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Off the Playground of Civil Society:
Freeing Democracy's Powers for the 21st Century[1]

Harry C. Boyte
Duke University, October 23, 1998

Introduction

"Civil society" is now the defining map of our civic life. Embedded in its framework are assumptions about the activity of the citizen and the meaning of democracy. The idea of civil society today vividly illustrates the power of framing concepts to structure resources and define political themes. Major foundations have divisions of civil society that allocate hundreds of millions of dollars to volunteer activity. Government agencies give time off to their employees so that they can "do citizenship." Presidents gathered last year at the Summit on Volunteerism to praise the idea. Meanwhile, a coalition organized by "end of work" theorist Jeremy Rifkin has signed up educational organizations, teachers unions, and philanthropic groups to advocate for community service as citizenship, and civil society as the site of active democracy.

After noting the rich and many-sided history of the idea, this paper takes issue with the way in which the concept of civil society is advanced and functions in public life. It proposes that we need a different way of thinking about what democracy is and where it is practised.

Many things associated with the concept of civil society have merit. Volunteers and service projects can make important civic contributions. A focus on character and civic values can occasion important explorations. But I focus on two problems with the ways in which civil society as a concept is now expressed and functions in politics. First, what I call "voluntarists" define the arena of citizenship as the voluntary sector, separated from government and from work and the workplace. This has the effect of stripping citizen agency of civic muscle and taking the challenge of renewing the public cultures and purposes of large institutions such as higher education off the agenda. Second, those who can be fairly termed "moralists" focus on the personal and moral attributes (and failings) of the citizen. Their writings convey a

moralizing, condescending tone. Citizens today are told to be helpful, caring, and virtuous.

But the list does not convey boldness, confidence, or power. It is as if citizens have been

consigned to the playground of civil society after they have been chased off everywhere else.

We need a new democratic politics, a commonwealth politics if you will. This, I argue,

has its own tradition distinct from (if sometimes overlapping with) the civil society tradition of

theory and practice. Commonwealth politics conveys a particular conception of freedom -- what

we experience when we are engaged with others in the creation of our common world through

our public work. It grounds democratic authority among the citizenry and ties work in many

settings to democracy. This politics reemerges today in a variety of contexts, and we have

sought to theorize as well as to develop the idea over the last decade at the Center for

Democracy and Citizenship. It shifts the focus away from "blaming the system" or, alternatively,

lamenting the shortcomings of citizens to strategies for freeing the democratic powers within

ourselves and within our institutions for public contribution. Higher education is a case in point.

Duke

"We are gradually requiring of the educator that he shall free the powers of each man
and connect him with the rest of life. We ask this not merely because it is the man's right
to be thus connected, but...in the spirit of those to whom social equality has become a
necessity for further social development. We are impatient to use the dynamic power
residing in the mass of men, and demand that the educator free that power."

Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics, 1902

"Each authority that these maids will face along the road of the grievance procedure
knows that the authority above him wants the Proudfoot system to work...No one along
the line of authority that we must travel can possibly be unbiased when listening to our
complaints. Until there is neutral arbitration of these grievances...[we] have no job
security, no dignity, no chance of becoming employees who share in the goal to make
this a great and quality institution."

Oliver Harvey, President of Local 77, speaking to the Duke
chapter of AAUP, 1966

Oliver Harvey was responding to a political and organizing challenge during the effort to

create a recognized union at Duke University, the imposition of a grievance procedure that he

believed was meant to intimidate employees and thwart organizing efforts in 1966. Jane Addams was writing about her experiences at the Hull House settlement with working class immigrants in Chicago in 1902. Despite the differences in time and context, the passages above can be seen as a conversation about freedom and democracy. Both tie education to expansive ends. The point of education is not simply learning, but freeing the powers locked within. This is a far richer conception of freedom than the limp negatives inhering in freedom as lack of constraint or freedom from oppression. Addams understands freedom as something that comes from connection to the whole and from productive engagement with the process of social development. "Yes," one imagines Harvey replying. "Employees at Duke want to help make this a 'great and quality institution.' But this is not easy. It takes organizing, alliances. It means clear-headedness about power."

Jane Addams and Oliver Harvey shared a belief that democracy is not mainly a set of institutions but rather a work in progress. This was the theme of Addams book, *Democracy and Social Ethics.* She argued that democracy, more than voting, means the advance of the whole people and identification with the "common lot."

I know Harvey's commitment to a similar conception of democracy from persona experience. Harvey, a janitor at Duke, deeply influenced my views on life and politics when I was a student at Duke from 1963 to 1967. I worked with him and others in the organizing effort.

All of this history came flooding back to me as I read the thesis on the effort by Erik Ludwig, a recent honors graduate from Duke.[1] Ludwig debunks conventional wisdom about Duke's action on employee grievances and recognition of the union. The common belief is that recognition resulted from a sudden and spontaneous outpouring of student sympathy for employees in a massive student vigil of April, 1968, which gained nationwide attention. Ludwig

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[1] "First Class Education and 'Second Hand' Workers: The Struggle for Unionization During Duke's Decade of Development, 1965-68," An Honors Thesis in Women's Studies, April, 1998.

shows how student and faculty support was the product of years of assiduous effort by employees and those who worked with them.

Ludwig's work is important, but his leftist theoretical frame (taken from Howard Winant[2]) also causes him to miss things. He focuses on the victimization of the workers and their struggle for justice, arguing their campaign was co-opted within "liberal hegemony." This account fails to capture changes their efforts catalysed and the reasons their effort succeeded.

Employees claimed their authority for addressing the whole purpose of the institution, they did not simply voice desire for fair treatment. This is a key difference in understanding democratic power. Workers wanted full participation in the work of making Duke a "great and quality institution." This was not simply a political manoeuver. It expressed the workers' conviction that their work contributed powerfully, if most often invisibly, to students' learning experience *and to the basic mission of the institution*. Oliver Harvey, Hattie Williams, and other employees anticipated by decades the idea of "learning community" articulated recently.

Their stress on a "great and quality institution" called forth better thinking, livelier teaching, more probing questions from faculty, and more engagement in education from students. I don't want to overstate the case. Duke did not become a transformed institution -- in retrospect, with more appreciation for the precariousness of human institutions, I am not sure at all that would have been good, given the politics and fashions of that era.

Yet during my years at Duke most of those associated with the effort, or even simply on campus at the time – faculty, students, staff, administrators – also rose to a higher level of public engagement and excellence. Classrooms came alive with questions. A never-ending argument moved across the campus about questions of civil rights, democracy, and education that lasted many years. That discussion shaped the futures of countless participants.

