effort without tangible products.
But the politics of accountability appears to be playing out with the same unintended consequences in the civil sphere as it has in government. For understandable reasons of efficiency and rational administration in a complex society, the NGO sphere is, like government, more specialized than ever before. This means that by necessity, as organizations take on more and more important social tasks, what they do and how they are doing it is likely also to become obscure to citizens. In such circumstances, citizens may have little reason to view organizations with trust or confidence. To cope with this problem, as in government, one of the most important trends in the nonprofit sector has been the rise of metrics-based performance measurement to demonstrate effectiveness. The use of performance measurement in the civil sector has been evident, for example, in the dominant approach of most large-scale grantmaking entities, referred to as “strategic” philanthropy within the field. Strategic philanthropy is defined in principle by setting clear goals to guide multiple programs and evaluating programs in terms of these goals. In practice, this typically entails the use of metrics: in response to pressure from funders and public supporters, such metrics are appealing because they appear to provide a “scientific” way to quantify successes, compare programs, and eliminate inefficiencies.

Yet despite the best of intentions, performance measurement in the nonprofit sphere risks unintended consequences. Perhaps the most important effects of the accountability movement concern the abilities of organizations to contribute to social innovation and experimentation. Unfortunately, performance measurement gives organizations incentives to direct their activities toward standardized, predetermined outcomes. Although nonprofit organizations make up a complex and diverse universe, with important differences of mission, size, and stage of development, organizations often use standardized criteria easily recognizable to peers, such as administrative or fundraising budget ratios, rather than metrics tailored to their unique goals. The demand for performance measurement ironically can undermine performance by encouraging organizations to shift scarce resources from program development to evaluation, when they can least afford it. As accountability scholar Kevin Kearns writes, “Perhaps the most disturbing feature of these quantitative metrics, applied universally to all nonprofits, is that they do not accommodate the notion of organizational learning and growth.” Performance measurement still begs the question of who decides what to measure. Rather than solve the accountability problem, it merely shifts it; now the question is not the effectiveness of each program, but the legitimacy of a given system itself. George Frederickson’s
2003 report, *Easy Innovation and the Iron Cage*, asks of these tendencies, what is the metrics phenomenon but the current “best practice” recognized across government, the corporate world, and civil society? The appeals to “best practices” and “rankings” give organizations a common language to account to funders, public supporters, and one another for what they are doing, a shorthand to demonstrate their effectiveness when the impact of a program is in doubt or difficult to quantify. Such practices implicitly define accountability according to status and reputation in relation to competing organizations. “There is every possibility,” Frederickson writes, “that the impetus to best practices and benchmarking is driven as much by the desire to increase an institution’s reputational capital as it is by a genuine desire to innovate.” There is no necessary connection between an organization’s reputation and its true capacity for innovation.

What Fredrickson describes as “managed innovation” assumes that organizational creativity occurs through a rational process that is consciously planned, executed in an orderly fashion, and evaluated through precise measurements. The most efficient way to accomplish this goal is by copying the practices of leading peers. Paradoxical as it seems, “managed innovation” suggests that organizational learning occurs not as a result of experimentation, but rather through adopting the management practices of other organizations.

The homogenization of the nongovernment sphere underscores a larger problem of confidence and legitimacy. As public administration scholar Christopher Pollitt has argued, performance measurement inevitably requires experts to interpret, analyze, and manipulate the data. “Ultimately,” he writes, “the strenuous efforts of these experts… [have] the paradoxical effect of increasing citizen distrust.” With only experts capable of policing one another, the data itself is no guarantee of legitimacy, and may in fact—for good reason—undermine public confidence in organizations.

Performance measurement and managed innovation demonstrate the complex dynamics of the colonization of the NGO sphere. Frederickson argues that managed innovation demonstrates the complex interdependencies of business, government, and NGOs. In our era, government increasingly collaborates with companies in public-private partnerships and contracts out services to private providers; meanwhile, private corporations, for their part, have grown as powerful and as bureaucratic as many national governments.

The professionalization of the NGO sphere is a response to problems of scale and complexity, but it has resulted in a division between citizens and specialized, credentialed experts: a common culture of top-down planning and professional management. The technocratic ideal has a deep history, and its most forceful articulation was perhaps by Walter Lippmann in his famous exchange with John Dewey, early in the 20th century. Lippmann had little hope for the ability of everyday citizens to rule themselves, rooted as they are in the prejudices and traditions of their kinship groups, and instead saw promise only in the development of a new cadre of public-spirited elites—which now appear to be the dominant reality across the government, corporate, and NGO sectors. Highly skilled and specialized professional work is playing an ever more powerful role in modern society, yet while expertise may clearly be necessary, it can create problems for the democratic legitimacy of organizations: across the fields of higher education, philanthropy, journalism, and government the politics of expertise complicates the potential democratic role of NGOs.

Underlying technocratic politics is an epistemology that, privileging expert knowledge,
separates experts from civic life and thus disempowers citizens. The dominant paradigm—that knowledge be objective and based only upon measurable phenomena—explicitly guides most academic research, but it is also implicit in professions across civil society. It contrasts with other forms of knowledge, including the practical wisdom (or *phronesis*) that enables citizens to make judgments on matters that are inherently uncertain. In principle, both types of knowledge should coexist; and in a healthy democratic system, even complement one another, with citizens' practical wisdom central in the process of reaching collective decisions, and expertise providing the most efficient means of administration. According to the dominant logic of expert knowledge, however, judgment between values in conflict is not considered a different and complementary kind of knowledge, but relegated, rather, to the realm of subjectivity and arbitrary opinion. The rationalistic emphasis on objective knowledge means that experts will assume that there is little that they can learn from citizens. Thus expert and citizen knowledge have become misaligned, and professionals tend to be cut off from the practical wisdom of citizens, while citizens view obscure expertise with increasing distrust.

The logic of expert knowledge, then, ironically constrains the public role of professionals, directing their expertise to highly specialized tasks that frequently remain irrelevant to and disconnected from the needs of their communities. In her eloquent book on the founding ideals of American democracy, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt described a distinct loss of “public happiness,” when the active and engaged *hommes des lettres* of the 18th century gave way to the “class of professional scribes and writers whose labours are needed by the ever-expanding bureaucracies” of contemporary organizations. Academics, journalists, and philanthropists may talk in similar terms as their professions become defined as increasingly specialized and detached. Harry Boyte ascribes a sense of frustration with this absence of civic purpose throughout academia: “They feel increasingly cut off from local communities… Their discontents take shape in a silent politics whose authority comes from hiding interests and suppressing attachment to living communities.” A group of political scientists, recently interviewed in the *New York Times*, admitted that their field had become irrelevant to the most pressing problems in democracy because they could only research phenomena that could be easily measured.

When expert professions do attempt to play a public role, they tend to do so in ways that may unintentionally stifle democracy: problems that are rightfully public in nature can become named in terms of technique, efficiency, or the rational administration of resources. In his classic book, *Seeing Like a State*, James L. Scott describes the paradigmatic approach to social planning around the world as a “high modernist” ideology, an optimistic faith in top-down scientific planning and rational administration, leading to social
disasters in recent history. Its implication is that citizens cannot play a meaningful role in addressing the problems that concern them; a more humanistic approach could see social problems as complex and political in nature, involving conflicts over deeply held values—what social planning theorists have referred to as “wicked” problems that expert knowledge alone cannot hope to solve. In a democracy, citizens will play an active role in reaching collective decisions before experts can hope to discover the best means of administering them. Scott’s examples of the worst planning disasters are drawn from authoritarian governments and their planned economies; but growing evidence suggests that the technocratic approach to social problems has taken hold across organizations of the civil society in established democracies.

Top-down approaches to social problems are commonly reflected in the self-understandings of professionals, especially in how they see themselves in relation to other citizens. For example, an especially common theme in the self-understandings of expert professions is discourse referring to a “serving” capacity, putting citizens implicitly in a receptive role. The service ideal reflects the best of intentions and a sincere effort to connect expertise to urgent social problems. However, it also implies a focus on discrete services to be delivered, rather than on building the civic capacities of communities to organize themselves and solve their own problems. It is usually framed in apolitical terms; for example as an effort to do charity for others, rather than as addressing distinctly political goals. And perhaps most important, service discourse may reflect a paternalistic impulse to care for others that can often result in relationships of dependency and clientelism.

Professionals tend to be cut off from the practical wisdom of citizens.

Identifying with a service role has become the dominant worldview across the expert-dominated professions, in both the government and NGO sectors. Although talk of civic engagement is currently widespread in higher education, for example, the mode of engagement is typically service-oriented and technocratic. Since the 1980s, service learning has been a popular mode of so-called “partnerships” between universities and their local communities. Yet service learning in critical ways reaffirms the typical expert relationships with communities. Many campuses are starting to embrace richer language of civic engagement, but much of these efforts have remained at the level of mission statements, without fundamentally moving beyond their historical roots in the service paradigm.

In philanthropy, the service role is reflected in the emphasis on financial resources and technical assistance rather than on building the civic capacities of communities. In the 1990s, civil society and NGOs were buzzwords in the field of international development, yet financial
assistance and service delivery have remained the dominant paradigms, internationally. In higher education, Harry Boyte describes the core imperatives of academic work as, “gather, analyze, and disseminate information.” The very ideas of “outreach” and “extension” assume that authoritative knowledge is a possession of universities that must be disseminated outward, rather than something that is cocreated in dialogue between experts and citizens. Although the dissemination model might add a “public” dimension to expert knowledge, it still places experts in the position of defining what counts as knowledge. Experts understand themselves as serving the public by acting as impartial authorities in their fields and sharing their knowledge with policymakers and lay citizens. Citizens play a largely passive role in receiving or applying information.

To say that civil society has been colonized by the inwardness of organizations, the politics of accountability, and the specialization of professions, does not mean that this colonization is absolute or irreversible. Even when an invasive plant is introduced into an ecosystem, steps can be taken to minimize its spread and nurture native species. Organizations and professionals within them can do only so much to produce a trusting and engaged citizenry, or to manufacture their own legitimacy. Still, organizations can play an important role by realigning their identities and routines with the habits and civic norms of communities. In fact, a growing set of organizations and professionals is beginning to challenge the inwardness of NGOs, countervailing groups that move beyond the paradigms of service delivery, technical assistance, and dissemination, to treat citizens as partners, coproducers, and civic actors.

Perhaps the most promising countervailing trend is the emergence of NGOs that are explicit in their attempt to strengthen the civic capacities of communities. For example, a growing network of organizations associated with the idea of “deliberative democracy” aims to create spaces for citizens to play a more active role in reaching collective decisions on controversial issues.

Citizens have a critical role to play in deepening public discourse.

Rejecting the politics of inwardness, these organizations assume that many social problems are political in nature, involving tensions between deeply held values, and that citizens have a critical role to play in deepening public discourse on complex issues. Even when they are concerned with particular issues or government policies, these organizations may have capacity-building effects as they strengthen citizens’ habits of collective judgment and decision making.

Similarly, organizations in the community-organizing tradition, influenced by figures like Harry Boyte and John McKnight, are talking about principles of “public work,” “capacity building,” and “asset-based community development.” Rather than taking a view of citizens as needy and deficient clients in need of help from above, they focus on the capacities that already exist within communities. Instead of mobilizing citizens to promote predetermined ideological agendas, they maintain a disciplined commitment to grassroots democratic principles and provide citizens with spaces in which they can learn to organize themselves. In the fields of urban planning and community development, organizations are abandoning top-down, technocratic approaches, in favor of more civic and humanistic models.
Sometimes, this countervailing trend takes the form of professionals who are critically aware of the limitations of their expertise, and see an ethical responsibility or calling to align their profession with self-ruling citizens. In his book, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice*, Albert Dzur named this movement, “democratic professionalism.” In academia, terms like *scholarship of engagement* and *public scholarship* are now being used to describe collaboration with community partners in advancing cutting-edge community knowledge. Similar groups have emerged in philanthropy and journalism to experiment with ways to collaborate with citizens in their work as civic actors rather than passive recipients or spectators. The common thread among these groups is a recognition that their professional work benefits from interaction and collaboration with citizens, giving them a structural incentive to move beyond the conventional narrow task or program focus. They may see civic leadership work as a means to rebuild public confidence in their profession or to receive input or feedback from stakeholders to increase their effectiveness. In such cases, rather than create wholly new organizations, isolated individuals or small groups are attempting to carve out niches for civic work within their established institutions. These “civic professionals” do not typically reflect the dominant paradigm within their fields, and sometimes they may even be marginalized within their own institutions, but they have successfully formed peer networks across organizations to advance their work.

