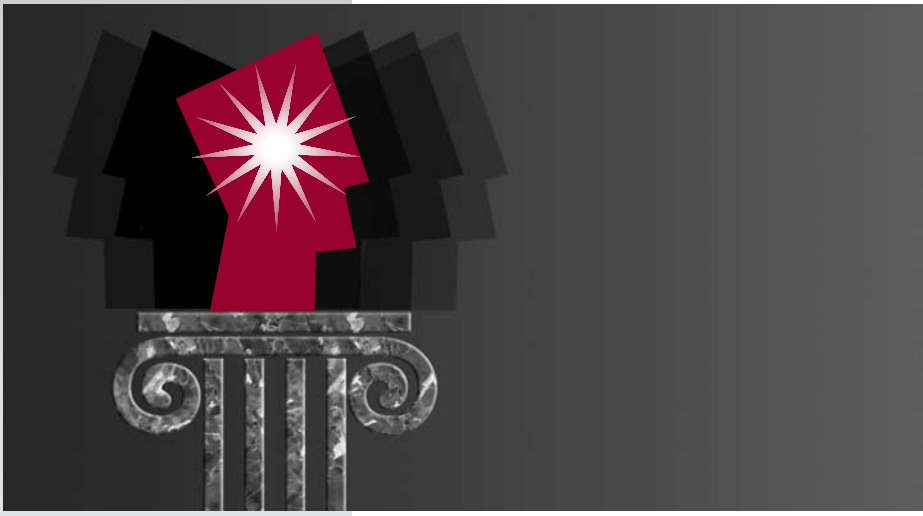
CIVIC AGENCY AND THE CULT OF THE EXPERT



Harry C. Boyte

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PREFACE

Harry Boyte has been a generous contributor to Kettering Foundation publications over the years. His insights into how democracy functions best are always unique and valuable; this paper is no exception. The distinction he makes between citizens as producers rather than just consumers who vote smart has been particularly powerful, and he—along with his colleague, Nan Kari—built on the idea of citizens as producers to come up with the concept of "public work." Public work is collective work done by the citizenry that produces things of value to the public. We have used this concept at Kettering because it aptly describes what citizens do in their communities when they build fish tanks for science teachers to use in classrooms or organize patrols to escort school children home through drug-infested streets.

We think of the decision making that citizens have to do to launch their collective efforts as a form of public work; "choice work," we call it. Recognizing deliberative decision making as essential to public work has helped rescue public deliberation from the misconception that it is merely one among many techniques for facilitating small group discussions. Furthermore, because public deliberation takes into consideration normative concerns—the things people hold valuable, and not just facts and technical considerations—it lifts public work out of purely instrumental politics. Public work enriches the concept of public deliberation, and public deliberation enriches the concept of public work.

In this paper, Boyte refers to the foundation's most recent reports, which distinguish between two admittedly interdependent political arenas. One is the institutional arena, where governments and major institutions like schools fill center stage. The other is the civic arena, where public work goes on in informal gatherings, ad hoc associations, and nongovernmental organizations. We have reason to believe that democracy in this second arena plays a role similar to that of the natural wetlands; it is the breeding ground at the beginning of the political

food chain. What we see here is more political than civil society but more civic than grassroots mobilization. The politics of the political wetlands has what we have been calling *organic* qualities. For instance, citizens relate to one another, not just to the state, and their relationships are based on the confluence of pragmatic interests, rather than on party loyalty. Resources are not financial or even material; they are located, as John McKnight argues, in the innate abilities of citizens that are magnified through their collective efforts.

Now, in this new paper, Boyte follows up on his earlier writing to concentrate on civic agency, which I take to mean the power to act as a body of citizens. Like Boyte, we have found people's sense of collective power sometimes strangely missing, not only because forces like those he identifies undermine it, but also because citizens themselves may fail to recognize it. When that happens, citizens defer to experts.

Like Boyte, too, we have found the prevailing concept of what it means "to know" especially stifling and hostile to civic innovation. Citizens have ways of knowing that can lead to sound decisions. This capacity for making sound judgments has been recognized since antiquity; yet in modern times, knowledge has been equated almost exclusively with quantitative measures produced through "scientific" means. This narrow understanding sidelines citizens as well as limits the criteria for accountability to that which can be measured. I say this while readily acknowledging my appreciation for the marvels of scientific knowledge, which I applaud when I go to my pharmacist or hear from my county extension agent.

In *Civic Agency*, Boyte provides a buffet of ideas to make a coherent case for a democracy in which citizens can be truly sovereign by becoming the agents of their own destiny.

—David Mathews

CIVIC AGENCY AND THE CULT OF THE EXPERT

Over the past century the expert has dethroned the educated generalist to become the role model of intellectual accomplishment. While expertise has had its moments, the price of its dominance is enormous. . . . Questions such as "What kind of a world are we making?" "What kind should we be making?" "And What kind can we be making?" move off the table.[1]

—Elizabeth Coleman, President, Bennington College

IN THE FACE OF MULTIPLYING GLOBAL CRISES, from economic collapse to global warming, many signs of a politics that develops civic agency—self-organizing, collective citizen efforts to solve problems and create public things in open settings without tight prior scripts—are also appearing. A civic agency approach is built through what we call public work, based on a sense of the citizen as a cocreator of a democratic way of life and a view that emphasizes politics' productive as well as participatory and distributive aspects. Such an approach is an alternative to conventional ideological politics, on the one hand, and community service and volunteerism, on the other. An alternative with rich emergent practices and concepts, it intimates the fulfillment of the vision of humanizing an impersonal world.

We are also caught in a corrosive knowledge war that presents a fierce obstacle to such civic politics.

On the one side are detached and technocratic champions of the singular authority of scientific and disciplinary knowledge—what might be called the "cult of the expert." Those of us in research universities are all too familiar with the posture of "the best and the brightest," bringing solutions to those viewed as ignorant, passive, needy, and pitiable. As we have come to better understand the inner workings of higher education, we have found that the expert cult is often a cover for deep insecurities—research faculty members are generally better understood as isolated and trapped scholars than as arrogant know-it-all experts. But the consequences of detachment are nonetheless dramatic. As Josiah Ober observes in *Democracy and Knowledge*, classical Athens had many practices and methods of aggregating expert and amateur knowledge. In contrast, "Contemporary practice often treats free citizens as passive subjects by discounting the value of what they know. . . . Willful ignorance is practiced by the parties of the right and left alike." An Athenian brought by time machine to the present would see the cloistered expert approach to problem solving and policymaking as "both worse for democracy and less likely to benefit the community."[2]

The cult of the expert has many effects. Professionals have narrowed identities from "civic" to "disciplinary"—no longer are most teachers or clergy or businessmen and women schooled to think of themselves as building the civic life of a place through their work. Dominant models of knowledge making undercut the moral and civic authority of forms of knowledge that are not academic—wisdom passed down by cultural elders, spiritual insight, local and craft knowledge, the common sense of a community about raising children. As they do so, they also undermine the confidence, standing, and authority of everyday citizens without degrees and formally credentialed expertise. As former Occidental College president Ted Mitchell has observed, one percent of Americans or less produce the knowledge that "counts."

Institutions of many kinds—from schools to nonprofits, businesses to congregations, government agencies to universities—have lost community roots. In consequence, institutions have come to be conceived as abstract, bureaucratic, and largely impervious to culture change, defined by rules, regulations, structures, and procedures, not as human creations that can in turn be re-created.

David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has made a strong case for the community side of knowledge, which he calls *organic politics*, "informal gatherings, ad hoc

associations, and the seemingly innocuous banter that goes on when people mull over the meaning of their everyday experiences."[3] Organic politics is open-ended, relational, and grounded in local knowledge and shared agreements accumulated through experiences over time. It generates power *to* and power *with*, not only power *over*. Community politics is narrative in quality. Like every person within a community, it is unique and one-of-a-kind.

But everyday citizens are not innocents in the knowledge war. An anti-intellectual "know-nothing" culture of victimhood and grievance has spread, especially dysfunctional for those in poverty or social isolation. Know-nothing politics disparages academic knowledge, science, and professional practices in the name of community and personal experience. This has been long developing. It was at the heart of "the Reagan Revolution" and it pervaded the G. W. Bush presidency. More recently, vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was a case in point. The appeal of her message reflects an overlooked divide in America—in recent elections, differences in education levels were a far more salient factor in how people voted than income levels.[4]

WE HAVE TO GET BEYOND EXPERT CULTS AND AGGRIEVED COMMUNITIES IF WE WANT TO DEVELOP CIVIC AGENCY, THE CAPACITIES OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES TO SOLVE PROBLEMS AND TO GENERATE CULTURES THAT SUSTAIN SUCH AGENCY. COMMUNITY IS THE LIVING CONTEXT FOR EVALUATING EXPERT KNOWLEDGE.