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[2] Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994).

My point in discussing its lapses is not to devalue Ludwig's thesis, which is certainly welcome. And I am not interested in waxing nostalgic about sixties activism. I have written elsewhere about conceptual and practical flaws in the protest politics of that decade.[3]

What I want to emphasize is the ways in which the conceptual frameworks we bring to a study of phenomena shape what it is that we see. Here, a rich story of the Duke employees' effort helps to highlight not only flaws in left wing theory that focuses on the singular struggle for distributive justice. A rich story also shows the artificiality of separating voluntary activity from work and the broad public ends and consequences of work. It suggests the possibilities for public freedom that work of public significance can create in publically oriented institutions such as colleges and universities.

The Democratic Origins of "Civil Society"

In recent years when civil society and related concepts (such as "mediating institutions") first reappeared widely and with significant political impact, they emerged as a way to address power questions -- dynamics that undermined the authority and the power of citizens in modern society. This usage was different from the earlier modern meanings.

The concept of civil society first appeared in the 18th century freighted with anxiety, as well as modest hopes. Scottish intellectuals such as Adam Ferguson, David Hume, and Adam Smith used "civil society" to describe the broad social and economic changes they witnessed around themselves. For these writers, civil society was seen as a pattern of egoistic commerce, specialization, and self-interested pursuits. It described a shift from the norms of politeness, courtesy, honor and social interconnectedness that had characterized the language of the aristocracy. Civil society, said Ferguson, the first writer in English to propose a history of the term, conveyed a loss of a sense of social unity. "Society is made to consist of parts, of

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[3] *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989, 1990); and, co-authored with Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1996).

which none is animated by the spirit of society itself." Adam Smith believed that private self-interest would advance the material well-being of all (his famous "invisible hand"); he also worried that the commercial outlook of civil society might well lead to a "society of strangers."[4]

Hegel built on such arguments. For Hegel, civil society was a map, a kind of social space, "the stage of difference which intervenes between the family and the state..." Hegel included work (commerce) well as institutions that we now label "voluntary" in his map of civil society. In his treatment, civil society took on a more unambiguously negative coloration. He saw the "rush toward equality" characteristic of civil society as leading to endless pressures toward ever greater consumption, producing ever greater dependency. [5]

The concept has had a lively history and usage since, but it reappeared in the 1970s and 1980s with an explosive force, emblazoned on the banners of sweeping social movements – a rallying cry for strands of conservatism and populism in the United States, and for opposition to authoritarian states in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Several currents of democratic thought and action associated with the concept of civil society are worth noting because they need to be incorporated into any criticism of the way the idea now is used.

Progressive uprootedness

Many theorists and advocates of civil society have used this concept to challenge the claims of overweening professional authority. They have drawn attention to the realm of the everyday, the vernacular, and the commonplace, and also to historically rooted and particular identities. They have argued that the modernist imagination, reflected in progressive, liberal, and left wing politics ever since the Enlightenment, has treated everyday lives and cultures of ordinary citizens with disdain and condescension at best, hostility at worst. This tradition of

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[4] This history follows Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1994). Ferguson quoted from xii; Smith from xiii.

[5] Hegel, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 122, 123.

theorizing draws from Robert Nisbet, Peter and Bridgette Berger, and William Schambra mixed

in with an eclectic populist here and there such as Zora Neal Hurston, Simone Weil, Sheldon

Wolin, and Christopher Lasch. In the 1970s, this criticism became expressed in the widely

used concept of mediating institution, an idea meant to challenge the "geometric thinking" of the

modernist mind, whose prejudices against religious groups, neighborhoods, families and other

human scale institutions were said to be embodied in social and public policies of many sorts. [6]

In the conservative and populist critique, the modernist imagination has been fed by an

uncritical celebration of science and technology as the highest form of knowledge and the key

to human emancipation. Models of knowledge based on scientific epistemology have

emphasized the detached, rational, analytic observer as the highest judge of truth and the most

effective problem solver. This approach is in conflict with communal common sense, folk

traditions and appreciation for craft knowledge mediated through everyday life experience. This

is not necessarily to say that science is "wrong," and folkways are "right" -- but rather to stress

that they are different sorts of valuable knowledge in politics, and that a celebration of the

scientifically educated expert as the actor in public affairs marginalizes the amateur. [7]

American progressives and liberals in the main never sought to recreate the world in the all-

encompassing terms of ideologies such as "scientific socialism." But in milder fashion,

American liberalism in its main variants in the 20th century had indeed come to embody a

model of the cosmopolitan and uprooted intellectual that eclipsed the everyday and historically

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[6] Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington: AEI, 1977); see also my own treatment of this from a populist perspective in *The Backyard Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1980).

[7] For a discussion of the reliance of even ardent early 20th century participatory democrats on scientific epistemology, see William Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985). See also Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989). For treatments of the implicit condescension of experts toward amateurs and traditional communities in liberal, as well as socialist ideologies see Harry Boyte, "Populism and the Left," *democracy*, No. 2 (1981); and Boyte and Kari, *Building America*, especially chapter five, "The New Nobility."

rooted. By the 1950s, Louis Hartz could argue to widespread intellectual acclaim that individual detachment from older, communal ties was the touchstone of American politics: "The master assumption of American political thought has been atomistic social freedom."

The argument against the technocratic outlook was given a powerful formulation by John Lukacs, a self-described "reactionary Catholic intellectual," refugee from Hungary in 1957. In *Outgrowing Democracy,* Lukacs argued that the 1950s was the pivotal decade. Lukacs said that he came to America believing that the country overestimated the capacities of "the democratic masses." But whether that was ever true, the 1950s saw a sea change. America shifted from a "democratic order" to a "bureaucratic state" dominated by a cult of efficiency. Government was by no means alone; virtually every institution – the media, schools, higher education, foundations, businesses -- came to radically underestimate people's capacities.[8]

Conservatives and populists have long made criticisms in this vein. It is notable that attention to these sorts of settings has appeared on the left in recent years. Thus, Michael Walzer, one of the most thoughtful voices on the American left, reflected on what he saw as the need for a moderated and complex view of civil society precisely in view of the left's historic neglect of the everyday, the particular, and the relational. "We have been thinking too much about social formations different from, in competition with, civil society," writes Walzer. "And so we have neglected the networks through which civility is produced and reproduced."[9] Walzer's argument is interesting for its insight, and also for its collapse of the many facets of civil society into a singular focus on civility.