Consisting of organizations on the margins of their fields, or isolated individuals challenging the dominant culture of their institutions, these may represent more of an inchoate stirring than a mature movement. However, taken together, they constitute an important countervailing force—and a reminder that the colonization of civil society is far from absolute. In creating an Open Government Initiative to make government agencies more participatory and collaborative, President Obama recently declared, “Knowledge is widely dispersed in society, and public officials benefit from having access to that dispersed knowledge. In this sense, surely, executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policymaking and to provide their government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information.” Like the president, organizations and professionals in the nongovernment sector may be beginning to recognize the extent of their inwardness and engage in the hard work of decolonizing civil society.

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“The democratic process requires not only the right to vote on a given policy choice, but also the ability to participate in conceptualizing and shaping what that choice is.”

Given the enormous challenges involved in reconciling the opposing forces of the pursuit of individual interests and the protection of the commons in the 21st century, what resources does society have to create a balance between these two? Civil society is the central construct joining private action and public purposes. Civil society’s primary resource allowing it an important degree of freedom from market-driven or governmentally dominated behavior is philanthropy, through commitments of both financial donations and voluntary time. Thus, we might well expect philanthropy, acting through civil society, to be a primary vehicle through which the well-being of the commons could be secured.

Indeed, philanthropy, with its historic blend of individualism, private resources, and concern for community betterment, would seem to offer society’s most important asset for combining private and public purposes. Practitioners of contemporary philanthropy, particularly those who serve as professionals and board members of large foundations, indeed view themselves as involved in the pursuit of public goods, whether in health care, education, environment, the arts, or myriad other arenas in which the provision of public goods is deficient. But key assumptions, both in operating style and substantive funding choices, act to limit foundations’ ability to work effectively on these problems of the commons.

An important insight into this conundrum is provided by moral philosopher David Sidorsky who describes the problems of collective action and value pluralism as posing the same challenge
to contemporary philanthropy as they do to civil society as a whole:

The idea of moral pluralism generates a dilemma for the practice of philanthropy. Characteristically, the practice of philanthropy assumes unity, coherence, or convergence among the diverse virtues and moral aims that it pursues…. Historically, this reflects the place of a unifying religious vision of the nature of the good or of a secular conception of a public philosophy which recognized the common good. Even etymologically, the love of mankind suggests a single passion that is directed beneficently to the shared values of mankind.

The theory and practice of contemporary philanthropy is necessarily pluralistic, however, and it reflects the range of decisions by individuals with different interests and values in a pluralist, democratic society. The legitimatized and recognized range of philanthropies in modern societies demonstrates divergent and even conflicting perceptions of the common good or the public interest…. The tension and possibility of conflict is apparent. It suggests the formal dilemma: if philanthropic plurality is recognized, then the pursuit of some goals which could negate others is appropriate. Hence, the common good will not be served.

The fundamental opposition that Sidorsky describes—between plurality and the commons—manifests itself, as we have seen, in the broad challenges of collective action and value pluralism facing modern civil society. Philanthropy has the potential to address these challenges. But two particular blind spots in the practice of contemporary philanthropy inhibit its ability to do so: an increasingly instrumentalist bias and a failure to comprehend the problem of reflexivity.

The first of the blind spots is rooted in an epistemological orientation that has shaped modern American philanthropy since the late 19th century. The efforts of the great foundations of the early 20th century—those created by Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, John D. Rockefeller Jr., and Olivia Sage—were generally guided by a set of assumptions that may be broadly described as the epistemology of applied science. As one historian notes, “A buoyantly optimistic faith that major social problems, like ignorance, poverty, and crime, could be solved characterized these foundations.” Their large-scale initiatives not only ushered in the age of scientific philanthropy but also blended science and philanthropy in a particular way on the model of the successful advances of the then newly emerging medical science. Applied to social problem solving, this approach pursued
the discovery of causal agents behind the negative social patterns, comparable to germs’ role in disease, and then sought their eradication through application of the proper remedies, comparable to medical antidotes.

This medical model was applied literally to a number of Rockefeller projects, such as the campaign to eradicate hookworm disease, and metaphorically to many other philanthropic interventions. It was the guiding theory behind the development of the new disciplines of the social sciences that were incubated in part by the growing foundations and the application of the social scientific findings as they were understood at the time to the problems of society. A prominent example was the work of a group of aspiring young social scientists at the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial in designing a parent education program based on the newly “discovered” principles of behavioral psychology that was promulgated throughout the country in the 1920s. (The program did not show any significant results and was abandoned in 1930.) Many other programs in juvenile justice, recreation, vocational education, public welfare, and other realms of social policy were developed in a similar manner by foundations inspired with the belief in the application of scientific knowledge to society.

The fundamental difficulty with this approach lies in its assumption that the epistemology of philanthropy should aspire to the classical notion of episteme (certain theoretical knowledge) applied to reality through techne, rather than the practical, local knowledge of métis that emerges from practical experience and involves the exercise of judgment rather than calculation. Given the socially constituted character and overwhelming complexity of the subject matter of philanthropy, métis much better fits the needs for practicing and evaluating the results of philanthropic engagement than does episteme. James Scott’s brilliant analysis of this problem in his Seeing Like a State captures the correspondence of métis to understanding and intervening in society—which applies as much to the practice of philanthropy as it does to his focus on the limits of scientistic state action—in his observation that “Métis is the mode of reasoning most appropriate to complex material and social tasks where the uncertainties are so daunting that we must trust our (experienced) intuition and feel our way.”

Indeed, the social problems that philanthropy seeks to address are defined by several characteristics that run exactly counter to the scientific vision of prediction and control inherent in episteme and techne: the factors of randomness, countless variables, absence of the conditions of controlled experimentation, and very long time horizons are only the most prominent of these. For example, the vast sums that have been expended by both government and philanthropy in recent decades with the aim of improving public education, despite often being tied to rigorous metrics of standardized testing scores, student retention rates, and so on, have yielded unimpressive results. The reason? Too many variables and too much randomness in those variables—cultural, political, economic, and environmental—stand between the “input” of funding and the “output” of educational quality. There is little evidence to suggest that philanthropists and government officials have learned much more than the conventional wisdom has
long told us: an inspired administrator or teacher trumps almost all other factors in producing educational success. He or she personifies métis. The same can be said of youth development, community organizing, care of the aging, the arts, policy advocacy, and most other arenas in which philanthropy is active.

The investment model seeks the highest “bang for the buck.”

The role of randomness is particularly important in this argument. The unpredictable but hugely influential role of randomness in human affairs undermines almost all attempts to make reliable predictions in large-scale (or even small-scale) social planning. This is not to say that it is useless to use data in seeking to make informed judgments about the direction of social improvement, only that currently unknown “black swans” will inevitably override attempts to calibrate increments of social change according to carefully constructed theories of social change.

Although scientific epistemology was not the only guiding force in early foundation philanthropy—both Carnegie’s libraries and Julius Rosenwald’s broad program of school building for African Americans exemplified a more open-ended approach to the application of knowledge to community building—the scientific model has strongly imprinted the practice of American philanthropy. While later generations of scholars and practitioners began to understand social problems as enmeshed in a more complex web of multidimensional and interactive relationships and therefore not straightforwardly solvable through the direct application of the techniques of laboratory science, the notion of linear causality has exerted a lasting influence on the thinking of American foundations.

A second powerful influence that has shaped the development of American philanthropy has political origins—the drive toward accountability for private wealth employed in the public arena. Already present in the longstanding argument between the Jeffersonians and the Federalists about the role of private groups in setting social policy, the democratic impulse to exert public control over the influence of private power surfaced with fresh force in the Progressive era. In the first decade of the 20th century this political movement produced growing pressure for greater governmental oversight over the expanding activity of large foundations. John D. Rockefeller Sr. became a particular magnet for attention to the power of private wealth; his companies’ predatory business practices and violent response to labor unrest in the early 1900s led to widespread suspicion of his philanthropic motives and a congressionally authorized investigation of his foundation activities. Frank Walsh, a Kansas City trial attorney who chaired the congressionally mandated U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, portrayed the Rockefeller and other large philanthropies as vehicles for the antidemocratic and unaccountable expansion of the power of the wealthy. This was a recur- rent theme in political life through the 20th century: Congressional committees of diverse political perspectives have expressed similar concerns in later decades about inadequate public oversight of private philanthropy, ranging from conservative suspicion of progressively oriented foundations in the 1950s to concerns expressed by Democrats about tax avoidance by wealthy donors in the 1960s to criticism by Republicans of lax financial controls in the 1990s.
These periodic expressions of governmental pressure for greater accountability in exchange for operational freedom have led to foundations’ increasing attention to issues of procedural responsiveness. Most observers agree that the resulting measures foundations have undertaken to demonstrate their openness and responsiveness to society—greater transparency, standardized financial practices, and improved governance—have had generally salutary effects on the field. But a contemporary version of the accountability theme has moved in a different, more problematic direction. There is a growing tendency by foundations to interpret accountability not as procedural responsiveness but as demonstrated substantive impact on society. What originated in public interest in avoiding outright fraud or the misdirection of philanthropic resources to private benefit has become misinterpreted as a quid pro quo requirement for philanthropy to yield a quanta of benefits equal to or greater than the costs of its tax benefits.

This interpretation stems from a third major influence that has shaped the rise of the modern foundation, one that has become ascendant in recent years—the effort to apply the commercial success of the “business model” to philanthropy. This trend originates in the modern tendency to translate the life of society into the language of the market. This language migrates into philanthropy and becomes expressed as concerns of donors in allocating portions of benefit, reassuring them that their investments are producing demonstrable results. While a desire for results is reasonable, the exaggerated emphasis on metrics, so-called “substantive accountability,” becomes a driving force in the field, creating unrealizable expectations that can lead to an unjustified image of failure when not met.

Guided by a more general worldview of the primacy of market-oriented relationships, the business model views philanthropic funding as investment in social problem solving. On this view, philanthropic investment is the means, while incremental steps toward social problem solving are the product. This approach, with its emphasis on metrics and deliverables (the “huge push toward measurability” as described by Intel founder and philanthropist, Gordon Moore), skews the work of nonprofit organizations through the narrow strictures and highly directive requirements of outcome-oriented funding. The early initiatives of Carnegie and Rockefeller had already begun to introduce this perspective to American philanthropy, but it was only late in the 20th century that the full conceptual framework of business approaches began to gain widespread influence in the field.

The investment model seeks the highest “bang for the buck” in the allocation of philanthropic funds, translating into the emphasis on outcomes for the purpose of accountability. Increasingly, this model, particularly in its “venture philanthropy” version, adds other dimensions borrowed from the for-profit world: an emphasis on
managerial efficiency and effectiveness; bottom-line outcomes; going to “scale”; investor control; and exit strategies patterned on the public buy-out. The transposition of the business model to philanthropy entails donors becoming investors and nonprofit organizations becoming contractees, a conceptual transference that, as I have argued elsewhere, has important negative consequences for civil society. Commercial markets are very good at accomplishing their intended purpose of efficiently allocating resources in exchange relationships. They are not very good at solving complex social problems.

The cumulative effect of these forces—the epistemology of scientific control, accountability interpreted as accounting for quantitative value delivered, and economic emphasis on return on investment—creates powerful momentum to move philanthropy in the direction of highly discrete instrumental objectives directed at solving specific social problems. The modern model for this approach is that of strategic intervention in the commercial market. In an era when the efficiency and effectiveness of market forces make their presence felt worldwide, this model has wide appeal, especially to those who, like many philanthropists, have experienced substantial success in the business world. But, as has already been argued, the market is fundamentally flawed in its ability to provide public goods and its conceptual structure is seriously limited in its capacity to address the vastly complex, multivalent, and interactive problems of human society that do not lend themselves to linear, demand-driven solutions.

Beyond the limits of instrumentalism and the practical problems of randomness, innumerable variables, and indeterminate time horizons, philanthropy also has to confront yet a deeper conceptual issue: the problem of reflexivity. This is a problem that extends beyond the realm of social prediction and control, going to the very heart of what it means to understand human action and social change.

