

# INFORMATION-AGE POPULISM

Higher Education  
as a Civic Learning  
Organization

*By Harry C. Boyte*



Council *on* Public Policy Education

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### **About the Author**

Harry C. Boyte is founder and codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota and a senior fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. He is author, coauthor and editor of eight books, including *The Backyard Revolution*, *Free Spaces* with Sara M. Evans, and *Building America* with Nancy Kari. He is also coauthor, with Elizabeth Hollander of *The Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the Research University*.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank the many contributions made by working associates at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship which, over the years, have included Edwin Fogelman, Nan Kari, James Farr, William Doherty, Gerald Taylor, Dorothy Cotton, Tony Massengale, Scott Peters, Carmen Sirianni, Melissa Bass, and Mike Baizerman, among others.

For this publication, in particular, thanks go to Marie-Louise Strom, Bill Doherty, and Yohtaro Hamada, colleagues at the University of Minnesota in 2001-2002, and John Dedrick and Ilse Tebbetts of the Kettering Foundation for valuable feedback on earlier drafts.

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Learning Organization

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## Foreword

*“I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”*

—Thomas Jefferson<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, at the urging of Harlan Cleveland, then dean of the new Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, we began a project aimed at finding workable remedies for democracy’s troubles. The challenge was daunting, but resources for such an effort had been accumulating rapidly in the civic experiments of recent decades at the grass roots of society — a civic ferment largely invisible in academic theory about politics and democracy.

The most effective civic efforts had piled up a great deal of evidence in support of Jefferson’s profession of faith in the people as the “only safe repository of the powers of the society.” Though Americans’ penchant for self-directed action to solve public problems in general seemed to be in decline, powerful countertrends had also developed. Citizens in communities across the country were taking up tough problems, from crime and housing to economic development and environmental restoration. It was clear that an increasing number of challenges required skilled, savvy citizen action if there was to be any hope of resolution.

It was also clear that the emphasis Jefferson placed on education — especially civic and political education — was powerfully vindicated by the most successful low-income, working- and middle-class citizen groups. Organizations such as those in the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) network founded by the late Saul Alinsky had come to include a wide range of political and religious viewpoints, racial groups, and income levels. Key to their success was an intense emphasis on development of the public skills of leaders, in the context of creating demanding intellectual cultures.

IAF organizations did not shy away from conflict. But they had become sophisticated in forming what they call “public relationships” with establishment leaders whom many once saw simply as the enemy. They also stressed moving from “protest to governance,” as described by Gerald Taylor, IAF’s southern director. “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.”<sup>2</sup>

On local and sometimes state levels, the IAF network accumulated remarkable successes. Citizen organizations such as Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio and Valley Interfaith along the Mexican-American border have reshaped development patterns over the last generation, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure, economic, and community development funds into once-impoverished barrios. The BUILD organization in Baltimore pioneered large-scale efforts at school reform, which affected low-income students’ graduation rates. East Brooklyn Churches’ Nehemiah Homes built thousands of affordable, single-family houses in the midst of an urban area that once looked like a war zone.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Leicester Ford, ed., Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1903), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup>*The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Temple, 1980); *Community Is Possible: Repairing America’s Roots* (Harper & Row, 1984); *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Harper & Row, 1986), coauthored with Sara Evans; and *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (Free Press, 1989). Interview with Taylor, April 26, 2002.

Such political successes, I was convinced, depend not only on individual public leadership development but on change in cultures of the congregations, which form the base of the IAF groups in ways that generate a collective process of civic learning. This requires a shift in the role of clergy from a mainly pastoral, caring role toward work that is far more energizing and politically educating.

These groups highlight the importance of seeing civic engagement as a function of institutional cultures, not simply of individual proclivities. From the outset, our approach at the Humphrey Institute differed from the volume of studies that analyze and diagnose the “crisis of democracy” in terms of voting levels and civic participation rates. A focus on institutional cultures draws attention to other questions: “Why are people turned off?” and crucially, “What works to change it?”

These questions have structured our action research projects at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) over the last 14 years. The center has focused on developing practice-based concepts and civic learning methods that are effective in engaging citizens in public life and invigorating the civic cultures of what we call “mediating institutions,” connecting everyday life to arenas of governance and policy.