Democratic movements against the state

A second theme associated with the re-emergence of civil society is the importance of

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[8] Lukacs (New York: University Press, 1984). For a detailed treatment of the spread of managerial cultures – the "cult of efficiency" – see Robert Kanigel, *One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Cult of Efficiency.*

[9] Michael Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society," in E.J Dionne, Jr., Ed., *Why Civil Society? Why Now?*(Washington: Brookings, 1997) p. 124.

alternative sources of popular power as counters to the totalizing state. This theme has been fed by real world experiences in 20th century socialism and communism. These have dramatized how the modernist progressive imagination, when wedded to enormous state power and weak sources of alternative action, can have disastrous consequences. Especially, the democratic movements that fought totalitarian governments in 1989 in the name of "civil society" put the concept at the center of intellectual discussion.

The expansive state depended on the crushing of forces outside. In a recent, striking book, *Seeing Like a State*, the comparative social theorist James C. Scott describes how the tools of administrative ordering of nature and society combined with "high modernist" ideology justified by unbounded faith in science, and became tyrannical when government had little opposition to its agricultural policies. The key was "an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring...high-modernist designs into being...closely linked to...a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans."

Forest science developed in the late 18th century France became the embodiment of this new way of thinking and acting. As Scott puts it, "Forest science and geometry, backed by state power, had the capacity to transform the real, diverse, and chaotic old-growth forest into a new, more uniform forest that closely resembled the administrative grid of its techniques."

What happened to forests also happened to human habitations.

Scott describes the terrifying human toll worked by the combination of these forces in country after country. "'Fiasco' is too lighthearted a word for the disasters I have in mind. The Great Leap Forward in China, collectivization in Russia, and compulsory villagization in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ethiopia are among the great human tragedies of the twentieth century, in terms of both lives lost and lives irretrievably disrupted."[10]

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[10] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), pp. 5, 3.

Scott is neither anti-government nor an enthusiast for the unbridled marketplace. Indeed, he shows how markets can have disruptive impacts much like the "high-modernist" state. The activists and theorists in the movements against Eastern Europe and other communist nations, in the main, share his hatred of totalitarian regimes, and they have used a language of "civil society institution building" to describe their work of building centers of democratic power. [11]

Seedbed for democratic movements

The third democratic taproot of the idea of civil society are the qualities such as "publicness" and "freedom" often found in voluntary and community settings that create seedbeds for democratic movements. In everyday community settings, people can find space for relatively uncoerced conversation, for self-organization, and for free intellectual life.

In political theory, writers who champion a movement for public deliberation that can form an alternative to manipulated opinion and public relations draw on the work of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas has argued that civil society in the 18th and 19th centuries was the setting for the development of a trans-local public, nurtured in new associations such as reading rooms, literary societies, and coffee houses where relatively free patterns of speech and argumentation developed. The public was apart from and a counterweight to government and official society.[12]

From yet another vantage, arguments about the importance of community settings derive from a new generation of social historians who focus on popular movements. My own research some years ago on the relative paucity of protest in the southern textile industry was greatly enriched by E.P. Thompson's description of the importance of relatively autonomous settings to

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[11] The way this has played itself out "after the revolution" forms a complex story. For an argument that movement intellectuals often feared the democratic movements of which they were a part, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity* (Cambridge: Oxford), pp. 338-90.

[12] For discussion of this argument see Craig Calhoun, Ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); for a critique of Habermas, see Boyte, "Citizenship as Public Work," in Stephen Elkin et. Al, Eds., *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (Penn State, forthcoming 1998). A number of theorists and practitioners – David Mathews, James Fishkin, Daniel Yankelowich, Amy Gutman and others – have made important contributions to public deliberation.

popular politics. Thompson, in his monumental treatment of English workers, *The Making of the English Working Class*, dramatized for me what was missing in southern textile towns where every institution -- from churches to sports leagues -- was controlled by the owners. In early nineteenth century England, by way of contrast, there were a variety of settings which Thompson described as "the people's own." There, "in the 'unsteepled' places of worship there was room for free intellectual life and for democratic experiments." [13]

Sara Evans and I combined ideas of publicness and freedom for democratic self-organization in the concept of "free spaces." We have argued that these can be seen at the base of every broad democratic movement in American history, from the Farmers' Alliances of the 1880s, as Lawrence Goodwyn shows, to labor struggles of the 1930s, from women's and feminist movements to community organizing. [14] Such movements underline the importance of publicness and freedom. But they also throw into relief the flaws in conventional thinking today.

The Limits of "Civil Society"

Civil society has become a bandwagon on which intellectual and politicians of all persuasions now ride. Commissions and reports on civil society appear everywhere. One theorist, Robert Putnam, made it to the cover of *People* magazine and to "Sixty Minutes" with his arguments about the erosion of voluntary involvements and social trust. *A Call to Civil Society*, the recent report of the Council on Civil Society chaired by Jean Bethke Elshtain, had signatories that ranged from Cornel West on the left to Dan Coats, Republican Senator from Indiana, on the right. The National Commission on Civic Renewal, whose working groups enlisted many of America's most prominent intellectuals, focussed its research agenda entirely

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[13] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (NY: Vintage, 1963), p. 156.

[14] *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1992); Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Cambridge: Oxford, 1980).

on questions surrounding the idea of civil society, like those raised by Putnam and his critics.[15]

The concept of civil society as presently advanced is a contraption of ironic contradictions. On the one hand, it draws from democratic concerns about professional culture and modernism, the power of the colonizing state, and the roots of broad democratic movements noted above. On the other hand, two flaws drain the idea as it presently functions in American public life of democratic content.

In the first instance, the theoretical camp of "voluntarists" separate civil society from work and large institutions such as higher education. In the second instance, the "moralists" camp use this map and go farther, displacing concern for civic life onto issues of morality and the personal attributes of the citizen. The moralists give the whole enterprise the character of a hortatory campaign for civic improvement.

Both features of current theorizing merit a closer look.   Here, I argue that current theory has several major flaws. Its location of citizenship neglects the fluid and boundary-crossing nature of democratic spaces. Its focus on voluntarism neglects the democratic power of work as a wellspring of citizen authority. And finally, its construction of democratic values neglects context, and also the complex nature of such values -- both affirming democratic ideals and challenging society's anti-democratic practices and assumptions.