We have to get beyond expert cults and aggrieved communities if we want to develop civic agency, the capacities of people and communities to solve problems and to generate cultures that sustain such agency. Community is the living context for evaluating expert knowledge. But without engagement with other ways of knowing, appeal to community knowledge produces a know-nothing reaction to the larger world. Sustained interaction between different kinds of knowledge also requires reconceiving institutions as living communities and dynamic cultures, with norms, values, practices, and patterns that can be changed.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICS

CIVIC POLITICS, growing from populist traditions, is the way to overcome the knowledge war, expand civic agency, and recommunalize institutions. It is also possible to debate strategies for its spread in new ways after the Obama campaign illustrated the power of civic politics to democratize a strong technocratic system—presidential campaigns.

National presidential campaigns have long been a vivid example of the cult of the expert: professional political consultants exercise tight control not only over staff but also over candidates. Political folklore redounds with stories like the hapless Al Gore in 2000, prohibited by his advisors from talking about his passion—the environment—or like John McCain being removed from his "Straight Talk Express" in 2008 by campaign managers. Centralized control is rooted in several dynamics. Campaigns operate with large budgets, usually raised from very wealthy individuals. They require quick decisions to mobilize large numbers of people over a short period of time. They take place in a context that reflects social trends that have largely turned citizens into demanding consumers, whose preferences, it is claimed, can only be understood through scientific methods. Finally, experts justify an extreme degree of control because of the stakes.

It is thus noteworthy that the Obama campaign incorporated democratizing elements from the broad-based community-organizing experiences that shaped the candidate. Themes of civic agency infused the campaign in its field operations and in the candidate's speeches. As Tim Dickinson, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine put it, "[The] goal is not to put supporters to work but to enable them to put themselves to work, without having to depend on the campaign for constant guidance. 'We decided that we didn't want to train volunteers,' said [campaign field director Temo] Figueros. 'We wanted to train *organizers*—folks who can fend for themselves.'"

At the heart of organizing in the campaign was the idea of "public narrative," a view of people as meaning-making *cocreators* of their worlds, which was brilliantly crystallized by Kennedy School professor and former union and community organizer Marshall Ganz. Ganz had been taken with the power of "story" to motivate in organizing. As he put it, "Strategy is important, but the most important question is motivation, questions of commitment, courage, and solidarity with others. There, story is huge."[5]

In a series of insightful journalistic accounts of the field operation for the *Huffington Post*, Zack Exley, an activist who knew firsthand the difference between scripted mobilizing and organizing, described the enthusiasm that he found among leaders and organizers. Person after person remarked on the creativity, energy, and sense of possibility unleashed in others and in themselves. He followed Jennifer Robinson over a number of weeks. In October, his story for the *Huffington Post*, ended with her reflections:

> "I'm a different person than I was six weeks ago." I asked her to elaborate later. She said, "Now, I'm really asking: how can I be most effective in my community? I've realized that these things I've been doing as a volunteer organizer—well, I'm really good at them, I have a passion for this. I want to continue to find ways to actively make this place, my community, a better place. There's so much more than a regular job in this—and once you've had this, it's hard to go back to a regular job."[6]

The introduction of themes of civic agency into the presidential election suggested possibilities for the large-scale appearance of civic agency in contemporary society. But the aftermath of the campaign has also dramatized obstacles.

The organization that grew out of the campaign, Organizing for America, relapsed into patterns of *mobilizing* the troops to push predetermined issue agendas. And after the election itself, the language of candidate Obama quickly shifted from "we" to "I." At the news conference marking the first 100 days of his administration, President Obama was asked what he intends to do as the chief shareholder of some of the largest U.S. companies. "I've got two wars I've got to run already," he laughed. "I've got more than enough to do."

The view that experts know best infuses even the administration's civic initiatives. As Bill Doherty and Al Dzur pointed out, "The administration's domestic civic initiatives largely rest, to date, upon the idea that nonprofit leaders will solve the nation's civic problems. Since nonprofits are generally run by professionals who see people as needy clients and consumers, this gives most people little to do except complain or give thanks."[7]

Elements of Obama's organizing background remain, especially in powerful speeches that challenge people to take personal responsibility for their lives and, in international settings, in speeches that convey a rich understanding of the dynamism and complexity of every culture and the need for every society to take responsibility for its fate. But in most operations, the administration has been reshaped by the dynamics that erode civic agency in modern society: a media culture and intellectual establishment, which treat "yes, we can" with thinly veiled contempt; citizens who assume that government's role is to deliver the goods; a way of seeing government agencies (like other institutions) as static, service providers outside the life and culture of communities; and expert cultures rooted in elite institutions.

THE OBSTACLES TO CIVIC AGENCY AND ALSO THE TRADITIONS WHICH SUSTAINED CIVIC POLITICS AGAINST THE GRAIN OF THE 20TH CENTURY ARE IMPORTANT BACKGROUND FOR UNDERSTANDING HOW CIVIC POLITICS MIGHT EMERGE ON A SIGNIFICANT SCALE.

The civic agency approach, which proved successful in the campaign, hints at the need for changes far more sweeping than any administration can achieve by itself. Thus, the obstacles to civic agency and also the traditions that sustained civic politics against the grain of the 20th century are important background for understanding how civic politics might emerge on a significant scale.

THE POLITICS OF MASS MOBILIZING

JANE ADDAMS, in an essay published in 1902, warned about the emergence of a class of professionals, "experts" as she described them, who saw themselves outside the life of the people. In her view, detached expertise reinforced existing hierarchies based on wealth and power and created new forms of hierarchical power that threatened the everyday life of communities.[8] Her warnings anticipated the rise of technocracy in its various forms, from mass-mobilizing politics which divides the world into innocents on the one side and evildoers on the other, to an assumption, rarely deeply interrogated but nonetheless pervasive in our time, that trustworthy knowledge requires a stance of "objectivity" and "distance."

Addams's warnings applied to a group of architects of a new way of seeing the world that replaced "politics" with the same scientific administration of the state. Intellectuals came to write "about" politics, from a stance of detachment from the general citizenry, far more than they practiced politics directly with the people. Over time, expert claims to unique authority, based precisely on outsider ways of knowing, eroded the civic fabric of society.

As historian Daniel Rodgers has described in *Atlantic Crossings*, the roots of academic detachment grew rapidly before World War I. In the late 19th century, American graduate students studying in Europe were fired with the same reformist zeal to tame the destructive forces of the market that moved Jane Addams and others of their generation. But they adopted a model of scientific objectivity and policymaking in private consultation with political leadership, far removed from public involvement. Young intellectuals had passionate concerns for tempering the workings of the marketplace. But more and more, they saw this as an elite activity.[9]

The culture of private consultation found new authority and articulation with the launching of the *New Republic* in 1914. The magazine was a forum for a glittering array of literary,

political, and intellectual leaders—within the first year, H.G. Wells, Theodore Dreiser, Conrad Aiken, Harold Laski, Lewis Mumford, and a host of others. However distinguished, the magazine also played a significant role in marginalizing the involvement of "amateurs" in public affairs.

"We all have to follow the lead of specialists," wrote Walter Lippmann, who set much of the intellectual course for the publication. In his view, a growing body of opinion "looks to the infusion of scientific method, the careful application of administrative technique." In the modern world, science was the model for liberal thinking, and "only those will conquer who can understand." The magazine touted the outlook of engineering and the image of the state as a machine, whose workings were best understood by the application of technique. This technical outlook gained considerable impetus from America's involvement in World War I, which the magazine enthusiastically supported.