Reflexivity, in its contemporary use, refers to the interactive nature of social knowledge and action—the fact that the thought and action of actor A in a social situation affects and is affected by the thought and action of actor B. Reflexivity is a concept that has gained current visibility in part through the work of George Soros, who describes the “two-way street” relationship between thinking and social reality. Soros has pointed out the severe limitations of the market model, especially evident in recent times, in understanding and predicting complex social interactions. A significant portion of his critique derives from his insight into the failure of most economic and social analysis (he is a writer with deep roots in the market but also a thoughtful commentator about concepts of social change) to take into account the fact that social intervention is not unidirectional. Social thinkers and actors who do not adequately comprehend the circular mutability of social information—Soros’s two-way feedback mechanism—are doomed to misinterpret social reality and misjudge their attempted interventions in it.
Taking into account the reflexive nature of human knowledge in coming to understand the intentions and actions of other human beings also has an important democratic dimension. Treating the subject of one’s knowledge (and action) as an equal participant in defining the problem and shaping its potential solution is fundamental to democracy. The democratic process requires not only the right to vote on a given policy choice, but also the ability to participate in conceptualizing and shaping what that choice is. Thus, taking reflexivity into account is important to all attempts to intervene in the public arena, such as in the pursuit of public goods, the democratic polity.

The tendency of philanthropic foundations to place increasing emphasis on narrowly defined funding targets and quantitative assessment propels the field in the direction of the imposition of a conceptual model—in this case the input-output paradigm of market transactions—that fails to do justice to the complexity of life in society. The market model flows from the requirements of the economic sphere in having a singular purpose and a simple, one-dimensional test of success: Does it make money or not? There is no equivalent unitary test in the broader social world. To seek to impose one in order to justify dollars invested in solving social problems distorts the very nature of civil society.

Thus philanthropy finds itself in a conundrum. The most pervasive problems facing society today—deficient provision of public goods, such as education, public health, environmental protection, and intercultural understanding—are problems of the commons which philanthropy should be most able to engage. Philanthropy can play a special role here, because neither the political process nor the market deals well with the complexity, uncertainty, or long time horizons of such public goods problems. Yet modern philanthropy finds itself limited in its ability to address just those problems.

The reason lies in the trend noted above: the increasing tendency in philanthropy to pursue narrowly focused, self-directed programs that promise marketlike results—increments of measurable outcomes that can be correlated with increments of investment—rather than a different category of judgment (exemplified in métis) about social success and failure more appropriate to the complexity and multidimensionality of the problems of civil society. If philanthropy can better understand its role in a world characterized by collective action problems, value pluralism, instrumentalism, and reflexivity, it will have a much better prospect of making headway on the value-laden, “wicked” (reflexive) problems of the commons.

I am suggesting that, by approaching its work not as managed process with product outcomes, but rather as a métis-guided engagement with other players in the social arena, philanthropy will have a much better prospect of making headway on the value-laden, “wicked” (reflexive) problems of the commons. At their core, these problems all derive from the unresolved tension in civil society: between the summed pursuit of
individual interests and the collective pursuit of larger public interests. As we have seen, this tension is endemic to modern civil society. Neither the state, with its necessarily circumscribed ability to intervene in the private domain, nor the market, with its limited capacity to pursue public goods, can effectively address it. Philanthropy, by contrast, operates as a vehicle that bridges private and public spheres and therefore is conceptually well suited to engage collective action problems.

A key to addressing all such problems is the strength and well-being of civil society itself. Civil society is the arena in which citizens connect their private interests with a larger sense of public commitment and collective action. Thus, in addition to philanthropy’s engagement with its many substantive areas of concern in the environment, health, education, the arts, and so on, it has a special role to play in supporting and strengthening civil society per se. This is an arena largely overlooked in current foundation philanthropy.

William Galston catalogues a list of primary public goods problems related to the diminished strength of civil society. In his view, these shortcomings are shared by almost all Western democracies: an emerging imbalance between the social promises of the welfare state and the resources that governments can mobilize to meet those promises; an increasing orientation toward present consumption at the expense of investments for future needs; increasing tension between the requirements of national unity and the centrifugal tugs of subnational identity groups based on region, ethnicity or religion; an escalating citizen mistrust of government and established institutions in general; and a weakening of the voluntary associations of civil society that should discharge many of the functions that governments do not.

The necessary balancing norm in the age of the ascendancy of individualism has been a commitment to some sense of the common good. It is, of course, easy to become nostalgic about the historical importance of this cultural value in the American experience, which has always competed with the longstanding pursuit of individual interests: from the early emphasis on individual liberty to the modern political rhetoric about freedom as the central defining American value, individualism has been the prominent theme. Yet, a broad agreement on the common good as an aspirational goal has also been a continuing thread in American history since the arrival of the earliest settlers. The classic statement of this commitment appeared in John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” declaration on board the Arbella as it approached the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. The sense of community and the goal of solidarity conveyed in Winthrop’s words defined the character of the societies the first American colonists began to establish. The ethos of the common good radiated from the common spiritual and practical bonds of the settlers; it was sustained and cultivated in the subsequent course of development of the colonies and the early United States.

This ancient norm of civil society has experienced waves of increasing and decreasing emphasis throughout the course of American history, but there appears to be a broad pattern of decline of commitment to the ethos of the
common good since the mid-20th century. Robert Putnam’s portrayal of the dramatic drop in civic participation and social trust has been the most prominent among many analysts’ descriptions of a rapidly diminishing set of core values related to communal commitment, civic mindedness, and concern for the well-being of the commons, accompanied by a corresponding increase in pursuit of individual ends and competition. Robert Bellah and his coauthors have recounted the story of this post-World War II trend in *Habits of the Heart*, in which they describe a late-20th-century American society with a progressively diminishing sense of communal attachment. More recently, Benjamin Barber has analyzed the contemporary cultural ethos that leads to the erosion of civic commitment, emphasizing the corrosive power of unrestrained markets.

Although there may be differing views on the degree of decline, the fact of a decline in a shared sense of commitment to the common good—“a steady attenuation of everyday cooperation and civic friendship”—is acknowledged by a wide social spectrum of social observers. Because of its central role as a defining norm of civil society, the ethos of the common good should thus be a major concern of philanthropy that seeks to build the capacity for collective action. But, as we have seen, this barely appears on the radar screen of contemporary philanthropy. If foundations were to begin to pay attention to strengthening social commitment to the common good, how might this effort be translated into action?

A growing body of research on social capital and the provision of public goods suggests that a healthy civil society with a high level of civic commitment is prerequisite to an ability to address the kind of wicked problems that inhibit the provision of public goods. One avenue to strengthen civic commitment would be to follow the recommendations by Putnam and others about supporting work that builds social capital. Putnam and his colleagues have developed a series of recommendations, described in the *Better Together* report of the Saguaro Seminar, as steps to help generate new forms of social capital in the United States, such as overhauling business practices by encouraging civic groups to meet on site, incentivizing community service, and creating flexible work hours; changing educational goals and curriculum to mandate service learning, sponsoring more after-school activities and encouraging participation of students on public boards and agencies; strengthening religious organizations through funding and partnerships; increasing opportunities for participation in community-based arts activities; and working for reforms in the political system that would increase the

It is easy to become nostalgic about the American experience.
Among these recommendations, one in particular stands out as widely endorsed by scholars and public commentators across the political spectrum: strengthening civic education. William Galston, surveying the most recent research on the relationship between civic education and civic commitment, concludes that there is solid evidence that civic education based on both substantive and experiential learning leads to enhanced support for democratic values, tolerance, civic participation, and social trust: “The more knowledge we have of civic affairs, the less we have a sort of generalized mistrust and fear of public life. Ignorance is the father of fear, and knowledge is the mother of trust.” This relationship appears to be true whether civic education is provided through schools, voluntary associations, or other modes of adult learning. In all circumstances, the important characteristics of effective civic education appear to be an emphasis on ideals and principles combined with learning in real-life situations that have direct relevance and consequence for the participants.

For Crenson and Ginsberg, the trend toward privatization of the public sphere in the latter half of the 20th century has gradually transformed the idea of a citizen from that of active political participant to that of consumer. They note that the political consumer makes individual marketlike judgments about the delivery of governmental services but increasingly sees it as his or her role to join with others to shape or change government policy:

The transformation of citizens into customers is significant. Citizens were thought to own government. Customers, by contrast, are merely expected to receive pleasant service from it. Citizens, moreover, are members of a political community with a collective existence created for public purposes. Customers are individual purchasers seeking to meet their private needs in a market. What is missing from the experience of customers is collective mobilization to achieve collective interests.

Active citizenship in a democracy requires active civic engagement, which, in turn, requires access to information about public affairs, the right to join in collective action, and a commitment to achieving one’s interpretation of the common good. What is called for, according to Zukin et al, is a “conscious, collective, and systematic effort to provide young Americans with the motivation, skills, and opportunities to participate in politics [to avoid] a slow but steady exodus from this realm of the public sphere.” Foundations can support the expansion
of civic engagement in many ways: directly through programs that draw people into public decision-making processes like deliberative polling, public forums, community organizing, volunteerism, community service, and indirectly through support of improved media and civic education.

Beyond individual elements of civil society in need of specific support, one important arena of civil society work is commonly overlooked even by those philanthropic foundations that are interested in assisting the field: organizations that support and promote the essential processes and structures of civil society. These are the membership, research, and advocacy institutions that create the knowledge base for understanding civil society and champion its healthy development worldwide.

The recent dramatic growth in the size and importance of civil society throughout the world has not been accompanied by a corresponding expansion of organizations dedicated to generating knowledge and support for the field. Compared to the support structures focused on the business and government sectors, organizational activity dedicated to analyzing and championing civil society remains quite limited. Yet, absent the natural support bases that exist for business and government, civil society organizations have a vital need for such information and advocacy. In the largest sense of their mission, philanthropic donors, both individuals and foundations, should understand that one of their overarching tasks is to strengthen the fundamental structures of civil society.

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“Certain tendencies in our society point in a direction away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and toward what I have called ‘managed democracy.’”

As a preliminary I want to emphasize certain aspects of the approach taken in this volume in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. Although the concept of totalitarianism is central to what follows, my thesis is not that the current American political system is an inspired replica of Nazi Germany’s or George W. Bush of Hitler. References to Hitler’s Germany are introduced to remind the reader of the benchmarks in a system of power that was invasive abroad, justified preemptive war as a matter of official doctrine, and repressed all opposition at home—a system that was cruel and racist in principle and practice, deeply ideological, and openly bent on world domination. Those benchmarks are introduced to illuminate tendencies in our own system of power that are opposed to the fundamental principles of constitutional democracy. Those tendencies are, I believe, “totalizing” in the sense that they are obsessed with control, expansion, superiority, and supremacy.

The regimes of Mussolini and Stalin demonstrate that it is possible for totalitarianism to assume different forms. Italian fascism, for example, did not officially adopt anti-Semitism until late in the regime’s history and even then primarily in response to pressure from Germany. Stalin introduced some “progressive” policies: promoting mass literacy and health care; encouraging women to undertake professional and technical careers; and (for a brief spell) promoting minority cultures. The point is not that these “accomplishments” compensate for crimes whose horrors have yet to be fully comprehended. Rather, totalitarianism is capable of local variations; plausibly, far from
being exhausted by its twentieth-century versions, would-be totalitarians now have available technologies of control, intimidation, and mass manipulation far surpassing those of that earlier time.

The Nazi and Fascist regimes were powered by revolutionary movements whose aim was not only to capture, reconstitute, and monopolize state power but also to gain control over the economy. By controlling the state and the economy, the revolutionaries gained the leverage necessary to reconstruct, then mobilize society. In contrast, inverted totalitarianism is only in part a state-centered phenomenon. Primarily it represents the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.

Unlike the classic forms of totalitarianism, which openly boasted of their intentions to force their societies into a preconceived totality, inverted totalitarianism is not expressly conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. Typically it is furthered by power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions. There is a certain heedlessness, an inability to take seriously the extent to which a pattern of consequences may take shape without having been preconceived.

The fundamental reason for this deep-seated carelessness is related to the well-known American zest for change and, equally remarkable, the good fortune of Americans in having at their disposal a vast continent rich in natural resources, inviting exploitation. Although it is a cliché that the history of American society has been one of unceasing change, the consequences of today’s increased tempos are less obvious. Change works to displace existing beliefs, practices, and expectations. Although societies throughout history have experienced change, it is only over the past four centuries that promoting innovation became a major focus of public policy. Today, thanks to the highly organized pursuit of technological innovation and the culture it encourages, change is more rapid, more encompassing, more welcomed than ever before.