Voluntarists: Detaching civic agency from power

"Civil society" in its current usages arose most dramatically as an effort to generalize experiences from recent social movements in Western Europe and the United States and from the democracy movements of 1989. The concept, as now advanced by democratic theorists of such movements, couples a critique of the totalizing state to ideas of publicness and public communication. This has descriptive value in highlighting sites where democratic experiments

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[15] *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths* (NY: Institute for American Values, 1998); National Commission on Civic Renewal, *A Nation of Spectators* (Philadelphia: Pew Charitable Trusts, 1998); E.J. Dionne, *Why Civil Society? Why Now?*

often emerge. The problem is that it *locates* active citizenship in voluntary associations. In the process it confuses descriptive and normative projects. Democratic initiatives, wherever they begin, cannot be confined by a social geography of community or voluntary group if they are to have much impact. Indeed, the possibility of democracy on a large scale depends on breaking free of boundaries and revitalizing the public dimensions of work in many settings.

Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato's 1992 book, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, set the pattern of taking work off the civil society map. The book has democratic aspirations. But their idea of civil society, seeking to retain for the concept a critical edge, has unintended consequences. Cohen and Arato propose a revision of the classical notion of civil society descended from the Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel, where the concept did not include the family, and it did include large institutions and commerce. They argue for "a reconstruction [of the concept] involving a three-part model distinguishing civil society from both state and economy" as the way to "underwrite the dramatic oppositional role of this concept under authoritarian regimes and to renew its critical potential under liberal democracies."

They define civil society as "a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication." They "distinguish civil society from both a political society of parties, political organizations, and political publics (in particular, parliaments), and an economic society composed of organizations of production and distribution, usually firms, cooperatives, partnerships and so on."[16]

With much the same purposes, others construct similar models. Thus, for example, Benjamin Barber, an eloquent theorist of "strong democracy" (the need for conceptions of democracy more robust than voting), created the definition that is now conventionally used.

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[16] Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. ix.

Civil society, according to Barber, includes "those domains Americans occupy when they are engaged neither in government (voting, serving on juries, paying taxes) nor in commerce (working, producing, shopping, consuming)."[17] His most recent book, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong*, elaborates. Barber accepts the argument of Jeremy Rifkin that work is disappearing before the inexorable advance of technology and the market, and that its civic overtones are irretrievably lost. Barber proposes that the voluntary sector represents a home and setting for democracy unlike the coercion of government and the commercialism of the market. He advances community service with civic reflection as a way to cultivate the identity of citizen as alternative to "producer" and "consumer." [18]

Theorists such as Cohen, Arato, and Barber are full of good intentions. They want to avoid what they see as the co-optation of many nongovernmental institutions in the corruptions of government or the loss of public purposes that attend marketplace dynamics. Barber's *Jihad Vs. McWorld* describes growing inequalities, the power of multi-national corporations, and the ravages to the human psyche generated by a market that destroys all resistance.

Yet the separation of the world of voluntary activity and community settings from work and government dramatically erodes the power and authority that citizens can gain through work. It also removes the large institutions of our world from being theaters of democratic action. How, one might ask, is it imaginable to challenge the lack of accountability of multinational corporations or the advertising industry with "volunteers"?

Democratic movements arise to address patterns of power -- not to occupy a social space or to find a home. Democratic movements subvert boundaries and cross categories.

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[17] Benjamin R. Barber, "The Search for Civil Society," *The New Democrat,* No. 7 (March/April, 1995).

[18] In his current cover article in *The Nation*, "More Democracy! More Revolution!," Barber argues that "the key to meeting each of these challenges" of contemporary politics "is cultivating citizens – through programs of civic education, voluntarism, community service and social responsibility." *The Nation*, October 26, 1998, p. 12.

And they draw on the civic authority that comes from work. This is a different point than that made by theorists of workplace democracy, though one not necessarily in conflict.

Throughout American history, democratic movements have gained public power through their arguments that relatively powerless groups "build the commonwealth" and thus merit full recognition and participation. For instance, this claim based on democratic authority from work is a central theme in the African-American freedom movement. The civil rights movement built on the authority derived by making work visible and by testifying to its strength and endurance. The bookend events of Martin Luther King's public career -- the Montgomery bus boycott, based on the dignity of maids who walked to work, and the Memphis garbage workers' strike -- find grounding in the great poem by Langston Hughes, "Freedom's Plow" which ties the ongoing struggle for democracy to work and freedom:

> *Out of labor -- white hands and black hands --*
> *Came the dream, the strength, the will, to build America...*
> *America!*
> *Land created in common,*
> *Dream nourished in common,*
> *Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!*
> *If the house is not yet finished,*
> *Don't be discouraged, builder!*
> *If the fight is not yet won,*
> *Don't be weary, soldier!*
> *The plan and the pattern is here,*
> *Woven from the beginning*
> *Into the warp and woof of America.*

Similarly, in women's history, women used the claims based on their civic work (challenging the distinction between paid and unpaid) as the foundation for suffrage. This claim was based on a view of freedom as public contribution that clearly anticipated Jane Addams. Thus, Francis Willard, leader of the largest women's association of the 19th century, believed that "the larger liberty for women," as the historian Eric Foner has observed, "lay in the freedom to develop individually and to contribute to the social welfare." She titled her book, *The Work*

and Workers of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.[19]

The idea of voluntarism itself does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* citations until the 1950s. It comes into usage as an "ism," a pattern of unpaid citizen labors in social service only recently. In 1969, the *Wall Street Journal* labelled as voluntarism "Nixon's program to enlist the help of private groups in solving social problems." It is noteworthy that this is the period when the term "amateur," began to acquire derogatory overtones.

The sorts of settings that prove seedbeds for democratic movements, what Sara Evans and I have called free spaces, often find hospitable ground in communities and voluntary associations. But their qualities of freedom for self-organization and political education and their publicness are not properties of community or voluntary groups. Throughout American history, broad democratic movements have incubated in diverse networks of settings which people own, that have (or in which people can achieve) a significant measure of autonomy from dominant power systems, that also have a public quality. Both autonomy and publicness -- understood not simply as discourse but also as the release and expression of productive energies directed to large and important tasks -- constitute the freedom moment in free spaces.

The concept of free spaces does not so much refute the idea of civil society as show its sharp limitations. Free spaces reach beyond a place-based and community geography of democracy and highlight the importance of work and organizations associated with work. In the African American freedom struggle, for instance, groups like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and community groups associated (such as women's auxiliaries described in the study by Melinda Chateauwert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*) sustained free spaces for political education and oppositional culture for generations.