The real enemy of the war effort, in the editors' views, was inefficiency. By 1918, mobilization had made the piles of undistributed anthracite coal disappear. "It is a triumph of organized units over unorganized individuals," wrote one regular writer. An editorial elaborated, "In the last analysis, a strong, scientific organization of the sources of material and access to them is the means to the achievement of the only purposes by which this war can be justified." By the war's end, the *New Republic* was suffused with scientific triumphalism. The war had taught us, it said, "to meet the threatened class conflict by placing scientific research at the disposal of a conscious purpose." One unsigned editorial argued the consensus: "the business of politics has become too complex to be left to the pretentious misunderstandings of the benevolent amateur."[10]

These trends increasingly shaped North Atlantic definitions of democracy. Fifteen years after World War II, Seymour Martin Lipset was able to define *democracy* as "a system of elections," with scarcely a murmur of dissent in his work, *Political Man*. "Democracy in a complex society," wrote Lipset, "is a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among candidates."[11]

Politics came to be located in the state according to wide intellectual agreement. As I argued in my 2002 and 2007 Dewey lectures at the University of Michigan, this relocation reversed

2,000 years of history about the meaning of politics, a history championed by Bernard Crick in his great 1962 dissenting work, *In Defense of Politics*. Crick called politics "a great and civilizing activity" that emphasized negotiation and engagement of diverse views and interests. Drawing on Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, Crick argued that politics is about plurality, not similarity. Aristotle (and following him Arendt) had proposed that an emphasis on the "unity" of the political community destroyed its defining quality. He contrasted politics with military alliance, based on "similarity" of aim. In this vein, Crick defended politics against a list of forces which he saw as obliterating recognition of plurality. Its "enemies" included nationalism, technology, and mass democracy, as well as partisans of conservative, liberal, and socialist ideologies.[12]

Crick's view was rare. Lipset and Stein Rokkan's *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* summed up long-developing definitions of politics tied to what they termed the "cleavages" of modern society, based on divisions between classes, church, and state, and clashes between the national state and subordinate group identities based on regions, ethnicities, or language. These definitions came to define the nature of political struggle and even everyday social interaction in the late 19th century.[13]

> MOBILIZING HAS WON VICTORIES FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS AND ACHIEVED OTHER SUCCESSES ON ENVIRONMENTAL, CONSUMER, AND OTHER REGULATORY ISSUES IN A DIFFICULT POLITICAL CULTURE. . . . BUT IT IS A "SLASH AND BURN" APPROACH, WHICH RAVAGES THE PUBLIC CULTURE, CREATES SHARP DIVISIONS, AND RADICALLY DUMBS DOWN PUBLIC DISCUSSION.

In the United States, state-centered democracy and politics generated the major strand of liberalism in the last century, "mass politics," which stressed universal claims, distributive justice, individual rights, and a consumer view of the citizen. A one-dimensional view of the person took hold among opinion elites—that is, ordinary people (if not themselves) are singularly concerned with filling their needs and wants, not with questions of life purpose, creativity, civic contribution, or meaningful work. In such politics, as Thomas Spragens shows

in his recent book, *Getting the Left Right*, the center is not civic agency; it is justice, or redistribution of resources to those conceived as disadvantaged and victimized.[14]

Mass politics crystallized in the mobilizing approaches to citizen action and elections that emerged in the 1970s. Mobilizing techniques included the door-to-door canvass, robo-calls, direct-mail fundraising, Internet mobilizations, and other mass-communication methods. They built on ancient human tendencies to demonize those outside one's own worlds, as well as modern tendencies, fed by inventions like the printing press, to see those outside "imagined communities" of nationhood, ethnicity, religion, partisan politics, and other differences in antagonistic ways. But mobilization took "us versus them" to new levels of psychological sophistication, using advanced communications techniques based on a formula: find a target or enemy to demonize, stir up emotion with inflammatory language using a script that defines the issue in good-versus-evil terms and shuts down critical thought, and convey the idea that those who champion the victims will come to the rescue.

Mobilizing techniques based on such a Manichean message can be highly effective and they have spread across the world with global telecommunications. In the United States, they dominate the entire political spectrum. They are, in fact, a signature of mass society that conceives of people as frozen into categories and market niches rather than viewed in narrative, meaning-making, dynamic ways. And the pattern of one way, expert interventions and mobilizing, which is inattentive to the cultures and individual stories of communities, is pervasive across the whole sweep of our civic life. Beginning as early as the 1920s, for instance, YMCAs traded their identity as a movement of citizens served by civic-minded "secretaries" for a new identity—that of an institution comprised of huge buildings and scientifically trained exercise professionals who provide "programs" to paying members.

Mobilizing has won victories for disadvantaged groups and achieved other successes on environmental, consumer, and other regulatory issues in a difficult political culture—it is easy to understand its rationale. But it is a "slash and burn" approach, which ravages the public culture, creates sharp divisions, and radically dumbs down public discussion. It is useful to understand its wellsprings in the politics of knowledge and how new approaches to science are significantly challenging its underlying assumptions.

BEYOND POSITIVISM: COMPLEXITY SCIENCE, POETRY, AND CIVIC POLITICS

MASS-MOBILIZING POLITICS is anchored in "positivism," sometimes referred to as objectivism, a particular way of knowing that dominated through the 20th century. Positivist philosophers argued that a particular view of science, resting on the discovery of permanent, atemporal standards of rationality that could be found and then applied, forms the basis for sound knowledge. Scientific method was purported to be pure, its aim was to find abstract, universal truths "out there" that could be brought back to enlighten the masses, like the philosopher king returning to Plato's cave. Positivism assumes the detached, rational observer as the highest judge of truth and the most effective problem solver.[15]

Even though it has long been discredited intellectually, positivism continues to structure our research, our disciplines, our teaching, and our institutions of higher education. It is like a genie that academia let loose long ago, now lurking below the surface and threatening our destruction.

Faculty members undergo an insidious socialization, especially in graduate school. We learn a stance of ironic detachment from our fellow citizens, seeing ourselves outside what Jane Addams called "the common lot." We embody such aloofness in different ways. The image of the detached and objective scholar and teacher leads to the expert stance of "fixing problems," "discovering truths," and "dispensing knowledge."

Challenging detachment in his educational manifesto, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer has vividly described its human cost. "This mode . . . portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know. . . . The subjective self is the enemy most to be feared—a Pandora's box of opinion, bias, and ignorance that will distort our knowledge once the lid flies off." The consequence is isolation. "Objectivism, driven by fear, keeps us from forging relationships with the things of the world."[16]

Some intellectuals have long dissented from the outsider stance. For instance, John Dewey challenged elitist sentiments of his fellow editorial writers at the *New Republic*, most notably in his book, *The Public and Its Problems*, written in response to Lippmann's attack on the very idea of "public." Dewey focused on action and agency throughout his career, seeing detached thought as the pretension of credentialed intellectuals and academics. As Alan Ryan, his biographer, has put it, "One reason why Dewey was never able to accept the orthodox argument of stimulus-response was the fact that it made the organism whose behavior was supposed to be built up out of endless stimulus-response circuits too passive, too spectatorial, and too much a creature of the environment."[17] Rather, the person "makes sense of the world for the sake of acting productively on the world." This focus led Dewey to skewer detached intellectuals.

For Dewey, ordinary men and women—not simply credentialed experts—had vital roles in science, or the creation of what he called "social [or scientific] intelligence." Dewey argued that all knowledge—"academic" no less than "practical"—is social knowledge, the product of an interplay of experience, testing and experiment, observation, reflection, and conversation, the fruit of a myriad of thinkers and doers. All have the capacity and right to participate in knowledge creation. "Consider the development of the power of guiding ships across trackless wastes from the day when they hugged the shore," wrote Dewey.

> The record would be an account of a vast multitude of cooperative efforts, in which one individual uses the results provided for him by a countless number of other individuals . . . so as to add to the common and public store. A survey of such facts brings home the actual social character of intelligence as it actually develops and makes its way.[18]

Recent science expands on Dewey's insights and arguments about the social and relational nature of scientific knowledge. Thus Barbara McClintock, the Nobel Prize-winning biologist who laid foundations for modern genetics, based her method on positing the interdependent and relational qualities of living organisms. "By observing how genes function in their environment rather than regarding them merely as isolated entities, she discovered that bits of genes can move about on chromosomes," argued Sue Rosser.[19] For McClintock, her own relationship to the object of study was as important as the relationship genes had with each other. "Over and over again, she tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you,'" said McClintock's biographer Evelyn Fox Keller. "Above all, one must have 'a feeling for the organism.'"[20]

A rich concept of the person as an agent, cocreator of her environments, a maker of contexts and communities, is intimated by what is sometimes called "the new science," or systems theory. A striking example is found in strands of experimental psychology that emphasize humans as unique, relational agents of their development even in early childhood. Infants create ideas drawing from diverse sources, as they learn to shape their environments. This science points toward an open, dynamic concept of contexts and of the humans who make them.

The late Esther Thelen pioneered in such science, moving toward a "grand unifying theory" of the field of early childhood development. Thelen's science was based on a relational, interactive, emergent understanding of complex systems and how to theorize them. She acknowledged a debt to Dewey but a stronger debt to William James who, more than Dewey, emphasized the idiosyncratic qualities of each person and the gritty, turbulent, ironic, and heterogeneous qualities of experiences. Thelen's theory challenged views of infants as passing through predetermined stages of development. She argued instead that infants are experimental, self-realizing agents, profoundly relational and interactive with their contexts. Drawing on many of her experiments, a group of former students and colleagues concluded that infants are constantly assembling holistic patterns, such as reaching or walking, out of many elements, including testing, perceiving, feedback, and experimenting with ideas. "[An] integration of body and mind is a fundamental characteristic of all goal-directed activities. . . . Thought is always grounded in perception and action."[21]

Similarly, John Holland, a leading figure in the science of complex adaptive systems, at the Santa Fe Institute and the University of Michigan, has shown how conventional science is based on reductive approaches and linear or additive mathematics. These assume that the whole is the sum of the parts. For instance, the fuel consumption of an airplane is calculated by a linear equation, based on velocity and altitude.