Change became a private enterprise inseparable from exploitation and opportunism.

—which means that institutions, values, and expectations share with technology a limited shelf life. We are experiencing the triumph of contemporaneity and of its accomplice, forgetting, or collective amnesia. Stated somewhat differently, in early modern times change displaced traditions; today change succeeds change.

The effect of unending change is to undercut consolidation. Consider, for example, that more than a century after the Civil War the consequences of slavery still linger; that close to a century after women won the vote, their equality remains contested; or that after nearly two centuries during which public schools became a reality, education is now
being increasingly privatized. In order to gain a handle on the problem of change, we might recall that among political and intellectual circles, beginning in the last half of the seventeenth century and especially during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, there was a growing conviction that, for the first time in recorded history, it was possible for human beings to deliberately shape their future. Thanks to advances in science and invention it was possible to conceive change as “progress,” an advancement benefiting all members of society. Progress stood for change that was constructive; that would bring something new into the world and to the advantage of all. The champions of progress believed that while change might result in the disappearance or destruction of established beliefs, customs, and interests, the vast majority of these deserved to go because they mostly served the Few while keeping the Many in ignorance, poverty, and sickness.

An important element in this early modern conception of progress was that change was crucially a matter for political determination by those who could be held accountable for their decisions. That understanding of change was pretty much overwhelmed by the emergence of concentrations of economic power that took place during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Change became a private enterprise inseparable from exploitation and opportunism, thereby constituting a major, if not the major, element in the dynamic of capitalism. Opportunism involved an unceasing search for what might be exploitable, and soon that meant virtually anything, from religion, to politics, to human well-being. Very little, if anything, was taboo as, before long, change became the object of premeditated strategies for maximizing profits.

It is often noted that today change is more rapid, more encompassing than ever before. I shall suggest that American democracy has never been truly consolidated. Some of its key elements remain unrealized or vulnerable; others have been exploited for antidemocratic ends. Political institutions have typically been described as the means by which a society tries to order change. The assumption was that political institutions would themselves remain stable, as exemplified in the ideal of a constitution as a relatively unchanging structure for defining the uses and limits of public power and the accountability of officeholders.

Today, however, some of the political changes are revolutionary; others are counterrevolutionary. Some chart new directions for the nation and introduce new techniques for extending American power, both internally (surveillance of citizens) and externally (seven hundred military bases abroad), beyond any point even imag-
because of the great freedom it allowed, was inherently prone to disorder and likely to cause the propertied classes to support a dictator or tyrant, someone who could impose order, ruthlessly if necessary. But—and this is the issue addressed by our inquiry—what if in its popular culture a democracy were prone to license (“anything goes”) yet in its politics were to be-

A word about terminology. Superpower stands for the projection of power outwards. It is indeterminate, impatient with restraints, and careless of boundaries as it strives to develop the capability of imposing its will at a time and place of its own choosing. It represents the antithesis of constitutional power. Inverted totalitarianism projects power inwards. It is not derivative from classic totalitarianism of the types represented by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Stalinist Russia. Those regimes were powered by revolutionary movements whose aim was to capture, reconstitute, and monopolize the power of the state. The state was conceived as the main center of power, providing the leverage necessary for the mobilization and reconstruction of society. Churches, universities, business organizations, news and opinion media, and cultural institutions were

The emergence of the corporation marked private power unconnected to a citizen body.

in the chapters that follow I shall try to develop a focus for understanding the changes taking place and their direction. But first—assuming that we have had, if not a fully realized democracy, at least an impressive number of its manifestations, and assuming further that some fundamental changes are occurring, we might raise the broad question: what causes a democracy to change into some non- or antidemocratic system, and what kind of system is democracy likely to change into?

For centuries, political writers claimed that if—or rather when—a full-fledged democracy was overturned, it would be succeeded by a tyranny. The argument was that democracy,
taken over by the government or neutralized or suppressed.

Inverted totalitarianism, in contrast, while exploiting the authority and resources of the state, gains its dynamic by combining with other forms of power, such as evangelical religions, and most notably by encouraging a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of “private” governance represented by the modern business corporation. The result is not a system of codetermination by equal partners who retain their distinctive identities but rather a system that represents the political coming-of-age of corporate power.

When capitalism was first represented in an intellectual construct, primarily in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was hailed as the perfection of decentralized power, a system that, unlike an absolute monarchy, no single person or governmental agency could or should attempt to direct. It was pictured as a system, but of decentralized powers working best when left alone (laissez-faire, laissez passer) so that “the market” operated freely. The market furnished the structure by which spontaneous economic activities would be coordinated, exchange values set, and demand and supply adjusted. It operated, as Adam Smith famously wrote, by an unseen hand that connected participants and directed their endeavors toward the common benefit of all, even though the actors were motivated primarily by their own selfish ends.

One of Smith’s fundamental contentions was that while individuals were capable of making rational decisions on a small scale, no one possessed the powers required for rationally comprehending a whole society and directing its activities. A century later, however, the whole scale of economic enterprise was revolutionized by the emergence and rapid rise of the business corporation. An economy where power was dispersed among countless actors, and where markets supposedly were dominated by no one, rapidly gave way to forms of concentrated power—trusts, monopolies, holding companies, and cartels—able to set (or strongly influence) prices, wages, supplies of materials, and entry into the market itself. Adam Smith was now joined to Charles Darwin, the free market to the survival of the fittest. The emergence of the corporation marked the presence of private power on a scale and in numbers hitherto unknown, the concentration of private power unconnected to a citizen body.

Despite the power of corporations over political processes and the economy, a determined political and economic opposition arose demanding curbs on corporate power and influence. Big Business, it was argued, demanded Big Government. It was assumed, but often forgotten, that unless Big Government, or even small government, possessed some measure of disinterestedness, the result might be the worst of both worlds, corporate power and government both fashioned from the same cloth of self-interest. However, Populists and Progressives of
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as trade unionists and small farmers, went a step further to argue that a democratic government should be both disinterested and “interested.” It should serve both the common good and the interests of ordinary people whose main source of power was their numbers. They argued, perhaps naively, that in a democracy

The destiny of their country is fast slipping from popular control.

the people were sovereign and government was, by definition, on their side. The sovereign people were fully entitled to use governmental power and resources to redress the inequalities created by the economy of capitalism.

That conviction supported and was solidified by the New Deal. A wide range of regulatory agencies was created, the Social Security program and a minimum wage law were established, unions were legitimated along with the rights to bargain collectively, and various attempts were made to reduce mass unemployment by means of government programs for public works and conservation. With the outbreak of World War II, the New Deal was superseded by the forced mobilization and governmental control of the entire economy and the conscription of much of the adult male population. For all practical purposes the war marked the end of the first large-scale effort at establishing the tentative beginnings of social democracy in this country, a union of social programs benefiting the Many combined with a vigorous electoral democracy and lively politicking by individuals and organizations representative of the politically powerless.

At the same time that the war halted the momentum of political and social democracy, it enlarged the scale of an increasingly open cohabitation between the corporation and the state. That partnership became ever closer during the era of the Cold War (1947-1993). Corporate economic power became the basis of power on which the state relied, as its own ambitions, like those of giant corporations, became more expansive, more global, and, at intervals, more bellicose. Together the state and corporation became the main sponsors and coordinators of the powers represented by science and technology. The result is an unprecedented combination of powers distinguished by their totalizing tendencies, powers that not only challenge established boundaries—political, moral, intellectual, and economic—but whose very nature it is to challenge those boundaries continually, even to challenge the limits of the earth itself. Those powers are also the means of inventing and disseminating a culture that taught consumers to welcome change and private pleasures while accepting political passivity. A major consequence is the construction of a new “collective identity,” imperial rather than republican (in the eighteenth-
century sense), less democratic. That new identity involves questions of who we are as a people, what we stand for as well as what we are willing to stand, the extent to which we are committed to becoming involved in common affairs, and what democratic principles justify expending the energies and wealth of our citizens and asking some of them to kill and sacrifice their lives while the destiny of their country is fast slipping from popular control.

I want to emphasize that I view my main construction, “inverted totalitarianism,” as tentative, hypothetical, although I am convinced that certain tendencies in our society point in a direction away from self-government, the rule of law, egalitarianism, and thoughtful public discussion, and toward what I have called “managed democracy,” the smiley face of inverted totalitarianism.

For the moment “Superpower” is in retreat and “inverted totalitarianism” exists as a set of strong tendencies rather than as a fully realized actuality. The direction of these tendencies urges that we ask ourselves—and only democracy justifies using we—what inverted totalitarianism exacts from democracy and whether we want to exchange our birthrights for its mess of pottage.

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“Citizens have to learn how to connect their personal lives to political issues.”

Examing everyday political conversation reveals an often ignored dimension of public engagement and disengagement, rebellion and acquiescence, curiosity and complacency. This seemingly shallow dimension is the intangible realm of unspoken political etiquette, where citizens delicately but very firmly establish a sense of what the public sphere itself is—of what can be questioned and discussed, where and how. In the contemporary American public sphere, paradoxically, what marks a context as clearly “public” is often precisely the fact that the talk there is so narrow, not at all “public minded.” The people I met wanted to create a sense of community, but did not want to talk politics. Though they did gather together, they missed a chance to ignite that magical kind of power that can sparkle between people when they self-reflectively organize themselves. Such reflection does not necessarily entail ignoring local, individual suffering or abandoning local hands-on projects. In the process of alleviating real people’s suffering, citizens could wonder aloud about the political forces that may have helped create that suffering. While building the playgrounds and selling tickets to the local Halloween fair, parents could casually talk about whatever came to mind, including politics. People could learn to use their collective imaginations to improve what they can improve—to lend a hand, but also an imagination. But civic etiquette made imaginative, open-minded, thoughtful conversation rare in public, “frontstage” settings. The more hidden the context, the more public-spirited conversation was possible; but politics has evaporated from public circulation.
A longstanding argument in political research declares that most people are just too dumb or narrow minded to be good citizens. These studies are both right and wrong: on the one hand, there is overwhelming evidence that most people simply do not know the most basic facts about politics. On the other hand, many fascinating studies show that being interviewed can make interviewees into thoughtful citizens; the interviews opened up free, unjudgmental space, maybe for the very first time in the interviewees’ lives, for talking through vague political ideas, playing with their ideas in the light of day; interviewees then could notice inconsistencies and begin to reconcile them. But the potential is usually hidden, because usually interviewees have different contexts in mind when voicing contradictory beliefs; when the beliefs remain nicely packed away in separate closets, the interviewees can avoid noticing contradictions.

This insight is one key to understanding how contextual political opinions are; and studies dramatically show that people are fully capable of becoming good citizens, if a social researcher who prods them with good questions should happen along. But these studies do not set out to ask how different real-life contexts called for different “hats,” or why so few contexts ask citizens to wear their “democratic citizenship” hat. Thanks to these studies, we know that the hats are in the closet; the next question is how people decide which ones to wear to which occasions.

Non-elites have good reasons for believing that what they say about politics does not matter: it usually does not. Political battles are usually pitched in favor of the people who already have money and power. But this simple explanation would not tell us why the people I met censored their own speech, even when they were far from oppressive institutions. The people I met assumed that powerful institutions would not pay attention to common citizens’ public-spirited talk; authorities’ long shadows deeply colored the kinds of conversations that groups had, even in seemingly unpressured, voluntary situations, seemingly far removed from official settings. They steered their attention toward problems and solutions that they felt they could address without challenging those authorities’ definitions of citizens’ proper role; they did so without the powerful institutions’ having to exert any direct influence at all.

Luckily, while those in power can monopolize wealth and material production, nobody can control all the tongues in the world. As culture scholar Steven Tipton tidily puts it, “social and economic circumstances influence our thinking, but they do not do it for us.” Whether actively challenging, actively embracing, passively embodying, or selectively transforming the seemingly rigid forces that surround them, citizens somehow have to enact a life within these institutions.

Studies show people are fully capable of becoming good citizens.
and have to make sense of their world. In the process of doing that, they create the organizations of civic life. And these organizations become a force in their own right.

Some of the more useful ways of thinking about power take inspiration from Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony,” that highlights the meanings that dominated people give to their circumstances. This focus on meaning-making offers a way of understanding how oppressed groups have accepted or transformed their political powerlessness. According to this line of thought, practical, everyday knowledge and intuitions actively but implicitly connect people’s ideas to the powerful institutions around them; the way people make sense of everyday experience usually discourages them from thinking thoughts that might challenge the status quo.