Theorists like Barber or Jeremy Rifkin who talk about the impossibility of work-centered democracy today simply demonstrate their fatalism. They argue that there has been an

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[19] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 110

irreversible severance of the products of work from the techniques, organization, and processes of work. But the trends these theorists observe derive from processes that exist in all three "sectors" -- government, business, and the voluntary world. Spaces in each are increasingly corporatised, drained of civic energy, and subject to a logic of rationalization that holds ends constant and focuses on efficiency of means. This rationalizing dynamic is evident in small nonprofit organizations, in community development corporations, in religious congregations. Indeed, a new trend is the mega-church, with public relations and customer services for specialized markets. Democracy's rebirth will require exchanging lessons of democratic action across sectors -- not maintaining rigid distinctions.

The loss of the civic overtones of work in government illustrates patterns evident elsewhere. When Carmen Sirianni, research director of the New Citizenship effort coordinated by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, interviewed government workers as part of examining the gap between citizens and government, he heard often, "we've lost the civil in civil service." As Paul Light, a scholar of government reinvention efforts puts it, "Departments and agencies have plenty of advocates for doing things *for* and *to* citizens. But there are almost no voices for seeing government workers as citizens themselves, working with other citizens."

For government workers today, citizens are seen in partial terms -- as customers, voters and volunteers, but not as co-workers in common effort. Politicians and civil servants share this general stance with many other professionals, who have psychologically removed themselves from a sense of *being part of the citizenry* in their work lives. Yet to note the pattern is not to accept its inevitability. There is nothing irreversible about this. It simply takes a different map -- and the robust democratic commitments and organizing to act on it.

To address such dynamics and to hold accountable global structures of our age we will need to reconnect work with public purpose in order to revitalize work as a source of democratic power. If democracy is to have a future, we are in it together. Yet this sense of the "common

lot" tied to productive effort, once brilliantly articulated by civic leaders such as Jane Addams, has eroded. When the democratic authority of the citizen is not at the center of democracy, attention shifts to the moral and personal qualities of the citizen. The moralist theorists' stance toward their fellow citizens illustrates this pattern.

Moralizing citizenship

"We come together as citizens of diverse beliefs and different political affiliations to issue an appeal for the renewal of the American experiment in self-governance," begins *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths*, in the summer of 1998. *A Call* was the product of the Council on Civil Society, chaired by theorist Jean Elshtain and sponsored by the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Institute for American Values. It worked since 1996 from the premise that "the possibility of American renewal in the next century depends decisively upon the revitalization of our civil society and our rediscovery of the American idea." The Council's definition was taken from theorists such as Cohen and Barber:

> By civil society we mean those relationships and institutions that exist in a sphere of society largely separate from both the institutions of government and the dynamics of the market economy. The essential social task of civil society -- families, neighborhood life, and the web of religious, community, and civic associations -- is to foster competence and character in individuals, provide the foundations for social trust, and turn children into citizens.

It held that "institutions of civil society are nothing less than the seedbeds of civic virtue."[20]

A Call reflects the preoccupations of its beginning. It cites survey data showing that Americans are "alarmed and overwhelmingly agreed about the problems of moral decline" and "deeply troubled by the character and values exhibited by young people today." It proposes that "the core challenge facing our nation today is not primarily governmental or economic" but rather the crisis in morality. In their reading, this crisis takes two forms. "As our social morality deteriorates, life becomes harsher and less civic for everyone...and we lose the confidence that

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[20] Quoted from "Institute, University of Chicago to Form Council on Civil Society," *Family Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 1-2 (Spring, 1996), p. 3.

we as Americans are united by shared values." Second, "as we become an increasingly fragmented and polarized society, too many of our fellow citizens are being left behind." Americans show insufficient compassion for the poor.

The year has seen a flood of calls for civic renewal based on diagnoses which parallel that of *A Call to Civil Society*. Values are fraying, it is said. Divorce is far too prevalent. Young people show disrespect. As *A Call* puts it, "Declining morality is reflected primarily in the steady spread of behavior that weakens family life, promotes disrespect for authority and for others, and insults the practice of personal responsibility." Proposed solutions are similar. There needs to be a renewed commitment to families, more civility in public discourse, a check on explicit violence and sex in the media, and attention to the moral foundations of society: "The essential social task of civil society...is to foster competence and character in individuals, build social trust, and help children become good people and good citizens," says *A Call*. [21]

At first glance, there would seem to be a happy conjunction in timing between the squalid spectacle surrounding the Clinton scandal and the spate of new calls for civic renewal. The posturing, public relations, and dissembling from every point of the political spectrum in Washington surrounding the Clinton scandal have, for almost all Americans, suggested that something is profoundly amiss in the nation's public life.

But what exactly is it? And does the call for a moral renewal among the citizenry convey the challenge that we face? Here, closer inspection shows problems.

Our political leadership shows the irony. President Clinton has been the leading political champion of the communitarian and civil society movement (though, one notes, there are more

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[21] *A Call to Civil Society*, pp. 3, 5, 6. It is important to point out differences. Thus, although the National Commission on Civic Renewal continued to emphasize Americans' moral failings and neglected the challenge of civic renewal in major institutions such as government and higher education but its report, *A Nation of Spectators*, adopted the public work approach to defining democracy; acknowledged wide feelings of powerlessness; and noted the "stirrings of a new movement of citizens" to reclaim responsibility for public affairs.

populist moments in his presidency[22]). The administration sponsors Character Conferences in the White House each year. Agencies develop volunteer recruitment programs, while simultaneously redefining their mission as "customer service."

Yet more is at work. In critical ways, to define "the problem" in our civic life as a crisis in morality is to remove the crisis from politics. Indeed, what is to distinguish this problem -- and its purported solutions -- from *any* contemporary political order? The rhetoric of moral decline and calls for renewal are widespread, for instance, among the ideologues today in the Chinese Communist Party. It is telling that while "civil society" and "moral crisis" form the center of citizenship language, "democracy" -- and its practices and spirit -- are at the margins.

Further problems appear. Perhaps most glaring is the selective description of the public's sense of "what is wrong" in *A Call*. Entirely missing from this account are the feelings of collective powerlessness which people of all backgrounds, ages, and even economic conditions recount. The economy may have been growing and people may feel some confidence in their individual economic futures, but belief that citizens, together, can act effectively to solve common problems is at a near record low, according to polling by groups such as the Pew Center for People and the Press and also more qualitative studies, like Alan Wolfe's recent exploration of the views of middle class suburbanites, *One Nation After All*.[23]

The silence about power is deafening. To raise the question in a serious way is to ask why it is that Americans feel so powerless -- and what might be done about it. In turn, this topic raises the theme of the broad movements across the country's history that have put questions of power at the center of the national agenda. A different vantage on the question of civic values is created from the stance of democratic movements in American history. The political

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[22] When I presented the concept of public work at the Camp David Seminar on the Future of Democracy on January 14, 1995, I was struck by Bill Clinton's relative "populism" -- respect for the stories and intelligence of "amateurs" -- compared to other members of the administration. Bill Galston, Deputy Director for Domestic Policy, championed public work throughout our collaboration with the White House.