Linear approaches hide the creative process of science, the metaphor making and model building that take place through intuitive leaps more akin to artistic endeavor than to deductive reasoning. These approaches also produce theories that cannot explain dynamic processes in which interactions among self-directing agents generate far more than the sum of the parts. The common scientific approach is "reduce the system to parts and, once you understand the parts, you will understand the system." It works fairly well in understanding simple, nondynamic, linear systems, Holland argues. But such an approach fails for emergent systems in

which agents interact and adapt without central direction. Adaptive and emergent systems "do *not* simply sum to give activity of the whole. The whole is more than the sum of its parts." In such systems, multiplier effects and recycling loops can generate enormous richness and complexity in unpredictable ways.[22]

Scientists like Thelen and Holland also show deep appreciation for nonscientific forms of knowledge making. Thelen not only challenged stage theories of development and disembodied thinking. She also differed from conventional views about scientists and their relation to the larger social world. Thelen saw the scientist as part of a common civic life, whose knowledge making is richest when she listens to diverse forms of knowledge. In Esther Thelen's view, theory grows not only from use of the scientific method but also from a rich and interactive set of plural relationships, with "amateurs," parents and families, as well as with other scientists. Thelen's populist science suggests a conception of the person not simply as a problem solver, but more broadly as a cocreator of the contexts in which problem solving takes place.

CIVIC POLITICS, LIKE POETRY, IS CONCERNED WITH QUESTIONS OF MEANING, PURPOSE, JUSTICE, AND EVEN BEAUTY—ALL FULL OF AMBIGUITY AND LADEN WITH CONFLICTS OF VALUE, ALL CONSTITUTIVE OF EFFORTS TO BUILD A GOOD SOCIETY.

Holland argues that one major limitation of science is found in its effort to eliminate ambiguity. He invites us to compare science with poetry: "A scientific theory aims at elimination of ambiguity through a rigorous line moving from premises to conclusion by truth-preserving steps. . . . The scientist relies on the conventions of logic and mathematics to tie observations into a framework that makes prediction possible." In contrast, "the poem aims at obliqueness and ambiguity to engage the reader at multiple levels." The result, in Holland's view, is that "the insights of poetry far surpass those of science in these domains . . . as they are characterized by words like *beauty, justice, purpose*, and *meaning*."[23]

Civic politics, like poetry, is concerned with questions of meaning, purpose, justice, and even beauty—all full of ambiguity and laden with conflicts of value, all constitutive of efforts

to build a good society. Moreover, civic politics is not a spectator sport. Politics not only raises the question of what to achieve but also of how to achieve it.

The project of dynamic systems theory, like other sciences, is to develop a *theory* that can apply across radically different cases and contexts. Ant colonies, urban areas, the immune system of the body, and the central nervous system are all made equivalent in developing a theory of complex adaptive systems. And mathematics is the foundational language. In Holland's terms, "Numbers go about as far as we can go in shearing away detail. When we talk of numbers, nothing is left of shape, or color, or mass, or identities of an object, except the very fact of its existence. . . . Three buses, three storks, and three mountains are equivalent 'realizations' of the number three." Mathematics is essential to the model-building process at the heart of science generally. "Shearing away detail is the very essence of model building."[24]

Stripping away detail for the purpose of model building, theory development, and predictive capacity has its uses in politics as elsewhere. But civic politics has as its foundational method something close to the reverse: the building of public relationships based on understanding and engaging the deepest levels of "detail," the unique story of every person and every community. Other modes of understanding—for instance cultural work of many kinds—have a similar narrative focus. But civic politics combines narrative with practical ends. It is an open-ended discovery and relationship-building process that informs action as it cultivates the habits and methods of engaging the irreducible particularities of others. Civic politics, descending from the Greeks and taking fuller form in the contemporary world, is the method that humans have developed to negotiate different, sometimes conflicting interests and views—including conflicting epistemologies—in order to get things done.

At times, diverse interests can be *integrated* through politics. Politics sometimes surfaces previously submerged clashes of interest. The aim generally is not to do away with ambiguity and the conflicts it entails. The aim is rather to avoid violence, to contain conflicts, to generate common work on common challenges, and to achieve broadly beneficial public outcomes.

The history of how civic politics survived in traditions of popular education and community organizing is important to understand, as the base camp for its expansion into realms of culture making, education, human services, and other activities.

KEEPING AGENCY ALIVE: THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

OVER THE LAST GENERATION, close to 200 broad-based community-organizing groups, involving several million people, have reintroduced civic agency into a society where people's capacities for self-directed collective action had sharply eroded.

This kind of community-organizing approach to knowledge making is also limited by the failure of such organizing to take into account knowledge making and cultural production as a form of power itself. This has meant that organizers have not fully grasped technocracy and its effects. It has also limited organizers' capacities to impact the larger society beyond their organizations, to democratize the politics of knowledge, and to reconceive and rework institutions that are now static and impersonal into living human communities, capable of reconstruction through organizing.

Broad-based community-organizing networks include the Gamaliel Foundation, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), PICO, DART, and many independent groups. Republicans, as well as Democrats, are involved in all of them. Some organizations reflect a wide range of religious views, and bring together African Americans, Spanish-speaking Americans, Asian Americans, and European Americans. Though their primary base is working families, they also include very poor, upper middle class, and a few upper class members.

On local and state levels, broad-based community-organizing groups have accumulated remarkable successes. For instance, the BUILD group in Baltimore pioneered living wage legislation for city workers, an initiative that has since spread across the country. The Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) group in San Antonio, pioneering many of the approaches of broad-based organizing, has won more than a billion dollars in infrastructure improvement in the once extremely impoverished barrios of the West and South sides of the city. It has shifted development patterns, changed the makeup of the city government, and

led in the creation of a statewide network of the IAF. State affiliates of IAF, Gamaliel Foundation, and PICO have undertaken successful statewide campaigns on issues like school funding, immigrant rights, and health care.

Community organizing, at the deepest level, is best understood not as a method of civic action but as a philosophy based on a narrative view that recognizes each person as a unique, meaning-making, and immensely complex individual. And it involves developing public skills to engage the story of the other in work, across differences, on common challenges. Members of broad-based organizations learn to understand the stories and motivations of others of different income, religious, cultural, or partisan political backgrounds through what are called "one-on-ones," the foundational method of civic politics. They learn to think in strategic ways and for the long-term. They pay close attention to local cultures and networks. All this is not to do away with conflict; civic politics in such groups, as elsewhere, often brings to light previously buried forms of conflict. But it is to use conflict for productive ends and public purposes.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, AT THE DEEPEST LEVEL, IS BEST UNDERSTOOD NOT AS A METHOD OF CIVIC ACTION BUT AS A PHILOSOPHY BASED ON A NARRATIVE VIEW THAT RECOGNIZES EACH PERSON AS A UNIQUE, MEANING-MAKING, AND IMMENSELY COMPLEX INDIVIDUAL.

Though broad-based community-organizing groups work on specific issues, their deeper focus is cultural with an emphasis on religious, democratic, community, and family values, understood in inclusive and open-ended ways. These groups define their work as building thriving communities. As Andres Sarabia told me some years ago, "We learned after the first year that the issues are the dessert, not the main meal." Sarabia was the first president of the COPS group in 1973, a model for broad-based community organizing. "The main meal is the renewal of our communities."

Organizers sometimes also describe their work as creating "universities of public life." Phrased in the language of complex adaptive systems, their successes in discovering and

developing public talent provide examples of multiplier effects when self-directing and interacting agents adapt to, and learn from, engagement with their environments and each other. Broad-based community organizations also contrast such *organizing* with *mobilizing*, using a distinction from the 1960s freedom movement described by Charles Payne in *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. While mobilizing efforts like marches and sit-ins are best known, community-level organizing was the movement's foundation. It developed a profound sense of civic agency—in the words of the freedom song, "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

These groups stress moving from "protest to governance," as described by Gerald Taylor, a key architect of organizing. "Moving into power means learning how to be accountable," said Taylor. "It means being able to negotiate and compromise. It means understanding that people are not necessarily evil because they have different interests or ways of looking at the world."[25] Such groups do not shy away from conflict. They recognize its uses, both in dealing with others outside their ranks and in fostering public growth through agitation within. But they have become sophisticated in forming what they call public relationships with establishment leaders whom many once saw simply as the enemy. When BUILD leaders met for the first time with Paul Sarbanes, senior senator from Maryland, for example, he welcomed them, took out his notepad, and asked, "What can I do for you?" "Nothing," was the answer. "We will be around for a long time, and you are likely to be as well. We want to develop a relationship. We need to understand your interests, why you went into politics, and what you are trying to achieve."[26]

CIVIC POLITICS CULTIVATES THE HABITS OF USING CATEGORIES AND PATTERN MAKING—ESSENTIAL TO ANY ACTION—IN FLUID, OPEN, AND PROVISIONAL WAYS.