A society’s political imagination is, according to this explanation, patched together in a way that makes domination seem natural and inevitable, odorless and invisible, “to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.” This hegemony is the ongoing cultural process that gerrymanders the boundaries of perception.

A more nuanced rendition of hegemony shows that subordinates’ social vision is not so hopelessly small at all. What Gramsci calls “contradictory consciousness” allows people both to notice and not to notice these “pressures and limits of simple experience, to stitch together mismatched pieces of contradictory reality and draw the contours of their shared, discussable reality. An example of a good study that starts to reveal this process is John Gaventa’s investigation of an impoverished and polluted Appalachian mining town, *Power and Powerlessness*. Gaventa says that government and the mining company crushed dissent over decades of struggle, and the newspaper ignored or condemned dissent, so that by the late 1970s, all that was left was silence; and poisonous water, and acid-filled mountain streams, and mudslides. After years of political domination, he says, valley dwellers created a culture of political silence, too hopeless even to voice feelings of outrage, too powerless even to formulate their own interests even to themselves. This silence may have sounded just like political acquiescence, but Gaventa says it was not. Valley residents told themselves that they did not care about their ruined home, but their resentment still could be heard in very subtle ways—and the culture of silence collapsed as soon as a plausible opportunity to challenge or avoid the mining company arose.

Still, a study like Gaventa’s does not go far enough in showing how citizens actively create hegemony. His valley dwellers’ silence seems simply to have happened as an automatic, natural, invisible response to the relentless cruelty of their situation. In Gaventa’s story, when a man whose water supply has been poisoned by strip mines declares “Black is beautiful,” referring to coal, he is explicitly declaring himself well served by the companies.
If he says nothing else to reveal his understanding of the situation, the only way we outside observers could feel sure that he was experiencing anything other than simple complacency would be to assert a connection between his attitude and our understanding of the valley’s history. That is, we would have to bypass the meanings the man himself gave to the situation.

We make the road by walking it; we create “the public” in practice.

Citizens have to talk themselves into their political ideas together, and that means having everyday places for casual political conversation. Talking ourselves into our feelings and opinions may seem like simple dishonesty or lack of self-awareness. You may be wondering, why can’t we just say what we really feel and think? Because thought itself is dialogue; a conversation that we imagine ourselves to be holding with someone, with ourselves, in which we talk ourselves through our thoughts and feelings.

How do people create “the public,” and give meaning to the act of participating in public life? We make the road by walking it; we create “the public” in practice. Our civic etiquette takes our perceptions of our own power into account, but is not simply caused by an “objective” wider world. Participants constantly “contextualize” any interaction, trying to make sense of it and the wider world, simultaneously. Through this process, civic practices inevitably empower or challenge institutions that the group implicitly holds on its social horizons.

This focus on conversation overcomes the dichotomy between inner and outer, subjective and objective, personal and structural. Instead of focusing on individuals and the inner dispositions they carry with them from one context to another, as studies of beliefs do, I listened in on the spaces between people—on the ways political ideas circulate, coursing through spaces that are neither “subjective” nor “objective,” but “intersubjective,” as Habermas put it. And instead of examining broad institutional hierarchies, as many studies of hegemony do, I tried to understand how people made those power relations relevant for everyday conversations and reality, by systematically sifting certain ideas and ways of talking out of some contexts and into others. If we listen carefully, we can hear just what it is about the wider world that members are taking for granted, instead of assuming that members somehow simply intuit everything about the institutions that an outside observer might notice or might learn through research. And, even more to the point, we can hear just how citizens create their own institutions—the seemingly free institutions of public life.

Political beliefs and political power are embodied in this elusive but very firm sense of what is appropriate to do or say in the contexts of the public sphere. How and why do some contexts evoke political conversation, and others discourage it? Understanding what speakers say in public is an important step in understanding what people assume talk itself is for, in those contexts, and ultimately what they assume public life itself is for and what democratic participation is. We answer the question, “What is democracy?” in practice; scrutinizing our practice might reveal to us that our implicit definition of democracy is not satisfying.

The beauty of the ideal public sphere is that it would allow the widest, most challenging and provocative ideas to circulate throughout the public. I found that ideas circulated in exactly the opposite way from what theorists would hope: the further
backstage the context, the more public-spirited conversation was possible. The same shift kept recurring: the farther the voice from a whisper and the larger the audience, the less eager were speakers to ponder issues of justice and the common good, to present historical or institutional analyses, to criticize institutions, to invite debate; to speak in a publicly minded way. Common sense considered the public sphere to be a place for dramatically airing self-interest and translating self-interest into short-sighted public policies; this folk definition of the public sphere kept most interesting debate out of public circulation.

Simple apathy never explained the political silence I heard. Inside of apathy was a whole underwater world of denials, omissions, evasions; things forgotten, skirted, avoided, and suppressed—a world as varied and colorful as a tropical underwater bed. There is no bottom layer to the cycle of political evaporation; citizens vaguely and ambivalently perceive or experience political issues but do not put them all into words: this is infinite, raw experience, that may in fact never be made recognizable, speakable, cultural. This bottom layer is made of the inevitable, unacknowledged connections we have with each other; dependence on unknown others for water and food, shelter and clothing, language and meaning. The way a person absorbs this level of experience is not observable to the fieldworker or to even the person experiencing it. It is like a dream: it happens, but we cannot grasp it in its entirety except in a theoretical, retrospective reconstruction, motivated by a theory of how the world works. And we all have such theories. One has to learn, for example, to connect or separate even something as basic as contaminated drinking water inward, to one’s own sick body, and outward, to a particular source of pollution. And this urge to connect the dots is powerful; to connect the dots, to make connections even where there are none! Everyone I met was aware, in some way, that they were connected to a wider world, beyond these first “exits” from political life, taken by mythically contented or disconnected or privately neurotic citizens, creating a relationship to the facts, as they ambivalently experience them.

So, the cycle of political evaporation begins on a bed of ambivalence and curiosity; people are not born apolitical. Beyond this fictional apolitical layer, obstacles lie in the path of any group that tries to express publicly minded sentiments in public contexts: groups can amplify the sentiments of anticonnection of the most bigoted, sexist, and homophobic members, and silence any members’ expressions of connection to the world, thus making the group seem more mean-spirited than the sum of the individuals, and evaporating any public expressions of tolerance and openness. Or groups can avoid talking politics in meetings, trying hard not to notice problems that can be addressed only through group discussion, leaving individuals secretly whispering vague worries and questions backstage. Individuals can silence themselves in group meetings, but still be able
to voice coherent political critiques in backstage contexts or in other groups’ meetings. Groups can ignore members who insist on talking politics in meetings, can silence their public-spirited speech in frontstage context.

Finally, any public-spirited idea that struggles through all of these obstacles still has to make its way past official and journalists’ roadblocks before emerging to the sea surface. In this manner, most political debate never makes it to set an agenda, to put one’s explicit demands on the table, to formulate an explicit belief to oneself. Even less debate makes it to the “first dimension of power”—the power to win or lose in an overt power struggle in the public arena. Challenges to the official definitions of citizens’ political participation have dissolved long before that.

While conversation did not make it to the surface, action did. Anyone in town could hear about the extraordinarily good volunteers exhausting themselves for the community (and privately wonder if this was the only possible solution to the problems volunteers addressed). Volunteer-style citizenship is the most temptingly easy, hegemonic format for involvement; it works by defining the floor for citizen participation in particular settings; by setting the boundaries for what citizens can say and how they can say it in the settings of the potential public sphere. People also knew about bigoted joking, because it sometimes translated directly into violence or name-calling, the first dimension of power: the aura of exclusion kept blacks and others out of some of the few “community” gathering places in town; just a few violent acts, and a subtle atmosphere of exclusion, bleed a frightening racist tinge throughout society without ever having to reach public discourse.

The cycle of political evaporation was also a cycle of misconstructions, in which volunteers and recreation group members represented themselves as self-interested and unconcerned, and activists then took them at their word and made dramatic efforts at rousing them from their supposed stupor. “Putting heads together to come up with solutions” was not the image that came to mind when volunteers thought about activism. Disengaged people thought of publicly minded talk as “soapboxing”—standing

People are not born apolitical.
up in a crowd and mindlessly yelling, to capture attention. Volunteers thought that criticism was bad unless people could do something about it. If all social problems are inevitable, then criticism is just theater.

News reporting about activism fitted well with these bystanders’ understanding of activists as people who are, at best, putting themselves on public display because they have a special kind of personality and “believe in standing up for their beliefs”; or because they are self-interested, or because they want attention; and in none of these cases offering any thoughtful, informed explanations for their concerns. The irony was, nobody really liked or admired self-interested speech and everyone detested theatricality. At an informal party after a small demonstration, one participant remarked drily that such events never even made it into the local news at all. To another event, the media came out because it was theatrical. “They asked me whether it would be or not: ‘Is it gonna be dramatic? Theatrical?’ They actually said they wouldn’t come if it wasn’t!” So, even though they disliked theatricality, activists thought that they had to stage dramatic events. Reporters did not like purely theatrical events, but thought the public would be entranced by enjoyable spectacles. The disengaged public read about activists’ stunts with disgust, if at all. In this tragic cycle of political evaporation, public speech was dishonored. The cycle reconfirmed Americans’ belief that public speech is nothing more than glittery self-aggrandizement.

On the other hand, the activists who tried so hard to sound like neutral experts would have appealed to people who appreciated their civic etiquette for its stuffy clauses and stiff vocabulary, for being difficult to understand; they would have heard it and thought that politics is boring and that they themselves were not smart enough to understand politics, instead of thinking that the activists are stupid. Those citizen-experts seemed to display knowledge of official processes and demonstrate that the activists are at least “screaming and yelling at the right people.” Volunteers would have thought that the stiff technical speech sounded authoritative but “distant” and “remote,” not something that could “affect them personally.” This kind of language thus would have reinforced all of these readers’ understandings of politics, as requiring very technical solutions.

Volunteer-style citizenship is temptingly easy.

Commentators, politicians, and theorists on all ends of the U.S. political spectrum applaud civic participation. Nobody ever comes out against it. After offering devastating critiques of the undemocratic nature of many institutions, many books and commentaries end with a general call for civic participation: participation in associations is hailed as the cure for many ills, from slow economic development to a declining sense of community, from the rise of loneliness and excessive competitiveness to inequality and excess corporate power, to ethnic and religious dogmatism, or as a partial cure for most or all of these at once.

I agree with Tocqueville and Walzer that vibrant civic life can infuse all of the rest of life with a fresh spirit, giving people ground on which to stand when presenting arguments against the excesses and narrowness imposed by any of these other spheres of life. But just advocating participation is not enough. The quality of public dialogue within these civic groups matters, too.
So what can help reverse this cycle of political evaporation, bring life to the deserted public sphere, and help Americans learn how to care about politics? Institutions do not all necessarily inspire a cycle of political evaporation: they can inspire the opposite. The national environmentalist organizations that helped a city antitoxics group, and the black Baptist church that hosted one townwide volunteer meeting, for example, implicitly told local citizens that publicly minded messages would not be ignored. By lending their ears, an irreplaceable resource, these national groups helped activists, and even some volunteers, to learn to speak in a new way in public contexts.

Without such counterforces to the institutions that discourage public debate, there were no public places for groups to speak with a publicly minded voice. Little local groups all over the country can try to develop such spaces from scratch; but a group that has access to the ears of a national or international organization that honors publicly minded talk—a religious body, an activist organization, a governmental body, an unusual media outlet—has an easier time, building upon the spaces that are already there, expanding the small breathing spaces into spacious openings. Local groups could make it part of their goal to keep those “ears” healthy, helping foster those broader organizations. The more that groups are able to speak in public, the more citizens will expect publicly minded debate in public contexts, and perhaps accept it as a cultural pattern.

Encouraging political debate is not identical to encouraging citizens to lend a hand. Presidents regularly stage ceremonies to honor volunteers; honoring volunteer work is a start—national service like Vista, that would pay volunteers a subsistence wage, for example, or the Thousand Points of Light Foundation, could help make volunteer work seem as important as it truly is. Yet a problem could easily arise if these volunteers became eager to help people one at a time, but at the cost of blocking out awareness of the possibly overwhelming, systemic aspects of the problems.