[23] Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All* (New York: Viking, 1998).

scientist Fredrick C. Harris argues that African-American civic values always combined "orderly and disorderly" in an "oppositional civic culture." The proposes that free spaces in the black community, from churches to unions, social clubs, masonic orders and schools, historically created a dual consciousness in black America. On the one hand, civic groups in the black experience have created a sense of connection and commitment to founding ideals such as democracy, equality, and freedom. On the other hand, such settings have simultaneously "transmit[ed] values that counter the dominant society's ideology of subordination, and they employ these values to justify and legitimize oppositional movements."[24]

For the moralists of civil society, movements are the wrong focus. Elshtain argues that attention should be on civil society, *not* on movements. She proposes that critics of the idea of civil society are driven by nostalgia. "Much of the 1960s politics was about 'Thinking Big,'" in her view. Yet she proposes that "movement politics is inherently unstable, ephemeral, and geared toward publicity." "Thinking Big" and movements are not what is needed. "Building and sustaining decent institutions is at the heart of the democratic matter. And movements don't do that -- don't built those ties of trust, reciprocity, accountability, mutual self help over time."[25]

This argument draws its views about movements from the sixties' new left. That period's focus on rhetorical gesture, its hyperbole, its Manichean quality of discourse created problems for democracy that still plague us. But Elshtain neglects movements that aimed precisely at "institution-building." What about the American Revolution? Or the common schools? Or the Populist Alliances? Or the suffrage groups? Or the trade unions of the 1930s?

Elshtain's list of civic virtues is telling. Values such as reciprocity, trust, and accountability are crucial democratic attributes, although, following Oliver Harvey's clear-

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[24] Fredrick Harris, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? The Erosion and Transformation of African American Civic Life," in *Philosophy and Public Policy* Vol. 18, 3, Special Issue on Civil Society and Democratic Citizenship, p. 21, 25.

[25] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Not a Cure All: Civil Society Creates Citizens. It Does Not Solve Problems," in Dionne, *Why Civil Society*, p. 27-28.

headedness about the Duke grievance procedure, it is always useful to look at the context of power relationships in which values operate. Thus, "accountability" is frequently used these days to beat recalcitrant employees over the head for not following "job descriptions," but accountability is also a vital attribute of public cultures where citizens, with more or less equal standing (nothing is ever completely "equal" in this world) join in commonly agreed upon tasks.

What is not on the list suggests problems as grave as the lack of context. What about boldness? Or self-confidence? Or willingness to challenge unjust power? Or commitment to freedom understood as public contribution?

In a world of growing inequalities and powerlessness, voluntarists and moralists alike convey a sense of unreality in their calls for civic renewal.[26] What we need are approaches that take the lessons of recent "democratic experiments" and generalize them across society.

The Commonwealth of Freedom[27]

"We used to target 'the enemy' – whether government or business or 'the system.' But over the last generation, the 'enemy' has become ourselves. We have to move from an outside and victim stance – because we're now part of the systems we used to hate. We are now the professional infrastructure of the service economy: government workers, teachers, social workers, lobbyists, advocates. The challenge of change in our time is changing ourselves, and our institutions."

Tony Massengale, National Citizenship School, Southern Conference, 1998

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[26] In historical perspective, the moralists can also be seen as expressing one side of the meaning of "freedom" in American history. Contrasted with the more populist, insurgent concept of freedom as Willard or Addams. They express the idea descended from Puritans that "true liberty," in the words of Jonathan Boucher, consists of "a liberty to do every thing that is right, and being restrained from doing any thing that is wrong." Quoted in Foner, *Freedom*, p. 5.

[27] This term, drawn from a poem of Francis Harper, the African American poetess, is also taken from my piece with Nancy Kari, "The Commonwealth of Freedom," *Policy Review*, November-December 1997, in which we seek to challenge the strand of conservatism that sees liberty as "doing the right thing." For other treatments of public work, see our book, *Building America: Democratic Promise of Public Work*, and "Democracy of the People: Expanding Citizen Capacity," in Burlingame et. Al, Eds., *Capacity for Change? The Nonprofit World in the Age of Devolution* (Indianapolis: Indiana Center on Philanthropy, 1996. For other statements of the public work perspective see also Harry Boyte and James Farr,"The Problem of Service Learning" ; Harry Boyte and Nan Skelton, "Educating for Citizenship: The Legacy of Public Work" in *Educational Leadership*; Scott Peters, "Extension Work as Public Work"; Robert Hildreth, Ed., *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History* (Minneapolis:CDC, 1998); and Bobby Austin, Editor, *Repairing the Breach: Report of the National Task Force on African American Men and Boys* (New York: Noble Press, 1996).

For the last decade, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute has sought to act on the premise of Tony Massengale's quote above, working with many partners in democratic experiments, finding free spaces within institutions, seeking to develop the democratic potential of work especially in professional traditions and practices. [28] Our largest effort is Public Achievement, a youth initiative now working with more than 20 partner schools and seven communities, in which teams of young people ages 8 to 18 are "coached" by older teens and adults. They undertake "public work" projects around substantial issues that express their values and interests. We have seen the potential of such work to change the basic culture of schools and the work of teaching, as well as the sense of power and confidence of young people. We have also worked in partnership with a mix of other institutions including a Catholic women's college, a settlement house, a nursing home, and an African American hospital. Although this work seems far removed from the sort of community organizing that some of you at Duke are involved with through the local organizing of the Industrial Areas Foundation, I want to argue that in fact there are strong parallels.

The Industrial Areas Foundation seems on the surface to be an example of "civil

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[28] The premise of the work at the Humphrey Institute came from a strategic analysis that "the new populism" touted by many progressive organizing networks and political leaders (including a "Populist Caucus" in Congress in the 1980s) was incapable of moving democratic politics off of a defensive stance. Many institutions which had once provided "civic muscle" for citizens to hold corporations accountable -- from trade unions to settlement houses, schools, and YWCAs -- had become service operations, dominated by professionalized patterns. At the same time, the cultures of professionalism in educational, service, and governmental institutions was in crisis, with many opportunities for democratic action and "free spaces" that confounded conventional left-right divisions. This argument is taken from "The New Populism Reconsidered," coauthored with Nancy Kari, unpublished. See also, for instance, Boyte, "Populism and Liberalism," *The American Prospect*, 1991.