The dynamic qualities of such civic politics form a contrast with mass-mobilizing politics and other forms of technocratic action, both in method and in philosophy. Mass-mobilizing politics generates habits of thinking in terms of narrow and static categories—"liberal," "conservative," "Evangelical," "Muslim," "rich," "homeless," and the like. Civic politics cultivates the habits of using categories and pattern making—essential to any action—in fluid, open,

and provisional ways. Rom Coles, a political theorist and organizer now at Northern Arizona University, describes the process at work when he became active in CAN, a community organizing effort in Durham, North Carolina. "Through hundreds of dialogues in pairs, stories circulate which would be difficult or impossible to surface in larger settings, and they begin to weave together a complex variegated fabric of democratic knowledge about an urban area and its people. In this more responsive and receptive context, relationships are formed and deepened in which a rich complex critical vision of a community develops along with the gradual articulation of alternative possibilities." The process develops skills of public interaction and public view. "As different positions, problems, passions, interests, traditions, and yearnings are shared through careful practices of listening, participants begin to develop an increasingly relational sense of their interests and orientations in ways that often transfigure the senses with which they began."[27]

Organizing is rooted in a generative and dynamic concept of the citizen as problem solver, cocreator of public goods, and coproducer of a democratic society, someone whose talents are developed and expanded by the practice of civic politics. It fosters what Doran Schrantz, a Gamaliel organizer, calls people's "public growth." Ernesto Cortes uses the theological concept of *metanoia*, or transformation of being, to describe this process. Barack Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, includes rich and powerful descriptions of such transformation, most significantly of himself as a young man confused about his mixed cultural identity, finding himself as he worked with very poor people on the South Side of Chicago.

BREAKING A BOND: THE RUPTURE OF CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

THE MODERN ROOTS of community and cultural organizing alike are found, especially in the 1930s, in living local cultures, which created multiple free spaces where relational and democratic cultures and experiences were sustained. In the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, there were 11 settlement houses in Minneapolis and St. Paul whose mission was "to develop neighborhood forces, arouse neighborhood consciousness; to improve standards of living, incubate principles of sound morality, promote a spirit of civic righteousness, and to cooperate with other agencies in bettering living, working, and leisure-time conditions." Settlement houses typically had staff living on site or nearby "in order to ensure that those employed understood the local community dynamics and undertook all their work from that vantage." They stressed working *with* neighborhood residents and new immigrants, rather than "ministering unto" them. Settlements also aimed at educating college students to think of themselves as citizens, working with residents and immigrants who were fellow citizens of the neighborhood.[28]

These patterns were nourished by "civic professionals" who saw their work as building social movements and sustaining the civic life of places—activities that can be called *cultural organizing*. In the 1930s, the idea that professionals' work should develop the civic capacities of people and communities and contribute to the enrichment of democratic culture was widespread. In Harlem, for instance, a range of professionals—artists and poets, labor organizers, teachers, ministers, and musicians, to list a few—saw themselves as having an obligation to develop the capacities of people invisible in the larger society. James Weldon Johnson, an architect of the Harlem Renaissance, put it this way, "Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment. Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing immemorial stereotypes." He saw blacks "impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature." The Harlem Renaissance meant that the black American was "a contributor to the nation's common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization."

In *The Big Tomorrow*, Lary May has described the ways in which a group of cultural workers in the film industry, led by Will Rogers, generated a sustained movement to change the values and images of "The American Dream." Many other forms of cultural organizing also grew from such foundations. In *Cultural Front*, Michael Denning traces progressive political organizing among "cultural workers" of many kinds during the New Deal, including journalists, screenwriters and artists, scholars and educators, and union organizers. Using the idea of a "historic bloc" of variegated forces of diverse interests and motivations united around certain overarching goals (including the defeat of Fascism, the defense of democracy, and the pursuit of economic and racial justice), Denning shows how the cultural front played a central role in reshaping American culture. The content of the American dream shifted from the individualist, WASP-oriented, consumerist ideal of the 1920s to a far more cooperative, racially pluralist and egalitarian vision of democracy. In the process, cultural workers developed a strategic consciousness of their own potential role in the battle of ideas and conceptions of the good society, as potential allies of industrial workers, blacks, farmers, small businesses, and other groups, fighting for themselves as well as others. Overall, the cultural front and its strands of organizing created a medium and mirror in which people saw themselves acting in more cooperative, assertive, and public ways. They asserted, instead, democratic values of diversity, equality, cooperation, justice, and the commonwealth. The "people," seen by intellectuals in the 1920s as the repository of crass materialism and parochialism, were rediscovered as the source of civic creativity.

OVERALL, THE CULTURAL FRONT AND ITS STRANDS OF ORGANIZING CREATED A MEDIUM AND MIRROR IN WHICH PEOPLE SAW THEMSELVES ACTING IN MORE COOPERATIVE, ASSERTIVE, AND PUBLIC WAYS.

Saul Alinsky, an iconoclastic activist and philosopher of organizing, is commonly credited as being the dean of modern community organizing, a view that has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring his own growing cynicism in the latter years of his life and the sharp differences between mobilizing and organizing philosophies. His authority, as an iconic figure in organiz-

ing, has also contributed to breaking the bond between community and cultural organizing in recent decades.

Alinsky's ideas were shaped in the organizing efforts of the Great Depression, particularly the experiences of anti-Stalinist public intellectuals and activists who were associated with the "Popular Front." The phrase itself conveyed a strategic framework developed by the Communist International in 1935, which had come to view its strategy of attacking moderates and even socialists as a disastrous mistake after the triumph of Fascists in Germany and elsewhere. Communists began to make broad, if cynical alliances across party lines. Alinsky and other anti-Stalinist progressives, including, later, key civil rights activists like Ella Baker, Myles Horton, Bayard Rustin; labor leaders like Sidney Hillman, A. Philip Randolph, and John Lewis; political leaders like Hubert Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt; and religious leaders like Reinhold Niebuhr, liked the idea of broad alliances but hated the division between "mass" and "scientific vanguard" central to Marxist-Leninist politics, based on a positivist view of knowledge.

Alinsky was closely associated with the progressive populist movement on both the community level and also in its cultural-organizing expressions. After graduating from the University of Chicago, he worked with the Chicago Area Project, an effort addressing juvenile delinquency begun by Clifford Shaw. Shaw's model of social action differed sharply from conventional social work, which defined professionals as the most important actors and their knowledge as derived from a scientific methodology detached from communal experience. Shaw, on the other hand, believed that communities held within themselves the main resources and capacities to solve juvenile delinquency. The professional's best role was as catalyst and facilitator, not as problem solver. In 1938, Clifford Shaw assigned Alinsky to Chicago's "Back of the Yards" community, an area of 90,000 impoverished, mostly Eastern European, Catholic immigrants in the shadow of the meat-packing companies. Working closely with Joe Meegan, a young Irish resident who had already sought to build an areawide community group, Alinsky helped organize a wide array of groups into the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) around a campaign to support the union organizing drive. BYNC brought together priests, small business owners, housewives, youth, communist organizers, the American Legion, and labor rank and file in an unlikely, freewheeling mix. Throughout the 1940s, the organization undertook a range of community initiatives—from hot lunch programs to recreation projects—involving teenagers directly in their planning and implementation. A byproduct was a sharp decline in juvenile delinquency.[29]

Alinsky's first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1946, codified principles of Back of the Yards and other organizing. Alinsky emphasized the need for popular organizations to be rooted in, and work through, local community life. "The foundation of a People's Organization is in the communal life of the local people," argued Alinsky. "Therefore the first stage in the building of a People's Organization is the understanding of the life of a community, not only in terms of the individual's experiences, habits, values, and objectives but also from the point of view of the collective habits, experiences, customs, controls, and values of the whole group, the community traditions." The organizer "should have a familiarity with the most obvious parts of a people's traditions." Organizers would often disagree with local traditions or groups. But efforts at democratic change must always be undertaken in the terms and histories given. "The starting of a People's Organization is not a matter of personal choice. You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes, and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives." To know a community "is to know the values, objectives, customs, sanctions, and the taboos of these groups. It is to know them not only in terms of their relationships and attitudes toward one another but also in terms of what relationship all of them have toward the outside. . . . To understand the traditions of a people is . . . to ascertain those social forces which argue for constructive democratic action as well as those which obstruct democratic action."[30]

TO KNOW A COMMUNITY "IS TO KNOW THE VALUES, OBJECTIVES, CUSTOMS, SANCTIONS, AND THE TABOOS OF THESE GROUPS. IT IS TO KNOW THEM NOT ONLY IN TERMS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ONE ANOTHER BUT ALSO IN TERMS OF WHAT RELATIONSHIP ALL OF THEM HAVE TOWARD THE OUTSIDE."