Some political theorists and politicians suggest repairing Americans’ bitter aversion to politics with call-in talk shows, or with call-in referenda, but these are not good solutions. Citizens have to learn how to connect their personal lives to political issues. A one-shot call to a radio talk show would likely reaffirm listeners’ belief that political debate is bewildering and disembodied, that ideas come from nowhere, and that people who care about politics just want to hear themselves talk at weird hours of the day and night. Such disembodied citizen participation neglects the process of learning to talk about politics. The theory behind this suggestion is that people are ready-made good citizens, naturally equipped to discuss, debate, understand how their concerns are connected to a wider world. But as interviews show, some citizens have had no practice in connecting their lives to politics; call-in talk shows and easy televised voting would open up a forum to unformed opinions that have not benefited from reflection.
And as the conversations between volunteers show, many citizens already have trimmed their aspirations before voicing them publicly—like impoverished people who, when asked what they would do with a million dollars, can imagine only as far as buying a warm winter coat. In radio call-in shows, callers are usually supposed to present themselves as representatives of “the little people”: powerless, simple, devoted to action and not talk. These shows often address politics with a spirit that is not open to debate; they dehumanize the other side instead of trying to engage in dialogue. These shows’ civic etiquette does not invite callers to debate, but only to become what one talk show host’s fans proudly call themselves: “dittoheads.”

Confessional TV talk shows, on the other hand, seem on the face of it to open up public speech to all, letting new identities and new topics burst into the public realm in a way that is more liberating and introspective than the polemical call-in shows. Some scholars say that talk TV grasps just how the smallest, seemingly quirky issues can really matter to real people, making the unspeakable speakable. Yet these shows open up the public sphere in a way that actually aids the cycle of political evaporation: in such self-confessional shows, citizens bare only the most private, intimate experiences for broadcast—like one participant who described to me, in great detail, her ex-husband’s drug problem and his failed efforts at quitting, and her unhappy childhood and more, but said that disclosing how she voted for president or disclosing her party affiliation was too private. The confessional talk-TV show enforces a relentlessly small circle of concern and outlaws reflection in public on the common good. Volunteers are called upon to lend a hand, therapeutic talk-show participants to bare their hearts; still missing from both styles is a thinking, moral soul that is loyal connected to the wider world. Direct questioning of politicians in so-called “town meetings” on TV could raise the level of political debate among politicians, as one 1992 presidential debate that included citizens’ direct questions showed; and if debate amongst politicians were less silly, and if there were some way of preventing politicians from planting fake citizens in the audience to ask only questions the politicians are prepared to answer, then citizens might be less disgusted, more inclined to talk reasonably with each other. But one-time events will not create ongoing public discussion. Volunteers had good, moral reasons for avoiding political discussion; and it took a long time for activists to unravel their culture of political avoidance and learn to value publicly minded debate. “Deliberative polling” is another intriguing suggestion aimed at rebuilding democracy:

Many citizens claim only to care about their own self-interest.
James Fishkin has advocated gathering about 600 citizens from all over the country and all walks of life, to meet for several days to discuss the issues of the day. The group would represent a perfect cross-section of Americans, showing how we would think if we had had the opportunity to deliberate. The results of their deliberations would, he hopes, be widely reported in the media, possibly replacing the media’s excessive reporting of the “top of the head” responses that people usually give to standard poll questions. The deliberative poll and stories about it might raise the level of media discussion and could certainly help avoid the often destructively mindless use of political surveys in the media, and perhaps do a little bit to germinate a new political culture.

Unlike most groups in the United States, the Christian right is better able than others to bring questions of the common good into public circulation, because religious language is not bereft of public-minded rhetoric, as political language is. When Americans want to talk about the common good it is easier to use religious language. The problem is that the way fundamentalists understand “religion” does not include interpretation, debate, evidence—God already gave all the answers—and there is a tendency to dehumanize those who disagree—“humanists,” gays, Jews, Muslims. Another language that purports to have all the answers without requiring public debate is the language of the free market. According to that approach, money talks, so people do not need to. An irony in the United States is that while “humanists” avoid talking about the common good, fundamentalists and free-market advocates join hands, using the language of a collective good to advocate private schooling, private health care, and private charity instead of welfare, individual punishment instead of social compassion. The task for a modern public is to develop a way of talking about the common good of diverse citizens that remains open to debate. But when public spirit evaporates from everyone else’s public discourse, the only “moral” voice left in public is the voice that calls for citizens to abandon the public good.

What if newspapers opened up spaces for grassroots groups to write columns explaining their positions, called public meetings, reported more actively on grassroots efforts? What if social service workers avoided the temptation to enlist volunteers one at a time to treat each problem one at a time? What if political organizers learned how to listen to their constituents more acutely? Organizers who are interested in making the link between local and global politics often grow discouraged when so many citizens claim only to care about their own self-interest, only about issues “close to home.” Organizers could listen to members talk in more than one context, and could pay attention to how different contexts amplify or muffle publicly minded analyses and concerns. Organizers could recognize that their ears are at least as important as their mouths, that just offering themselves as a public audience is perhaps the most constructive thing they can do, listening to local groups offer political analyses in public, reassuring local groups that it is permissible, and good, to discuss politics in public spaces.
Most important, citizens themselves can cultivate a sense of respect for the power of talk itself. Of course, hands-on relief of suffering is important; but talking about the human causes of suffering is important, too; and the two could go together. Busy volunteer groups might feel that they do not have time to devote to such discussion, but often, talking about it in public-spirited terms would not take any more time at all, and in the long run, that kind of discussion could inspire people, and lead to more thoughtful and effective ways of addressing the problems. Rather than focusing on changing only the private beliefs and “inner” values or the “outer” powers that make participation so difficult, we could devote more care to opening up everyday contexts for publicly minded talk, and valuing those public places.

While the parking-lot-filled, toxin-laden suburban landscape surrounding the groups may seem unusually desolate, it clearly shows how hard it can be to develop a sense of togetherness in the suburban places where most Americans live. And while the polluted physical environment surrounding the groups may seem extraordinary, it clearly shows that citizens’ lack of attention is not simply due to lack of danger or lack of perceived danger. How different are the rest of us from these neighbors of toxic industries, ringed around by military bases exporting weapons to the world, witnessing fires and explosions and watching the nuclear battleships float by? Perhaps we live a few more miles away, but how far? If the chemical plants moved to some country with lower environmental standards, would that be far enough? Perhaps we feel safe. If we do not, we, too, manage our feelings somehow, perhaps by telling each other that the problems are not close to home. In trying to get along, and make the world seem to make sense, we sometimes develop an etiquette for talking about political problems that makes it harder for us to solve them.

The act of carving out public space for open-ended, broad-minded political conversation could, potentially, implicitly call into question many unjust forms of power. When citizens assume that speaking in public is a source of power, public speech magically can become a source of power. But when we assume that public speech is untrustworthy, useless, and dangerous, then we lose a precious, magical gift: the ability to decide what goes on in public—to represent ourselves to ourselves—and to make sense of the world together.

Tracing this process of political evaporation shows how some Americans create the local institutions of the public sphere, tells us what they think the public sphere is, tells us what they assume community and democracy are. Recreation group members gathered because members wanted friendship and community, a
home base. Volunteers and activists gathered to try to make the world better. Yet, all the groups’ sense of political etiquette prevented them from fully following up on their humanitarian impulses for gathering together, preventing their desires—for togetherness, for community improvement, for world improvement—from reaching full bloom. For most of the Americans portrayed here, and probably for most Americans, the public sphere is a dry and dismal place, from which intelligence, curiosity, and generosity have evaporated. Yet, the people I met also ambivalently knew that they were deeply connected to a wider world. Ambivalently, most wanted a wider circle of concern than they let themselves voice in public.

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“America’s civic life has shifted from stress on shared values and goals to the pursuit of specialized interests.”

The great civic transformation of our time has diminished America’s democracy, leaving gaping holes in the fabric of our social and political life. The civic past cannot be revived, of course. Nor should it be. Before the rights revolutions of the late 20th century, too many people were marginalized and disempowered; and before the recent proliferation of citizen advocacy groups, too many important values were excluded from agendas of public debate. Nevertheless, critical aspects of the classic civic America we have lost need to be reinvented—including shared democratic values, a measure of fellowship across class lines, and opportunities for the many to participate in organized endeavors alongside the elite few.

To strengthen our democracy, we Americans need to reform our civic life, reasserting ourselves as practitioners of the preeminent democratic arts of “combination.” But what sorts of reforms should we undertake? Currently fashionable proposals call for shrinking government, concentrating civic energies at the local level, and handing public social services to religious congregations. From the perspective of the history we can readily grasp why such proposals might do more harm than good. Then we can move on to consider national-level reforms, including fresh strategies for civic organizing, and measures that could be undertaken to make the national media, elections, and government supportive of renewed democratic vitality in American civil society.

We live in a nation marked by growing gaps between the rich and the upper middle class versus everyone else—in a country experiencing the withdrawal of privileged people into gated
communities, Potemkin village vacation spots, separate schools, and expensive box seats at sporting events. America’s civic life has shifted from membership mobilization to advocacy and management and from stress on shared values and goals to the pursuit of specialized interests. In an era when the highly educated and the well-to-do are cocooning within separate and privileged arrangements of all kinds, at a time when money and top-heavy initiatives count for more and more in organized politics and associational life, how could our national democracy possibly be revitalized through indiscriminate increases in any and all kinds of local sociability and neighborly charity? The people most likely to take local community and “social capitalism” to heart—to benefit from them and feel self-satisfied—are, I fear, the same folks already flourishing, in increasingly privatized ways, in America’s ever more lightly governed version of just plain old capitalism. Improving local communities, and social life more generally, will not create sufficient democratic leverage to tackle problems that can only be addressed with concerted national commitment.

The state of Maine, for example, is a wonderfully civic place, scoring near the top of Putnam’s cross-state index of social capital. No surprise, for Maine has strong civic traditions, a progressive Clean Elections Law, and relatively high voting rates. The state boasts remarkably neighborly towns; active nonprofits and citizens’ groups; elected officials readily available for personal contact; public radio and television stations plus the Bangor Daily News practicing civic journalism at its best; and native wealthy citizens (above all novelist Stephen King and his wife, Tabitha) who give generously and wisely to community undertakings everywhere in Maine. All of the good things prescribed by communitarians and social capital theorists are already happening in Maine. But Mainers still need to be part of broader national community and democratic politics with real clout. Over the decade of the 1990s, four-fifths of Maine families have experienced a steady deterioration in real incomes. What is more, the erosion of health insurance marches forward inexorably, as more and more Maine businesses and middle-class as well as poor people suffer from the rate-setting practices of nationally powerful insurance companies. Despite local civic vitality, in other words, many Maine communities and people have been badly hurt by the erosion of active democratic government in the United States.

Much the same may be true across the United States. A recent Pew Foundation study found that 77 percent of Americans “feel connected to their communities, and say the quality of life there is excellent or good.” Detailed results debunk “the popular myth that Americans are isolated in their homes and offices.” They document that “people have a profound sense of connectivity to their communities and their neighbors, are volunteering in record numbers, are helping neighbors to solve problems, and are optimistic about the future.” Yet “Americans still have many concerns,” concluded Suzanne W. Morse, executive director of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, who directed the study. Respondents were asked to rank order various concerns, and the “top problems ... facing communities across the country” turned out to be “the lack of jobs that pay a living wage” and “access to affordable health care.” These,

We must find ways to nurture national solidarity, as well as local community.
of course, are widespread problems that must be addressed by active democratic government. They cannot be solved by scattered local action, neighborly interactions, or occasional volunteering orchestrated by church congregations or nonprofit agencies. The Pew results suggest that many pundits in the current civic engagement debate have misdiagnosed the problem.

To correct for recent civic losses and revitalize American democracy, we must find ways to nurture national solidarity as well as local community. And we need national-level reforms with bite, targeted on powerful institutions and nationally ambitious activists. No more than anyone else who has studied civic trends in the United States do I have a magic wand to produce immediate civic revitalization. That acknowledged, let me make some bold, even speculative recommendations—most of which run very much against the grain of currently fashionable civic reforms.