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship, with a group of close associates, worked in partnership with schools, congregations, a settlement house, a nursing home, community educators, Cooperative Extension, local government, colleges, foundations, the White House Domestic Policy Council, and Campus Compact (see [www.publicwork.org](http://www.publicwork.org)). These initiatives engaged young people, parents, rural citizens, school teachers, new immigrant communities and many others. Through these efforts, we developed the conceptual framework of “public work.” Public work stresses citizenship as productive activity by a mix of people that creates a lasting civic contribution. It is practical. It solves public problems, produces public things, and develops civic power as part of the process. It is thus different than civic action as simply deliberation, or citizen politics as a struggle for justice by the oppressed or disaffected.<sup>3</sup>

In one sense, public work is a conceptual articulation of the old vernacular tradition of productive citizenship, what David Mathews has called the “sweaty and muscular work” of building schools and creating other public things, which infused American democracy with civic energy in the nineteenth century. But naming and developing concepts is itself important work. We have found that self-conscious practice of public work is a way to engage citizens of diverse backgrounds, and also teach a working respect for those of different backgrounds. As we hear repeatedly from young people in our networks, “We don’t have to love somebody to do public work with them.”

We have also sought to develop civic pedagogies of public work. As pedagogy, public work approaches stress a range of skills and habits that include but also go beyond skills of “civics,” focused on the electoral process, or many versions of “communitarianism,” focused on voluntarism. Public work skills and habits include communication, strategic and analytical thinking, problem solving, self-direction, and teamwork. They also entail learning to see the world in broadly “political” ways — not as a scramble for scarce resources but as a process of negotiating diverse interests and views for the sake of broad public benefit. Public work pedagogy, especially developed in the civic youth initiative called Public Achievement, also involves sustained reflection on political concepts such as self-interest, power, citizenship, responsibility, public life, and politics.

Developing the concept of the public meanings and dimensions of work also led us to emphasize the potential of “professions as public work.” Professions as public work is a way to describe energizing, catalytic professional practices. When they do public work, professionals contribute to

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<sup>3</sup>This argument is first developed in Boyte, “The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Boston: MIT, 1992).

public life and the education of citizens as they practice their craft. Professions as public work is a contrast to expert service delivery.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, focus on professions and cultures brought our attention to higher education. Higher education is the formative institution in the construction of professional identities and practices in our age, as well as in the generation of professional and disciplinary knowledge. This attention coincided with evidence that higher education is an environment ripe for change. A growing discussion of civic engagement has developed in higher education institutions faced with declining public support and with increasing demands for relevance. Research supported by the Kellogg and Kettering Foundations in the late 1990s gave us a way to look at the potential of civic engagement understood as *work*, not as off-hours volunteerism. We interviewed dozens of faculty at the University of Minnesota, as well as administrators, staff, students, and stakeholders in the broader community. More than expected, the interviews revealed a widespread desire for much more public engagement as a dimension of regular professional work. Moreover, the interest in public relevance of teaching and research was not simply an individual desire but was also found in broad, if often invisible, disciplinary sentiments. “Our whole department feels too cloistered,” said one department chair in the College of Liberal Arts. “There is a desire to engage more deeply the urban scene and the broader public world.”

Over the next two years, building on partnerships with a group of faculty at the College of St. Catherine, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship worked with Robert Bruininks, Provost, and Craig Swan, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, on strategies for reinvigorating the university’s public mission. This resulted in a Task Force on Civic Engagement, appointed in the fall of 2000, charged by the provost with developing comprehensive proposals to “renew the land grant mission.”

Work with higher education puts back on the table questions that we began with: If democracy depends, in the richest sense, on the “powers of the society” being vested in the broad citizenry rather than in any elite, what obstacles does higher education present to such empowerment? What are the opportunities? And what would higher education look like if it became a “civic learning organization,” a medium for “informing the discretion of the people,” infused with a fresh sense of public purpose?

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<sup>4</sup>For the efforts of Bill Doherty and his colleagues, see [www.puttingfamilyfirst.info](http://www.puttingfamilyfirst.info). For other examples, see “Intellectual Workbench,” at [www.publicwork.org](http://www.publicwork.org): Nan Kari (occupational therapy); Moriba Karamoko (the IAF work with clergy, organizing); Julie Ellison (humanities and arts); Nan Skelton (youth development); Deborah Meier (teaching); and Fred Kent (traffic engineering and urban design).