Many activists and public intellectuals in the 1930s shared Alinsky's view, coming to appreciate both community-level organizing and its connections to, and enrichment by, cultural organizing. Leaders in the freedom movement, such as Ella Baker, Myles Horton, and Bayard Rustin, all had roots in the anti-Communist popular organizing of the Popular Front. There

are older and other roots around the world, such as the folk school and popular education traditions of Scandinavia, the popular education and liberation theology traditions that came alive in Latin America, and the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and others in South Africa all learned and practiced a politics that included diverse perspectives and interests and that stressed confidence-building work and education. They had what Charles Payne called an "expansive concept of democracy" and a "developmental understanding of politics." This meant that "whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives." They also appreciated the role of cultural and educational workers in creating larger patterns of democratic meaning and possibility, beyond local communities.[31]

By the 1960s, Alinsky had shifted his emphasis in ways that contributed to a severance of the connection between community organizing and cultural organizing. He spent much of his time speaking to young radicals on campuses, whom he saw as having "no illusions about the system, but plenty of illusions about the way to change our world." His second book, *Rules for Radicals*, was "written in desperation" as an attempt to create a "realistic" primer for radicals.[32] The irony was that his "realism," what he called "the world as it is," embodied the estrangement of mass society, consumer society, mass politics, and the existentially uprooted person as givens. As his biographer Sandy Horwitt has described, Alinsky rejected place as an organizing site. "For more than a decade, as people scattered to the suburbs, he had talked about the declining importance of the old geographical neighborhood where people had lived, worked, and played."[33]

THE CHALLENGE OF SPREADING CIVIC POLITICS ON A GLOBAL SCALE IS TO BRING TOGETHER CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, TO CREATE SUSTAINED CULTURES OF CIVIC LIFE, AND TO RECOMMUNALIZE THE LARGE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.

Alinsky's approach, drawing on the practicality, power, and realism of 1930s organizing, had always stressed beginning with "the world as it is." But by the 1960s, in reaction against

what he saw as the hyperbolic rhetoric and posturing of the New Left, Alinsky's depiction of the "world as it is" denuded political life of its cultural and normative dimensions: "Once we have moved into the world as it is then we begin to shed fallacy after fallacy." In the "world as it is," he said, "the right things are done only for the wrong reasons," "constructive actions have usually been in reaction to a threat," and "morality is to a significant degree a rationalization of the position which you are occupying in the power pattern at a particular time." In *Rules*, Alinsky proposed a strategy to unite the "have nots" and the "have some, want mores" in an alliance against the "haves." This was a thin and reductive equation of politics that made his book a bible for mobilizing politics for a new generation of activists in the 1970s.[34]

While broad-based community organizers in the Industrial Areas Foundation and other groups saw themselves going beyond the late cynicism of Alinsky, they largely accepted his assumption that the broader mass culture cannot be changed. Every major organizing network has thus made a distinction between "building broad-based organizations," which they define as their aim, and "movements," which they equate with the protests of the late 1960s, ephemeral, thin, and transient. The contrast has had the effect of creating a sharp division between internal and external cultures that I have long observed, a sort of civic schizophrenia. Internally, leaders and organizers use a rich relational and value language full of democratic, communal, and religious allusions and references. But when they make public demands, their language is much sparser, expressed usually in the transactional politics of economic interests. Some have explained this by envisioning their organizations as "monasteries of democracy," surviving the Dark Age of a corrupt culture impervious to change.

The challenge of spreading civic politics on a global scale is to bring together cultural and community organizing, to create sustained cultures of civic life, and to recommunalize the large systems and structures of the contemporary world. There are many lessons to learn from.

CIVIC POLITICS AS PUBLIC WORK

THE SKILLS AND HABITS of civic politics include relationship building, tolerance for ambiguity, ability to deal with conflict constructively, and the capacity to act in open environments with no predetermined outcomes. These are not part of graduate school curricula in scientific or other conventional academic or professional disciplines. The capacities for civic politics and civic professionalism have to be learned in practice. The process also entails *unlearning* tendencies acquired in formal education, such as a hypercompetitive, individualist bent and a posture of intellectual certitude. Our colleague Bill Doherty estimates that it usually takes two years of combining learning with unlearning for most professionals to do effective public work. But as the Obama campaign suggested, public narratives to frame this learning and unlearning can be articulated through cultural organizing tied to real world practices. Moreover, conceptual and practical innovations have emerged as important resources.

Our civic engagement work with partners through the Center for Democracy and Citizenship aimed at developing civic agency in many settings—from K-12 schools to nursing homes, the College of St. Catherine to cooperative extension—through translating the methods and ideas of broad-based community organizing. It began with the observation that success in this endeavor depends not only on the development of individuals' public skills but also on a change in the religious congregations which are the main base of broad-based community groups. Such change in turn required a significant democratization of the politics of knowledge embedded in the professional practices of the clergy. Civic politics made the work of the clergy more "public," a process called for in an important IAF document issued by the Black Caucus in 1981, *Tent of the Presence*, which envisioned a shift from "Moses-like" leaders to more relational, interactive leaders, what Youngblood was later to call a "Nehemiah" model. In broad-based citizen groups, clergy learn to work with their congregations in ways that are catalytic, politically educating, and empowering.

As we worked with partners to democratize knowledge-based institutions, it soon became apparent that institutional organizing requires a shift in framework. Rather than seeing institutions as defined by structures, procedures, rules, and regulations—the conventional way of looking at them—we found it necessary to reconceive of institutions as living and dynamic *communities*, with norms, values, leadership, and cultural identities. Maria Avila, a former Mexican American organizer who now directs the Center for Community-Based Learning at Occidental College, has given a vivid account of what this means. "The medicine for our predicament [in higher education] requires efforts to restructure the way we think, act, behave toward each other, and the way we act as a collective to restructure power and resources." Avila argues that organizing focuses on culture change before structural change. "Culture changes [come] first, leading to structural changes later." Change is relational, tied to organizing and power. "For academic institutions to partner with community groups, institutions and organizations for a better society [requires] countless opportunities for conversations and organizing campaigns with community partners engaged in power restructuring."[35]

RATHER THAN SEEING INSTITUTIONS AS DEFINED BY STRUCTURES, PROCEDURES, RULES, AND REGULATIONS—THE CONVENTIONAL WAY OF LOOKING AT THEM—WE FOUND IT NECESSARY TO RECONCEIVE OF INSTITUTIONS AS LIVING AND DYNAMIC COMMUNITIES, WITH NORMS, VALUES, LEADERSHIP, AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES.

Seeing institutions as communities, building public relationships, undertaking intentional changes in their cultures to make them more public, and thinking in political terms, are largely foreign to academic and professional organizations. The cultural norms in these institutions are highly privatized, individualistic, and infused with the positivist stance of objectivity. This is especially the case in higher education. Decades of cultural evolution have detached faculty members, their pedagogies and scholarship, from the civic life of living places as Tom Bender, among others, has documented. Yet we had seen possibilities for some change in higher education cultures in early partnerships—preeminently in the work of Nan Kari and her colleagues at the College of St. Catherine in the early 1990s. Kari organized a "citizen poli-

tics" group of faculty that met weekly and thought strategically about change in the college, to create a more public culture. They generated many changes (their lessons are described in her essay in our earlier Kettering Foundation publication, *Creating the Commonwealth*). During these years, we also began to develop a more extensive theory of "public work," a concept that differs sharply from the dominant conceptions of civic engagement as off-hours "service" or "voluntarism."

In 1997, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation invited the Center for Democracy and Citizenship to undertake a planning process that explored the possibilities for strengthening the "public service mission of land-grant colleges and universities." We began to focus more systematically on higher education. In our historical investigation, we followed the path of Scott Peters, a former graduate student researcher with the center. Peters has discovered that a "public work lens" illuminates histories of public relationships between land-grant colleges and communities in late 19th- and early 20th-century America, heretofore largely unexplored and obscured, both by the prevailing focus on providing service and by critics' insistence that land-grant institutions have been mainly, if not only, oppressive and technocratic in their orientation and work.