Civic transformations happened abruptly in late-20th-century America, driven by youthful activists who bypassed older membership federations, launched new social movements, and ended up fashioning new models of professional advocacy to press rights for the disadvantaged and fresh understandings of the public interest. Social, political, and technological factors converged to facilitate the civic transformation of the 1970s to 1990, yet new ideas about the value of professional association building were also crucial. Now that the downsides of earlier changes are becoming apparent, there is, once again, room for fresh understandings of what it will take to enhance American civic democracy. Leaders who understand the democratic deficits of our overly professionalized and elitist contemporary civic life can devise new models of association building, blending the best of the old and the new civic America.

Innovation need not proceed in a vacuum, because promising reinventions are already under way. From a broad brush perspective, the substitution of professional management and advocacy for mass-mobilizing politics and membership-based associational activities has been the dominant trend since the 1960s. But organizers in certain social movements have more or less self-consciously combined classic and innovative styles of civic organizing—using the most up-to-date communications tactics for fundraising and lobbying while at the same time drawing large numbers of Americans into associational networks and organized shared endeavors. Many of these same movements and associations have also rediscovered the efficacy of using social contacts to draw members and their friends and neighbors into political campaigns. The latest political science research reveals that when it comes to drawing people to the polls on election day, person-to-person contact works better than repeated mailings or anonymous telephone canvasses, let alone impersonal television advertising. Strengthening participatory associations may thus be the key to political as well as civic revitalization. During the 1990s, a number of real-world associations and movements discovered, and practiced, this truth for themselves.
Since 1995, for example, a reenergized American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), under the presidency of John Sweeney, combined staff-led lobbying with grassroots organizing in workplaces and during election campaigns. Along with some (though not all) of its member internationals, the AFL-CIO now welcomes and nurtures unconventional activists devoted to organizing new workplaces and activating minority and women workers, who historically were marginalized in union bureaucracies. Some of these new organizer-recruits come from blue-collar and professional workplaces; others come from college campuses, from other social movements, and from religious seminaries. AFL-CIO training efforts include innovative efforts, such as “Union Summer” and “Seminary Summer.”

Local volunteers remain detached from national centers of power.

Taking heart from such already existing models of popular civic mobilization, as well as from America’s long civic history, contemporary activists have various strategies open to them as they launch new associations, reorient existing ones, or take part in multigroup movements for social and political change.

Civic activists (and the patrons who help them to get started) can consider building networks of chapters, holding recurrent representative meetings, and raising ongoing resources through dues from members—or affiliated groups. Since the 1960s, America’s “civic entrepreneurs” have rarely proceeded in these ways, because it seems so much easier to open central offices with media people, lobbyists, and computerized mailing lists. But taking longer and asking for a greater commitment may result in a greater payoff. Sustained infrastructure building—provided it is not just local but translocal—can generate greater influence than centralized efforts focused on Washington, D.C., or ephemeral plays for attention in the national media. It takes time to connect leaders and members to one another across places or institutions, yet this is the only way to draw large numbers of people into a movement and the best way to generate sustained leverage to make a difference beyond one issue battle or election.

Interestingly, there are signs that some Washington, D.C.-based advocacy groups are becoming more interested in federated chapter building. In recent years, the AARP has hired organizers to work full time at developing new state and local chapters. And Jonah Edelman, son of the leader of the professionally run Children’s Defense Fund, has been working for some time now to develop networks of dues-paying chapters in an associated organization called Stand for Children. The hallmark of such approaches is leadership training and steady recruitment through...
an outward radiating network of contacts. In turn, leader-organizers have to be given an ongoing stake in the associational effort through shared and representative decision making.

Professionally run advocacy groups and research institutes can also learn to form persistent partnerships with membership associations. Not every civic association, old or new, needs to become a full-fledged membership network. Advocacy groups, research institutes, and other memberless kinds of civic organizations can continue to do the professional tasks they do best, simultaneously forming partnerships with membership groups or institutions. Planned synergy of this sort fueled many of the most successful social movements and legislative drives in American history, and there is no reason why Washington, D.C.-based advocacy groups cannot seek out unlike (as well as like) partners in contemporary coalitions. “Inside the Beltway” ought to become an outdated phrase for advocates—especially for those who care about causes not favored by the most powerful established interests. Of course, people who want democratic changes should continue to work for and with Washington, D.C.-based groups. But citizen advocacy groups should always be looking for ways to cooperate with—and stimulate and learn from—organizations that themselves have widespread, interactive memberships.

Finally, we come to the need for reforms in government and politics. It may seem perverse to wind up a book about civic transformation by talking about changes in government and electoral politics, but this historical tour has taught us that representative government and politics serve as both models and opportunity structures for associational activities. Americans became a civic people in the first place by building voluntary associations that imitated the routines of representative government—and voluntary federations often, in turn, sought to influence and work with government. Not incidentally, recent shifts toward management rather than membership have coincided with a turn toward regulatory politics in Washington, D.C. And recent civic changes have unfolded in parallel with shifts toward professionally managed and television-oriented electoral campaigns. As long as centralized and professionally managed institutions and advocacy groups retain special access to government and the media, and as long as advocacy groups and pollsters have more to offer office-seeking politicians than other kinds of actors, American civic democracy will not become much more inclusive—and local voluntary efforts will remain detached from national centers of power.

To achieve civic revitalization, therefore, we must also modify the workings of politics and government. Yet currently touted approaches to “political reform” may not be what we need. Too many liberal reformers have gravitated to the notion that getting big money out of electoral politics is the master key to civic improvement. Elections are currently as much about raising money as about mobilizing voters. Candidates and public officials spend high proportions of their time talking to rich people at fundraisers. And a horde of money-dispensing special interests swarm around every congressional legislative battle in Washington, D.C. So it is easy to see why Common Cause and other “good government” groups obsess about money in politics. But the problem is that good-

Reforms have pushed our polity away from true popular mobilization in politics.
government reform strategies, while unlikely in practice to succeed at reducing the political advantages of the wealthy, could easily undermine what remains of organized, popularly rooted political mobilization. In the name of limiting big money, a number of current good-government reforms would limit the ability of unions and popular groups to raise issues during elections; and some may greatly weaken political party efforts to mobilize new voters.

Long traditions of American political reform stretch back to the Mugwumps and the elite Progressives of around 1900. These reformers hated 19th-century political party machines, which they saw as promoting corruption. So the reformers worked for measures that would emphasize an unemotional, educational style of politics—and measures that would, ideally, give “every individual citizen equal voice.” However, the highly competitive, well-organized party networks, so hated by the Mugwumps, were also very adept at organizing and inspiring voters and turning them out on election days. Voter participation in the United States has never been so high—as a proportion of all those legally eligible to vote—as it was when the party machines held sway.

The United States has now had more than a century of experience with what I will call “neo-Mugwump” reforms, which promise to revitalize democracy by elevating the thinking individual over all kinds of group mobilization—and the results are not happy. With renewed vigor in recent times, Americans keep passing laws designed to get money out of politics, only to see each new round of “reforms” quickly circumvented. Of late, we have also passed tax laws to keep civic associations and institutions from engaging in partisan activities. In practice, such laws merely encourage professionally managed groups to proliferate, especially groups that can claim to be involved in “research” and “educational” lobbying while eschewing direct popular political mobilization. Intentionally or not, late-20th-century neo-Mugwump reforms have pushed our polity away from true popular political mobilization—and probably in other associational realms, as well. If 21st-century Americans continue down the neo-Mugwump reform road, by passing laws that make it still harder for all kinds of groups to draw people into politics, the results will further the tilt toward the rich and those with advanced degrees. Instead we need to envision and enact reforms designed to get broadly organized groups of people into politics.

After the 2000 presidential election culminated in a series of tawdry legal and judicial maneuvers, there was an understandable resurgence of interest in how U.S. elections are conducted. Reforms have been proposed by various groups, including the National Commission on Federal

“Reform” often treats politics as if it were something dirty.
Election Reform cochaired by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. National discussion is certainly healthy, but arguments are overly focused on how to count votes already cast rather than on ways to draw many more Americans into politics. After all, only about half of eligible American adults bother to vote at all, even in closely contested national contests. Unfortunately, the reform ideas getting the most attention are technical or regulatory fixes, while too little attention has been paid to one of the most promising recommendations of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, the proposal to make federal election day a national holiday.

National elections enhance civic engagement, researchers have shown, because they encourage popular involvement and build national solidarity. We should take note of this fact and do all we can to build drama, group efforts, and collective effervescence into National Election Day. Interestingly, Puerto Rico is the one part of the greater United States where contemporary voting turnout is unusually high—averaging 83 percent in presidential election years, and 70 percent in “off years,” up to 35 percentage points above turnouts on the mainland. Economist Richard Freeman has investigated the Puerto Rican phenomenon. He argues that institutional rather than personal factors must be involved, because when Puerto Ricans migrate to the mainland, they vote at a depressed rate like other Americans. In Puerto Rico itself, off-year elections are held on Sundays, and presidential-year elections occur on holiday Tuesdays, when the highest turnouts are recorded. “By reducing the cost of voting and making voting day a dedicated event,” Puerto Rico has increased turnout significantly, Freeman suggests. “Citizens with time constraints find it easier to vote on the Tuesday holiday or Sunday off-day,” and “citizens who would otherwise not vote are induced to vote by making the voting day a special event, which galvanizes political parties and their activities.” In effect, with its voting holiday, Puerto Rico has reinvented some of the entertainment, drama, and collective solidarity characteristic of 19th-century U.S. elections.

Like Puerto Rico’s Tuesday holiday every presidential election year, a new U.S. Election Day should not just be “time off”—for experience has taught us that removing obstacles to individual registration and voting is not enough to raise turnout. We need “motivated voters,” as Marshall Ganz explains, and much of the motivation must come from social example and organized mobilization. Twenty-first-century Americans should aim to make elections fun and compelling. The increased visibility of a holiday election day could, in itself, encourage more individual citizens to vote. But the holiday should also be an occasion for group involvement by unions, churches, institutions, civic associations, and all manner of other organizations. Politically active groups could use the holiday time to deploy poll watchers and get-out-the-vote activists, yet there might be additional ways to make Election Day an occasion. States, for instance, could declare contests, so that the localities doing the best job of raising their voting rates would get bonus grants for locally designated public projects. Workplaces and
associations could also stage contests, to see which units or chapters can achieve high turnouts. Institutions and associations can encourage people to go to the polls and throw after-the-vote parties to celebrate. Anything that enhances the social side of citizenship would help turnout—and an important side effect would be to strengthen associational bonds for groups that get involved.

Just as important as election reforms are measures to encourage political organizing and associational involvements in politics. “Reform” in the neo-Mugwump tradition often treats politics as if it were something dirty and implicitly holds up the ideal of an educated elite safely above and outside of politics. Ironically, although liberal advocacy politics grew out of the popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s, much of it has ended up reinforcing the Mugwump disdain for popular involvement in politics. Expertise and “public education” are often favored by advocacy leaders—which is understandable, because these reflect their special capacities as professionals. U.S. tax rules also push associations toward reliance on expertise and educational strategies. But it is not clear that this style of politics has the passion, heft, or social reach to pull regular people in, let alone to enable majorities of citizens to exert true political leverage.

As matters now stand, many associations in America have to go through convoluted and legally risky maneuvers to engage in politics. Election regulations and tax rules erect barriers between “partisan” and “nonpartisan” activities, and both liberals and conservatives use these rules (and advocate new ones) to demobilize their opponents. When conservative Republican Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the House, he was investigated and reprimanded for running a political education operation designed to train and mobilize conservatives to (horror of horrors!) win elections. Liberals applauded this reprimand and were equally pleased when the Internal Revenue Service investigated the mass distribution of voter guides by the Christian Coalition (on the grounds that it violated rules preventing tax-exempt religious associations from engaging in partisan politics). At the other end of the partisan spectrum, right-wingers are constantly agitating against political expenditures by the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Teachers, calling on Congress to pass so-called paycheck protection legislation that would prevent union expenditures on politically relevant activities without first asking each union member whether he or she wants a portion of individual dues spent in these ways.

All of these measures are equally perverse. As small-d democrats, all Americans should be happy when politicians engage in training other leaders and mobilizing voter bases—that he did this so effectively was one of Gingrich’s enduring contributions to U.S. public life. We should also be delighted when civil associations get involved in politics, especially groups, such as the Christian Coalition and the AFL-CIO, with large memberships that enjoy some representation in associational governance. Whatever one may think of any given group or its issue positions, political education and mobilization by popularly rooted federations enhance leadership capabilities and prospects for organized democratic leverage in

We need to get broadly organized groups of people into politics.
America. And organized group efforts also make it much more likely that individual citizens will be personally contacted, actively invited into political and civic participation.