Our partners have included Tony Massengale who is quoted above, once an African American student leader at UCLA, later a leader and then an organizer with the IAF in Los Angeles; Dorothy Cotton, former director of Citizenship Education for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Nancy Kari at the College of St. Catherine, Nan Skelton, previously Assistant Commissioner of Education in Minnesota and now at the Center, Dennis Donovan, a principal at a Catholic grade school who now is national organizer for our youth work, James Farr on the political science faculty at the University of Minnesota, Miaisha Mitchell, an African American health leader, Peg Michels, who has founded her own organizing center, Civic Organizing Inc., and many others. We have also benefited from collaborative partnerships on the concept of public work with the Kettering Foundation, the Kellogg National Task Force on African American Men and Boys, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

society" organizing. Examination from a "work-centered" stance illuminates other dynamics.

Last year in a speech to the Chautauqua Institute in New York, Michael Gecan, director of IAF in the New York region, assessed the advances as well as the frustrations that the IAF network of citizen organizations faces in the late 1990s. Gecan vividly describes the growth of the network: 150 full time organizers, 61 organizations; nearly two million members. Participants address many of the nation's toughest problems -- crime, housing, drugs, lack of well-paying jobs with dignity. And perhaps most importantly, they recover a public life. "Their experiences soon provide them with a lifetime supply of the antidote to wishful thinking and inflated exceptions. They learn how rough, jarring, and taxing the public arena can be -- and how equipped and flexible and creative they need to be to operate in it," Gecan recounts. For all the challenges -- in part because of them -- IAF participants gain a new sense of themselves and their power. "Leaders who were told to think small, start small, be small, thought big, fought hard, made some mistakes, but won -- and are still winning -- in a big way."[29]

Gecan's account shows the substantial growth and learning that has taken place in IAF, the nation's premier community organizing network. Yet Gecan also describes frustrations. Never has the IAF had such depth and numbers. Yet perhaps never has it been so far from public attention. IAF groups operate in the shadows. Their concerns are often ignored, even ridiculed by the media, academia, and politicians.

Analysts of the Industrial Areas Foundation and many within IAF itself employ a set of categories associated with civil society to describe their efforts. Many seek to document the "social capital" produced by IAF groups. Foundations regularly number "volunteers" in assessing impact. Yet a radically different vantage, and one with far-reaching implications for change in the "system worlds" which slight the network, is suggested by an internal document

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[29] Michael Gecan, "Organizing and Public Life in the Nixon-to-Clinton Years," first deliverred at Chautauqua, July 22, 1997; in my possession; quotes from pp. 22-23.

from 1981 that is a window into the depth of their thinking about work.

In 1981, the Black Caucus of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a group including many leading black clergy in the network and also key organizers such as Gerald Taylor, now regional director of the Southeast, produced a new document, *The Tent of the Presence*, based on the passage from Numbers where Moses gathered a carefully selected group of elders at the "tent of meeting," the center of the Jewish community. There, Moses shared with them power and responsibility for leadership during the travels to the promised land.[30]

Tent of the Presence, rich with Biblical symbolism and exegesis, also included the newly accented IAF themes of democratic public life. The document argued that the black community in America -- and the black church in particular -- stood at a crossroads, facing a dangerous movement to the right in American politics. In such an environment sixties'-style clergy who saw themselves as "movement leaders," dependent on charismatic appeals and moral exhortation, were simply ineffective. For the black community to avoid an increasingly ' dangerous isolation and marginality, a new style of leadership among the clergy would be needed, along with new organizational forms. Like Moses, the black clergy had to choose individuals with promising talents and abilities and "share some of the spirit" with them. A new form of collaborative leadership should emerge, spreading leadership, power and responsibility more widely, creating opportunities for public life within their congregations and beyond. And new "broad-based" organizations were needed, owned by the members, funded with their own money, aimed at gathering durable power over time.

This document illustrates what has happened over the last twenty-five years in IAF, as the network has explored democratic possibilities in many religious traditions and patterns of clergy work. In a sense the network has responded to the challenge of Jane Addams by

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[30] *Common Wealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* describes the process of rethinking and reworking of the clergy role that has occurred in the post-Alinsky IAF, especially chapters seven and eight.

focussing on "freeing the powers" of the clergy and congregation members alike. Its developing practices and theory, new styles of liturgy, exploration of democratic themes in scripture, work to open public spaces in religious congregations all have refuted the dismissals of Christianity's public potentials by Hannah Arendt, one of the great democratic theorists of the twentieth century. This effort also points the way to exploration of democratic potential in other work.

Over the last decade, this has been the undertaking of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. A detailed account of our learning, experiences, and framework is beyond the scope of this lecture today, but I conclude with several points. Overall, we are convinced that there is enormous and largely untapped possibility for far ranging renewal of public life based on "freeing the powers" of work in many institutions, the possibilities of a broad movement that puts the question of democracy at the forefront of conversation and action. It has four themes, each tied to work that unleashes public powers and potentials.

In the first instance, the heart of education for democracy -- education generally -- needs to be recast in Addams terms, as about "freeing the powers" for public creation. This is one reason why the concept of "public work" is useful. We define public work as the ongoing, messy effort of a mix of people ("a diverse public") that creates things of civic importance. Attention to both process and product of work is key. The education that takes place as people gain skills of working strategically in real-world settings not only equips people for public life but frequently leads to a transformed sense of self. "Adults won't take us seriously unless we take ourselves seriously," said Kaitlyn, a seventh grader. "What Public Achievement does is teach us about how to deal with the real world."

Second, attention to products, the actual creations of work for which people are accountable, in which people take pride, and through which they gain a sense of stake and "ownership" in their environment, helps counteract the "process" language of civil society talk, where the emphasis is on helping, deliberating, serving. "I feel like I'm writing my signature on

the neighborhood, so that everyone can see," said one young woman, formerly a gang member, who helped build a community park in a crime-ridden neighborhood. Public products can include the material and tangible – buildings, parks, murals and other public art, contributions to restoring the environment. They also can include social or cultural creations -- an inter-generational project; a program to reduce sexual harassment, a new school curriculum.