A PUBLIC-WORK PERSPECTIVE LOOKS AT THE WAYS IN WHICH WE HAVE LOST WISDOM IN KNOWLEDGE, AND KNOWLEDGE IN INFORMATION. IT ASKS QUESTIONS ABOUT MEANING AND LARGER PUBLIC PURPOSE. IT LOOKS AT HOW PUBLICS THAT ACT, AND THE PUBLIC CULTURES SURROUNDING AND SUSTAINING SUCH ACTION, MIGHT BE REVIVED AND REGROWN IN A MODERN, TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

Our diagnosis of the problem and the solution to civic disengagement drew from this theoretical framework. The public-work approach highlights the public dimensions of work, both individually and institutionally. Thus it differs, in significant respects, from conventional liberal and communitarian approaches to citizenship and their attendant conceptions of democracy. A public-work approach explores the public dimensions of professions, disciplines, and individual faculty experiences—and the erosion of those dimensions.

What would it look like if teaching were a public activity, for example? What are the public conditions and effects of scholarship? What happens if faculty and staff see themselves as public people, in partnership with other citizens? What new resources might be tapped and cultivated? What new energies unleashed? The public-work approach rejects the conventional model of college cultures as aggregations of discrete units in competition with each other; instead, it conceives of college cultures as living wholes, calling particular attention to the public dimensions of such cultures.

Diagnostically, public work examines the forces contributing to the erosion of public cultures in modern institutions, which have become increasingly subject to a logic of rationalization that holds ends constant and fixed, and focuses on efficiency of means. "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" asked T. S. Eliot in his prophetic poem from 1937, "The Rock." A public-work perspective looks at the ways in which we have lost wisdom in knowledge, and knowledge in information. It asks questions about meaning and larger public purpose. It looks at how publics that act, and the public cultures surrounding and sustaining such action, might be revived and regrown in a modern, technological society. Specifically, what does public action and public culture look like in institutions of higher learning and knowledge production? In many ways these are radical questions, not framed in conventional partisan terms of left or right but in etymological terms, going to the roots of our disciplines and our work.

Progress at the University of Minnesota was uneven, with frequent dead ends, setbacks, and difficulties. The work dramatized that "civic engagement in one university" is impossible—the fate of the university efforts are tied to much broader change, because the university is intricately embedded in systems and cultures across the world. This is particularly true for institutions caught up in the scramble for global rankings, which are determined largely by peer review journal publications. Nonetheless, significant cultural and institutional changes did occur at the University of Minnesota. In 2003, the Regents adopted the main recommendation of the Provost's Task Force on Civic Engagement, to create a high-level, universitywide Council on Public Engagement with this goal:

> To incorporate public engagement as a permanent and pervasive priority in teaching, learning, and research activities throughout the university and to enlist support for public engagement among all segments of the university and in the larger community.

Subsequently, the university established an Office of Public Engagement, directed by an associate vice president, a position now held by Andy Furco. More than 120 projects, aimed explicitly at culture change and supported through a competitive process of seed grants (building on the model of the College of St. Catherine), have been organized in departments and colleges. Students can now earn a community learning and community service notation on their transcripts. The high-profile Leadership minor has incorporated the Public Achievement approach—explicitly political, using a public-work definition of citizenship and a civic politics approach—into its core curriculum, which has begun to reshape practices in residence halls, student government, and elsewhere.

On the West Side of St. Paul, the Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC) aims to create a "culture of learning" that makes education of children everyone's responsibility. The NLC has begun to reconnect nonprofits, schools, and businesses with the neighborhood in what our colleague Nick Longo called "an ecology of learning."

A third strategy consists of sustained work with professionals interested in civic agency and public work. Bill Doherty and his students and colleagues have shown how public work can be translated into a powerful wellspring of democratic change in family professions through cultural organizing that articulates cooperative and democratic themes and values tied to community organizing. In the Families and Democracy initiatives associated with his Center for Citizen Professionalism at the University of Minnesota, professionals work with families on a host of issues to tame the forces of a degraded, hypercompetitive, hyperindividualistic culture that tend to overwhelm families. The families and communities themselves are the main source of energy and action.

As we thought about how to transform sources of civic dysfunction into wellsprings of civic renewal and the development of civic agency we focused on institutions "upstream," where there is interest in developing cultures that prepare young people for public work and citizen professionalism. This led to a partnership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) with the object of incorporating civic agency and public work into regional colleges and universities and minority-serving institutions, such as historically black colleges and universities. A key characteristic of AASCU institutions is that they aspire to become "stewards of place," focused on local and regional life. As such, argues George Mehaffy,

AASCU vice president, they "are ideal places to focus on building the capacity for civic agency among students, faculty, and staff."[36] The AASCU task force on place called on these institutions to serve as "learners as well as teachers in tackling the myriad of opportunities and issues facing our communities and regions." We have also found liberal arts colleges with a strong emphasis on place, civic education, and vocation with public meanings and dimensions. One example is Augsburg College in Minneapolis, the new institutional home for the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, grounded in a strong sense of its Lutheran theological tradition of educating students for "vocation in the world." The school combines a commitment to engagement in an inner-city neighborhood with a focus on civic education and learning that respects the talents and uniqueness of each student. Paul Pribbenow, the college president, calls this learning to develop "a narrative framework in which . . . tensions are lived, not just debated [and] able to live through the messiness of common work."[37]

A place for mingling and interaction among diverse peoples by respecting people's heritages, the Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center in Minneapolis shows that high-level knowledge production often occurs far from academia.

Efforts to generate theoretical, as well as practical, interaction among different kinds of knowledge making are not found only in formal educational settings. For instance, the Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center in Minneapolis draws on the richness of learning and cultural resources in African American and other indigenous cultural experiences and traditions. In their words, it has an intellectual, experiential, and futurist frame that "evens the playing field." A place for mingling and interaction among diverse peoples by respecting people's heritages, the center shows that high-level knowledge production often occurs far from academia.

Atum Azzahir, founder of the center, is an outstanding public intellectual who never went to a traditional college. Though Azzahir did not get a conventional degree, she is widely read

and studies systematically at her husband's institute of African philosophy, the International Khepran Institute. With others at the Cultural Wellness Center, she reflects continuously on the theory, lessons, and models they are developing. With her colleague Janice Barbee, Azzahir also teaches undergraduate and graduate students from different fields at the Academic Health Center and other departments of the University of Minnesota.

The purpose of the Cultural Wellness Center is "to unleash the power of citizens to heal themselves and to build community." The center's philosophy is based on the proposition that "health results from the process of people's active engagement and participation in life, in defining the standards of health for themselves, and in addressing sickness and disease on the community and cultural as well as personal levels." This philosophy has implications for educating young people as well.

THE CENTER'S PHILOSOPHY IS BASED ON THE PROPOSITION THAT "HEALTH RESULTS FROM THE PROCESS OF PEOPLE'S ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN LIFE, IN DEFINING THE STANDARDS OF HEALTH FOR THEMSELVES, AND IN ADDRESSING SICKNESS AND DISEASE ON THE COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL AS WELL AS PERSONAL LEVELS."

The center is located in a bank building on the border of the South Minneapolis Powderhorn and Phillips neighborhoods. This is the most culturally diverse area in Minnesota, with the largest combined concentration of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos. The neighborhoods also include many people from diverse European American traditions. The interior of the center reflects the cultures, images, and traditions of the community. Plants along the walls seem to flourish in the space. Masks from East and West Africa hang alongside textiles from Southeast Asia and Celtic images. When one enters, the sounds of water fountains and the smell of cedar, sage, or frankincense and myrrh generate the sensation of being in a different kind of place, rooted and alive.

Three principles underlie the philosophy they call the People's Theory of Sickness. These include the idea that people are responsible for their own recovery and healing; that commu-

nity provides the container and the resources for living a healthy life; and that connection to culture and a sound identity transform the trauma of racism.

Before starting the center, Azzahir and Barbee spent two years holding conversations with different cultural communities in South Minneapolis. They discovered that many cultural groups—Hmong, Latinos, Native Americans, and European Americans as well—had issues similar to those of African Americans. "I know of the collective aloneness of the African American because I am a member of this group," said Azzahir, "but to hear the Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, and Ojibwe people, Mexican and Hmong American people speak of their deep sense of disconnectedness and aloneness has amazed me. I thought these groups had culture, language, and a home base, even if they didn't control it. I became more and more driven to be a part of and give direction to an effort to alleviate this condition for these great peoples of ancient heritage." She credits Barbee, for understanding that what they call "cultural restoration" is urgent for people of European descent, as well as other "great peoples of ancient heritage."[38]

They gathered hundreds of people in Citizen Health Action Teams, or CHATS, that took place biweekly and monthly. The meetings were a place for the discussion of sickness, disease, health and medical practices, crime, violence, race, class, religion and spirituality, family education, jobs, old age, sexuality, and other topics. "Of these, sickness and disease levels and health and medicine drew the broadest response, and also affirmed the emphasis we had placed on these topics before we began organizing," Azzahir and Barbee wrote. The process also clarified their theory of knowledge generation. "This highly active process of bringing together many different people from many different cultures to solicit solutions to a community's problems became our trademark. It is now the approach we use in the center for sustaining people's engagement, as well as generating organic knowledge that helps solve the problems facing community residents."[39]

SIGNS OF A NEW CIVIC MOVEMENT

IN MAY 1968, a strike of French students was followed by a general strike of workers across France and led to the near collapse of the government of Charles de Gaulle. The May events captured the imagination of people across the world for the depth of their challenge to an increasingly impersonal, technocratic future. Alain Touraine captured the complexity in *The May Movement*: "The enemy is no longer a person of a social category, the monarch or the bourgeoisie. He is the totality of the depersonalized, 'rationalized,' bureaucratized modes of action of power" in modern society. Or as Eric Hobsbawm put it, commenting on Touraine, "What is happening today is the 'great mutation' from an older bourgeois to a new technocratic society [that] creates conflict and dissidence not only at its margins but at its centre."[40]

"A new technocratic society" is an abstraction—and the strikes of a generation ago had few targets and little in the way of a political program for the transformations felt to be so urgently needed. When the Popular Front alliance of the left vacillated about what to do—in some ways as confused by the strikes as the conservative establishment—the Gaullist government regained its composure and the strikes collapsed.