I conclude that the United States should repeal or modify all kinds of rules designed to create fire walls between partisan and nonpartisan activities. This does not mean that campaign finance reforms cannot proceed. In fact, the best reforms have been enacted at the state level and involve voluntary adherence to rules of the game by candidates who, in return, gain access to public funding. Election reforms in the future can follow the example of the Maine Clean Elections Law, which limits fundraising and expenditures on advertisements by candidates who accept to run under its rules but allows associations to use their internal newsletters and communication mechanisms to distribute materials to voters. Such intraassociational expenditures do not count against the legal spending limits—and this, of course, can have the effect of strengthening membership-based electoral contacting on right, center, and left alike.

At the national level, reformers should work for both election reforms and tax incentives that would deliver the biggest advantages to associations that derive relatively high proportions of their funding from membership contributions and actually have interactive members who enjoy rights to participate in associational decision making. Some degree of tax exemption can still go to nonprofits and professionally run advocacy groups engaged in research and education. But more could go to groups with members who enjoy rights to participate in decision making, including the selection of associational leaders. Old-style chapter-based associations are not the only ones that could qualify if such rules were properly designed. Tomorrow’s associations will figure out ways to use new technologies to encourage membership participation, contributions, and interaction. Why shouldn’t our electoral rules and our tax systems encourage exactly that?

The way politicians govern after their election also has a profound impact on civic life. Elected officials and political party leaders often feel beleaguered by clamoring interest groups and overwhelmed by the need to court wealthy donors. They easily forget that political leaders have considerable ability to influence the mix of groups in their environment and some ability to shape the strategies used by actors who want to influence them. When public officials hold hearings or bring groups together to advise about policy agendas and options, they understandably include experts and advocates with established records in a given policy area. But when they want to learn what constituents think, they often turn to pollsters—or the expert staffs of nonprofit institutions or professionally run advocacy groups. Devising policies
becomes bifurcated from selling them. Associations and movements with large numbers of popular supporters—but few lobbyists or experts stationed in Washington, D.C., or the state capitol—get the message that they don’t count for much in setting agendas or choosing policy options.

Institutions, movements, and associations with large memberships could be assigned more prominent roles in congressional hearings and consultations by congressional staffs—not just symbolically, but in ways that could build public understanding and involvement in legislative decision making. This could happen when party leaderships in Congress are deciding how to frame agendas for entire legislative sessions; it could also happen when decisions must be made about how to approach a major policy concern, such as reforming health care. What I have in mind is more than just asking associational leaders to come to a hearing one day and take a position on a policy question. Associational leaders could be asked to pose questions to their memberships and gather a range of responses from state or regional meetings, from local chapter discussions, or maybe through Internet sessions with members. Congressional committees and staffers could make it clear they would value learning about the full range of responses and the reasons people give for them. At a later point, when actual legislation is being debated, elected representatives might return to groups that favor the options in question and ask for their help in explaining legislation and mobilizing broader public support.

Involving membership-based associations more directly in setting policy agendas and developing policy designs could produce better legislation—in closer touch with citizens’ everyday concerns and more likely to be successfully implemented. Experts are not the only ones who have useful things to say about, for example, the kind of health insurance patients and doctors need, or the sort of Patients’ Bill of Rights that Americans really prefer. If broader consultations with popularly rooted groups had occurred during the 1993-1994 national debates about health insurance reform, not only would reform legislation have been more likely to pass Congress, the proposals at issue would probably have been much better designed and more widely understood than the arcane plan designed by the advocates and experts who dominated the official planning process. Involving membership associations in the effort could only have produced better results—just as it did back in 1944 with the G.I. Bill.

Better policies would not be the only result of involving membership networks in governmental policy deliberations. When the word gets around that discussions at the PTA, or the union hall, or the local environmental club will formulate ideas to be fed into a report to Congress (or the city council or state legislature), people will find it more worthwhile to join the
discussion. If public officials raise the visibility and clout of popularly rooted associations—putting them at least on a par in policy planning with business lobbies, pollsters, and expert-dominated think tanks and advocacy groups—then the popular associations seem more relevant to the very people those associations hope to attract and involve. If membership associations are obviously part of the action as authoritative governmental decisions are made on issues of broad popular concern, they will quickly become more attractive to potential joiners.

I have argued that Americans must find ways to strengthen the links between democratic governance and representatively governed civic associations capable of involving large numbers of citizens. The specific strategies I have outlined may, or may not, be fruitful. In all likelihood, other thinkers and popular movements can come up with much better ideas. The process of civic revitalization must proceed by trial and error—and the more experimenters, the better. However, if I am not totally confident of the answers to our present dilemmas I have briefly outlined, I am much more certain of the diagnosis I have offered, inspired by a richer understanding of America’s civic past and a clear-eyed view of the startling civic changes of our time.

In classic civic America, millions of ordinary men and women could interact with one another, participate in groups side by side with the more privileged, and exercise influence in both community and national affairs. The poorest were left out, but many others were included. National elites had to pay attention to the values and interests of millions of ordinary Americans.

Over the past third of a century, the old civic America has been bypassed and shoved to the side by a gaggle of professionally dominated advocacy groups and nonprofit institutions rarely attached to memberships worthy of the name. Ideals of shared citizenship and possibilities for democratic leverage have been compromised in the process. There cannot be any going back to the civic world we have lost, but we Americans can and should look for ways to re-create the best of our civic past in new forms suited to a renewed democratic future. To accomplish this, we will need to go beyond moral exhortation and local do-goodism; and we certainly should avoid extending professional tendencies and patronage-based funding to our religious institutions, which have heretofore flourished through congregational fellowship and membership contributions. New strategies for translocal...
association building must be devised. And we must reform our national institutions to encourage and unfetter civic leaders who organize large numbers of their fellow citizens.

America has gained in important ways as professional management has displaced membership in our recently refashioned and enlarged civic life. But we need to be clear about the good things we have lost—about the diminished democracy and losses in fellowship across class lines that contemporary transformations have, often inadvertently, wrought. Taking lessons and inspiration from our nation’s rich civic history, we must find ways to fashion again for our own times the sorts of great voluntary combinations that long ago impressed Alexis de Tocqueville with the extraordinary capacity of Americans for the vigorous practice of civil and political democracy.

*The da Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University. This essay is drawn from her book, Diminished Democracy, © 2003, and published here with permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.*
“Democracy contemplates citizens joining forces and taking action on common problems through civic associations.”

At Kettering, every year we review our research by looking at all of it through one particular lens. This year, we have had our eye on the role played by civic associations, particularly nongovernmental organizations. We’ve become aware of a range of forces that appear to be reshaping what some call the independent sector. What we have learned has come primarily through observing what is happening in the large network of communities, organizations, schools, colleges, universities, and government agencies that we have gotten to know over the years. In addition, we try to keep track of what others are finding and what scholars are writing about. The Review brings some of this literature to the attention of our readers so they may join in the conceptual journey we have taken as we reflect on our research.

Our objective is to try to determine if changes in the independent sector may be contributing in some way to the anxiety and frustration that Americans now seem to feel about the direction the country is headed and about their seeming inability to affect the course of events. The concerns that worry citizens are familiar: an economic recession, global competition, the rising cost of health care, terrorism, and so on. These concerns are coupled with, indeed seem to reflect, a loss of confidence in the ability of the political system to respond effectively.

Last year, when we were looking through the lens of the economy we found that people had similar concerns. They were buffeted by job loss, mortgage foreclosures, and debt. Individually, they knew they could relocate, learn a new skill or profession, and be more frugal; yet collectively, they were at a loss about what they could do as a citizenry. People had little sense...
of political agency. Now, this same frustration with being unable to solve problems reappears when the issues aren't only economic. So we wonder if the civic organizations that have been available to citizens as vehicles for their collective efforts are less available or less relevant these days.

We are aware of what scholars have documented: some national organizations that once had local chapters that organized citizens have closed their chapters, consolidated their operations in Washington, and hired lobbyists to carry out their missions. At the same time, the balance in the independent sector between organizations that serve the general interest and those that serve particular interests seems to have shifted toward the latter, so much so that one organization, calling itself Common Good, has emerged to address the imbalance.

Kettering research done with the Harwood Institute and reported this past year in *The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community* shows that even national organizations that continue to support the general interest are turning inward, focusing on their existing programs while being pressured to demonstrate immediate and tangible results from their interventions. This tends to create a disincentive for organizations to build civic capacity in communities because it might well be difficult to prove that their intervention and not indigenous forces brought about any changes that occurred. David Ellerman, formerly of the World Bank, has written persuasively on this phenomenon. Moreover, local civic organizations argue that the requirement to show measurable results quickly ignores those accomplishments that are intangible. As Bruce Sievers points out in the chapter we print from his recently published book, there are fallacies or blind spots in the prevailing epistemological assumptions in philanthropy—primarily the assumption that there is a kind of “scientific” knowledge that can lead to effective social and political controls. Bruce argues for greater appreciation of practical, local knowledge. And some public administration scholars have found that reliance on best practices and benchmarking inhibits experimentation and inventiveness. We hear about these inhibitions’ effects when we talk to the civic entrepreneurs who drive community initiatives.

Nongovernmental organizations are intended to be vehicles for citizens and play a role different from governmental institutions. Several years ago, however, we at Kettering were rather surprised to find that citizens don’t make the traditional distinction between governmental and nongovernmental organizations. They see the two as essentially the same: large, bureaucratic, and inaccessible. Like governmental agencies, today’s civic organizations tend to bring their agendas to communities rather than derive their agendas from them. In a word, independent organizations may have become “colonized” by government agencies, a case that Derek Barker makes in his essay on this trend. Even in smaller civic organizations, professional staff have come to do the things that citizens once did; and these organizations are not necessarily citizen-controlled, or vehicles that people can use for their own purposes. Although such nonprofits may act on behalf of the public, they don’t necessarily act directly with or through the public. Consequently, civic organizations may no longer have the legitimacy to mediate, as they were once understood to do, between the citizenry and the government.

But what about citizens’ ability to create new organizations, perhaps ad hoc, to serve their purposes? This does continue to happen, although some argue that it happens less often because modern society fosters social isolation; we “bowl
Another way to proceed has been to assume that if traditional civic organizations are changing their roles, it is logical to assume that they will leave a vacuum in which new organizations or ways of organizing may emerge in response. In other Kettering periodicals, Connections and the Higher Education Exchange, we lay out what we have learned so far about the evolution of some academic centers into what may become NGO-like organizations. In one paper, “Democracy’s Hubs,” Martín Carcasson has described the opportunities for such an evolution that occur as part of the civic engagement movement that is sweeping higher education; and Scott London’s study, mentioned above, reports on what such centers in colleges and universities are already doing to strengthen citizens’ abilities to participate in public life, revitalize communities, mend the social fabric, and advance the common good. Such centers are already working beyond traditional forms of citizenship education to give students opportunities to practice a deliberative democracy they can use every day, not just in elections.

One of the most intriguing stories about alternatives to conventional civic organizing concerns an effort in small, community-based foundations not to follow “best practices” and insist on getting projects up to scale but rather to “start small and stay small.” Philanthropies with this orientation may provide better opportunities for citizens to come together and act on
agendas they have set for themselves. Freeing its grantees from the obligations to scale up to a nonprofit organization, the Battle Creek Community Foundation, for example, is supporting resident-led associations through its neighborhood investment program. This could be a novel way of civic organizing that makes use of what Bruce Sievers calls practical, local knowledge.

In our analysis this year we are as yet without a definitive conclusion as to whether the established civic organizations are less relevant and less accessible to citizens than they used to be. Still, we have seen enough evidence to be concerned and hope to move on to these follow-up questions: what kind of civic associations do citizens need, and what would enable new or existing organizations to respond to those needs? When I ask myself these questions, I come back to the citizens on the Gulf Coast we heard about after Hurricane Katrina. They wanted organizations that could talk to them about how they might come together, as a community, to rebuild their community. While most communities haven’t been decimated by a natural disaster, they have faced wicked problems that require them to come together and to act as a community. Their citizens have to make sound decisions that reflect what remains more important to them—in the face of inevitable disagreement over what is most valuable to them individually. And they have to make choices about how to organize their efforts so they will complement and reinforce one another. Communities have a lot of this choice work to do on their own, and they would benefit from civic, nongovernmental organizations that understand this work and how it is done.

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