Democracy  
in the  
Information  
Age

*“A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people that mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge brings.”*

—James Madison

*“The essential aim of ... the most democratic movements we have is to train ourselves, to learn how to use the work of experts, to find our will, to educate our will, to integrate our wills.... It is of equal importance with the discovery of facts to know what to do with them.... In politics we do not keep these different kinds of information apart....”*

—Mary Parker Follett, *Creative Experience*, 1924

Opening up and democratizing the ways in which knowledge is produced, diffused, and adopted is key to democratic change of every kind in the twenty-first century. It is even key, in a growing number of cases, to elemental problems of social order and survival. Transformation of higher education from a setting whose norms now emphasize detachment and apartness, to a place for civic engagement, civic learning, and the reconstruction of politics itself, will be at the heart of this democratization.

This is not to say that expertise is not important, that the search for excellence is not worthwhile, or that norms of judgment, reason, and the capacity to look at questions from many vantages are not intrinsic to the proper mission of higher education. We have found that sustained attention to democratization of knowledge production in higher education illuminates the *practical* and *public* dimensions of knowledge in the disciplines and professions. Public and practical dimensions of knowledge add distinctive standards of excellence such as pragmatic tests of practice, and attention to aspects of learning such as apprenticeship relations. Democratizing knowledge also highlights the importance of “public spaces,” places for the flourishing of discourse, deliberation, and the making of broad political and scholarly judgments.<sup>5</sup>

To undertake democratization of the production and diffusion of knowledge is to stress the need for disciplines to interact across porous boundaries with the wider world, often in developing of research agendas, always in discussing the question, “knowledge for what?”

Democratic publics, full of diverse talents and ways of looking at the world, produce their own distinctive excellences, as one recalls from the Athenian republic, Italian republics of the Renaissance, or our own great traditions such as Chautauqua, the Harlem Renaissance, and the New Deal arts and culture projects. They also create the contexts for using expertise wisely. As Mary Follett observed many years ago, science can tell us whether a snake is poisonous or not, but not what to do about it crawling around on the floor in our midst; that takes collective discussion. Democratic publics also enlist and cultivate the passions of “amateurs” (from the root, *amator*, or

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<sup>5</sup>On the public and practical dimensions of knowledge production, and the usefulness of the concept of “craft” in thinking about these, see “Professions as public crafts,” in the research section of [www.publicwork.org](http://www.publicwork.org); and the interview with Ken Keller in the section, “Intellectual Workbench.” On public space, see David Mathews, *Creating More Public Space in Higher Education* (Washington: Council on Public Policy Education, 1999).

lover), a crucial need in a world where experts and governments by themselves can do little to solve mounting public problems, from global warming to sectarian war.

Knowledge is not a zero-sum resource, such as land or capital, though the ferocious battles over secrecy in government dramatizes how much is often at stake in the struggle over who knows what and when. Knowledge is increased if shared or pooled. Thus, a politics of knowledge differs from the dominant politics in the twentieth century, which was primarily about distributive struggles over who gets what.<sup>6</sup>

A democratic politics of knowledge requires a deep, if unromantic, respect for the talents and intelligence of ordinary people. Today, devaluation of most people's talents and intelligence is part of the warp and woof of institutions of every kind. Thus, democratic politics of knowledge involves an information-age populist challenge to the meritocracy, which is the structuring ideology of our age. The reconstruction of higher education in civic populist terms, as a civic learning organization whose mission is to "inform the discretion" of citizens for self-government, is essential.



## Powerlessness and Meritocracy

Today, most Americans are deeply disaffected by politics. Voting levels have dropped steadily over the last decade, and there has been a broad decline in many forms of civic participation and associational life.

A variety of diagnoses are offered to explain civic disengagement: the role of money; the unraveling of public morality and the rise of a culture of radical individualism; even the pervasiveness of television. *But from a civic populist perspective, the elephant in the room is the widespread sense of powerlessness experienced by most Americans.* Such powerlessness is produced by the philosophy of meritocracy, which structures our institutions, rendering most people marginal to real decision making and condescending to their intelligence.