But from another perspective, May 1968 can be seen as a harbinger of the energies appearing in the early 21st century, energies with far more concrete manifestations, strategies, and approaches than they exhibited a generation ago, and with a name for what is wrong: the cult of the expert has put some people at the pinnacles of prestige and authority, simultaneously imprisoning them in isolated and tiny private worlds, while it undermines the authority, confidence, and standing of the great majority.

A focus on civic agency—how people can become shapers of their lives and communities and agents of change—informed by insights from broad-based citizen and community organizing is visible across the world. It appears in development efforts, such as the Twaweza: The East African Citizen Agency Initiative in the Global South, as well as in a collection of essays reflecting on World Bank and UNDP experiences, entitled *Culture and Public Action*,

and written by leading development scholars. It is visible in pioneering work on public health, resource management, global climate change, and education reform. And, civic agency is central to an effort to define an emergent "civic field," led by a group of scholars who organized the first Institute of Civic Studies this summer at Tufts University.

A fledgling movement called Imagining America is based on themes of public work and public scholarship, civic agency, and cultural organizing in the arts, humanities, and design fields. It has enlisted many universities and colleges in recent years, recalling something of the spirit of older cultural organizing in the 1930s. With leadership from Julie Ellison, David Scobey, Timothy Eatman, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Nancy Cantor, George Sanchez, and many others, it is dedicated to bringing cultural-organizing approaches into higher education and to creating more fluid, reciprocal, interactive partnerships across rigid borders and boundaries. Its mission is "to strengthen the public role and democratic purposes of the humanities, arts, and design. In order to fulfill this mission, we support publicly engaged academic work in the cultural disciplines and the structural changes in higher education that such work requires."

The theory and practice of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) have come to emphasize catalytic action, civic capacity building, and public work as a far richer and more promising way of knowing and acting for long-term health than mobilizing and service delivery alone. In 2008, the agency teamed up with longtime partners in state and local health agencies to launch what they call "a movement to make the U.S. the healthiest nation in a healthier world." Together, they formed the *Alliance for the Healthiest Nation*, which seeks to catalyze diverse energies and efforts to promote health and well-being in all settings and sectors. The new organization's prospectus defines a scope of interest that extends far beyond what occurs in doctors' offices to address the many factors, including education, housing, transportation, food, and prosperity, that shape one's sense of well-being. Bobby Milstein, coordinator of the CDCP's worldwide *syndemics* (systems-oriented) network, has helped to create an intellectual context for the alliance with a framework that combines public health and systems theory with civic agency and public work. Milstein envisions a profound shift in public health practice and theory, in which "all relevant dynamics arise from the mutually reinforcing relationships among a population's health, living conditions and the public's power to act." This perspective recognizes mutually reinforcing connections between living conditions and health, but includes emphasis on people's agency, their capacities to shape and reshape their environments.[41]

Directly addressing the politics of knowledge itself, the group organizing a *Call for a Civic Science* seeks to catalyze an international intellectual movement founded in an understanding of the irreducibly plural nature of knowledge making. The Esther Thelen Legacy fund brought us together. We contend that "science is a way of knowing created by human beings, employed for human ends. It is not the only way of knowing. It is open-ended, experimental and social." Its conclusions need to be debated and improved upon. "But for all such qualifications, science has also proven a mighty resource for human empowerment, freedom, and betterment. It is the work of myriad visible and most often invisible craftsmen and women over millennia. And in recent decades, the influences and discoveries of science have exploded at an ever accelerating pace," according to the *Call for a Civic Science*. The pattern produces ironies as well as possibilities: "At the threshold of the 21st century it is therefore a profound irony that 'science,' as often invoked in the popular culture, presented by some leaders and practiced by many professional systems, turns the promises of science upside down. Today, 'science' can fragment us, disempower us, and constrict our sense of possibility. Today science is often called upon to provide quick solutions to our most intractable problems."

SCIENTISTS GAIN A LARGER PERSPECTIVE ON SCIENCE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION WHEN THEY LEAVE THE LABORATORY AND INHABIT OTHER ROLES, AS PARENTS, NEIGHBORS, CO-WORKERS IN CIVIC PROJECTS, AND AS HUMAN BEINGS.

The authors conclude that:

> Scientists need the real world of rich, diverse experiences to provide grounding, testing, and challenge to all our propositions. Scientists gain a larger perspective on science and the human condition when they leave the laboratory and inhabit other roles, as parents, neighbors, co-workers in civic projects, and as human beings. Civic science is about engagement with each other and mutual respect. It represents a call to work together to address the challenges we face and to build a thriving world for ourselves and for future generations.

All these manifestations are signs of a movement for a new freedom in a world grown stale and impersonal. For all the challenges we face—perhaps in part because of them—we could be at the threshold of a new politics that will bring us wisdom, not simply information. And it could open new possibilities for transforming and humanizing the communities, institutions, and societies of the new century.

Three frameworks of civic engagement

	Distributive justice	Communitarian	Civic Agency
What is democracy?	Representative government	Participatory moral order	Way of life built through public work
What is the citizen?	Voter, consumer	Community member, volunteer	Cocreator/civic agent
What is citizenship?	Voting, obeying the law, respecting rights	Helping others, participating	Public work
What are key problems?	Inequality, ignorance	Radical individualism	Technocracy and powerlessness
What are the central tasks?	Fair distribution of rights and services	Creating community, teaching values	Developing civic agency
What are key methods?	Voting, mobilization, advocacy	Service	Organizing, popular education, creating cultures of public work
What is education's role?	Expert training and services	Moral education	Civic learning sites, cultural organizing, educating citizen professionals
What is power?	Power over	Public opinion, moral consensus	Power to

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ENDNOTES

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[4] See Michael Tomasky, "How Historic a Victory?" *New York Review of Books,* Vol. LV: 20 (December 18, 2008), 44-47.

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[10] Lippman and others, quoted from John Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1994), 75, 76, 77, 78.

[11] Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 45.

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[13] I was struck by how this "freezing" shaped modern societies in Europe as well as—perhaps more sharply than—the United States in 2008. I worked with a group of Dutch development aid agencies and the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague in a project called Civic Driven Change, exploring the possibilities of an alternative approach for development in the Global South, different than state- or market-centered approaches. It became clear through the year that there are parallel needs for a different paradigm of politics and change in the Netherlands itself.

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[17] Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 296, 245.

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[19] Sue Rosser, "The Gender Equation," *Science,* September-October, 1992, 46.

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[31] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California/Berkeley, 1995), 68.

[32] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

[33] Quote from "The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky," reprint of *Harper's* from June and July, 1965, 9; interview with Father John Egan, South Bend, IN, August 2, 1980.

[34] Saul Alinsky, "Is There Life After Birth?" (speech to the Centennial Meeting of the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, MA, June 7, 1967, Chicago: I.A.F. reprint), 12-13.

[35] Maria Avila, "Transforming the Culture of Academia: An Organizing Based Model of Civic Engagement" (draft in author's possession, August 11, 2003).

[36] Personal e-mail correspondence, December 11, 2007.

[37] Paul Pribbenow, "Dual Citizenship: Reflections on Educating Citizens at Augsburg College" (address to the ELCA Vocation Conference, Luther College, July 31, 2008), 4, 2.

[38] Quotes from interview with Atum Azzahir, May 23, 2006, Minneapolis. Material from Azzahir and Barbee taken from Atum Azzahir and Janice Barbee, "Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center: Cultural Reconnection and Community Building for Personal and Community Health," in *The End of One Way* (Minneapolis: McKnight Foundation, 2004), 44-61.

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