Third, public work is a way to highlight the identity shifts and the practical, organizing dimensions involved in democratic renewal. In public work, professionals (including academics) take part and lend their real skills, but they do not "fix things," or dominate. Rather they are part of a broad effort that taps diverse public talents and contributions. This brings us back to themes of the Local 77 campaign: effective change a combines the "orderly and disorderly." It holds in tension the "world as it should be" and "the world as it is"; it is pragmatic, clear-headed about power, sophisticated in forming public relationships. In Massengale's terms, this requires a shift from being outsiders to being co-creators.

A critical obstacle is the detachment of professional identities from an identification with "the common lot." Today, the dominant notion of public service in higher education illustrates the separation of faculty identities from reciprocal work with other citizens. A vivid example was given by Donna Shalala, then Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, in a 1989 Dodds lecture at the University of Illnois. Shalala, seeking to revive a sense of public service, articulated exactly the approach about which Addams had warned. She proposed "the ideal of a disinterested technocratic elite" with a moral mission of "society's best and brightest in service to its most needy." She argued that research universities should "deliver the miracles of social science" just as doctors "cured juvenile rickets in the past."

Shalala's view illustrates professionals' loss of connection to the wellsprings of democratic power. Since her appointment as Secretary of HHS, it also illustrates how firmly a managerial outlook continues to be in place at the highest levels of government. In contrast, in

creative citizen-government partnerships that the Center has analyzed, the key starting point has been an identity shift. "We put the civil back in civil service," described one government professional with the Army Corps of Engineers who helped develop an approach for collaboration with communities, rather than service delivery. It is not easy. It requires professionals letting go of the idea that they can control outcomes. But it also allows professionals to claim their own anger at the way that managerial cultures cramp their talents. "Public work means 'liberating our own talents' not denying our knowledge," said another.

We have seen similar dynamics in some of the Public Achievement school sites, where teachers and staff, with effective organizing, have undertaken substantial change in teaching and school cultures. They engage youth in different ways. In another example, our colleagues at the College of St. Catherine have involved a wide range of workers and stakeholders at the college -- faculty, staff, students -- in the work of creating a learning environment. It has been messy, difficult, and challenging, but the college nonetheless is making progress in redefining teaching and learning as public activities that cross boundaries of disciplines and experience.

In the fourth instance public work highlights a kind of "craft" approach to power; different from mobilizing or advocacy approaches. It emphasizes creating multiple centers of action that can challenge unaccountable power, the logic of the marketplace, and the detachment of professional cultures by "freeing their democratic powers." This means renewing traditions of what can be called catalytic professional practice like that of Jane Addams, and our Center has discovered rich, if largely subterranean, streams of such practice through the 20th century. In catalytic practice the point is not to "shape" or "mold" participants but rather to help provide tools and occasions for places and institutions to discover their distinctive spirit, genius, and public life. This also means taking ourselves in higher education seriously, and renewing our

grandest idea, that higher education's fundamental purpose is service to democracy. [31]

Conclusion

The conventional theory of civil society embodies the crisis in democracy by separating the map of citizenship from work. It assumes, simultaneously, that citizens, or the exercise of citizenship, are "out there," detached from the work of the professoriate and the dynamics of our system. Its map is flawed by that very assumption.

Despite the displacement and externalizing of "the civic problem" in many variants of social and political theorizing today, there are signs suggesting that this pattern can change. Our own interviews with senior faculty and administrators at the University of Minnesota, for instance, have uncovered deep concern with the direction of the institution and the work of faculty -- the trends toward marketplace criteria; the redefinition of students as customers; the equation of "public service" with service to businesses, using a simple measure of economic growth, the loss of public overtones and meanings in much scholarship today. They have also vividly suggested how much faculty, along with staff and students, want a renewal of more robust public purposes and culture.

Yet higher education also illustrates the flaws in the civil society map today. Campuses buzz with talk of "teaching civic responsibility" through more community service opportunities and character education. Few, indeed, focus on the relationship between "citizenship" and the work for which students are being prepared, or the public dimensions of the work of the professoriate, or the core work and culture of the institution as a whole.

To address the crisis in democracy from the vantage of higher education will require

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[31] Through the research of Scott Peters, a graduate student and now faculty, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship discovered that catalytic professional practice and the democratic mission of higher education are vividly combined in a little known, but remarkable, tradition of "public work" in the nation-wide system of county extension agents tied to land grant colleges. This tradition, continuing until the 40s (although always at war with the "cheap food" tradition in the system, held that extension work should be a "leaven," not an expert intervention, aimed at helping creating vital rural democracy and public life. Scott Peters, "Extension Work as Public Work: Reconsidering Cooperative Extension's Civic Mission," Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1998.

that we recast the work of our institutions as public work. This will mean that we re-examine our scholarship and the nature of our disciplines, our reward systems, our purposes and our institutional practices. It will mean that we rethink our identities as faculty members, students, staff, administrators -- and as theorists of democracy.

Similar work of democratic renewal must take place across the range of other institutions in our service economy. To build a new democracy, we need a new democratic politics that puts power, work, and public creation at its center.

	CIVICS	CIVIL SOCIETY	COMMONWEALTH
What is democracy?	Representative government; rule of law	A "civil society," including voluntary groups	The work of the people, building public institutions and creating public goods
What is the aim of politics?	Distribution of goods and services (who gets what, how, when)	Spirit of community	Creating the commons
What is a good citizen?	Voter (advocate)	Responsible community member; volunteer	Co-creator
What is the aim of education?	Prepare for careers; instruct in bodies of knowledge	Develop character, responsibility	"Free the powers" for public work, develop skills, habits and outlook for public work
What is the outcome?	Public products	Civic process	Civic development tied to public creation
What is the professional practice?	One way interventions by outside experts	Facilitation, enhancement of community understanding, teach civic values	Catalysis of public work, work with other citizens in broad public projects
What is freedom?	Individual rights (e.g. speech, worship, etc); freedom to enjoy a flourishing private life	Freedom to be virtuous	Freedom to unleash and develop capacities in contribution to the commonwealth

This chart illustrates different "politics" based on three broad conceptions of democracy. The first "civics," is the conventional view of democracy that we learn in civics classes -- but I would argue that its fundamental framework sets the contours of the left-right political divide. "Civil society" (or communitarian) approaches stress citizenship as voluntarism. Commonwealth politics presents a new, and also old (if buried) work-centered tradition and philosophy of democracy. All have contributions to make, but movement from left to right involves progressively richer and deeper conceptions of democracy and politics.