In 1996, the Kettering Foundation commissioned The Harwood Group, a public issues research firm, to conduct focus groups across the country in order to better understand the "nature and extent of the disconnect between what people see as important concerns and their sense that they can address them." The focus groups discovered a nation of citizens deeply troubled about the direction of the society as a whole, even if they felt optimistic about their own personal lives and economic prospects after several years of economic expansion. They saw large institutions, from government to business to education, as increasingly remote and focused on narrow gain. They worried that America is becoming a "greedy nation," where values such as "looking out for number one" and "get-

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<sup>6</sup>Politics as conceived in these terms revolves around the state. And it is seen as a quintessentially distributive activity. David Easton's classic definition captures both the state-centered and distributive aspects of politics. Politics, said Easton, is the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values. (Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* [New York: John Wiley, 1965]). This is similar to the classic definition given by Harold Lasswell, who said that politics is the struggle over "who gets what, when, how." By mid-century, mainstream American liberals took this to take place within the framework of *Federalist Paper #10*, which saw politics as the activity of the political class: "the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves convened for the purpose." Sidney Hillman, the twentieth-century union leader, added strategic elements with participatory implications: "Politics is the science of how who gets what, when, and why." Hillman's definition has continued to structure the predominant paradigm of progressive citizen action. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines politics as *1a*: The art or science of government .... *2*: Political actions, practices, or policies; *3a*: competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership in a government or other group. Public work politics adds to this the concept of politics as a productive activity solving problems and creating public things.



ting rich quick” replaced hard work, accountability, community and family life, and a sense of the human and the sacred. They expressed grave concerns that people were increasingly divided by race, ideology, religion, and class. Society used to “build walls to put the bad people in,” said one man in Memphis. “Now we’re building walls to keep the bad people out.” He also saw that as futile. “There’s no sense of community anymore. Everybody is walled off from the other neighborhood.”

Citizens feel powerless to do much about these trends. As a result, they retreat into smaller and smaller circles of private life where they do have some control, even if they think retreat spells trouble. “If you look at the whole picture of everything that is wrong, it is so overwhelming,” said one woman from Richmond, voicing widely held sentiments. “You just retreat back and take care of what you know you can take care of — and you make it smaller, make it even down to just you and your unit. You know you can take care of that.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1999, a parallel study of baby boomers and older adults by the Minnesota Board of Aging in Minnesota found similar results. Using a public-work model of citizen engagement that asked about interest in “doing more than simply volunteer” by participating in solving public and community problems, the board organized a series of focus groups. They found that both baby boomers and older adults have a strong desire to feel useful, to make serious contributions to rebuilding a sense of community, and to be involved in decision making about the shape of their communities. Citizens also expressed the desire to learn civic skills such as how to work across divisions of ideology, race, or culture, and learning “big-picture thinking” that ties specific tasks to the larger questions and challenges.

Finally, citizens felt that most volunteer opportunities relegate them to “positions of mediocrity with the assumption that they lack the capacity to work on big issues that affect the community.” Volunteers, in their view, are rarely asked “what they are good at, what is important to them, and how they want to be part of shaping their communities.”<sup>8</sup>

Such patterns of institutional condescension derive from meritocracy, which has spread throughout our society like a silent civic disease, disempowering and marginalizing people.

John Lukacs, a self-described “reactionary Catholic intellectual,” and a refugee from Hungary in 1957, observed this dynamic in his 1984 book, *Outgrowing Democracy*. Lukacs argued that the 1950s was the pivotal decade. He had come to America, he said, 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.<sup>9</sup>

Politics today dramatizes meritocracy, a philosophy of rule by “the best and the brightest.” Joan Didion details this pattern in her new book, *Political Fictions*, based on her essays in *The New York Review of Books* on American political campaigns from 1988 to 2000.

Among most Democratic candidates and their staffs, she found a palpable assumption of superiority. “I recall pink-cheeked young aides on the Dukakis campaign referring to themselves, innocent of irony and so of history, as ‘the best and the brightest,’” she writes.

Conservative pundits and politicians are at least as arrogant.

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<sup>7</sup>Richard C. Harwood, “The Nation’s Looking Glass,” *Kettering Review*, Spring 2000, pp. 15-16; 7-8.

<sup>8</sup>Dean Mohs, *Celebrating and Encouraging Community Involvement of Older Minnesotans: A Snapshot of Current Minnesota Baby Boomers and Older Adults*, Minnesota Board of Aging, April, 2000, pp. 6, 3.

<sup>9</sup>Lukacs (New York: University Press, 1984). For a detailed treatment of the spread of managerial cultures — the “cult of efficiency” — see also Robert Kanigel, *One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Cult of Efficiency*.

“Given their obstinate lack of interest in the subject, asking a group of average Americans about politics is like asking a group of stevedores to solve a problem in astrophysics,” wrote Andrew Ferguson, a senior editor of *The Weekly Standard* in 1996. “Before long they’re explaining not merely that the moon is made of cheese, but what kind of cheese it is...” The impeachment controversy of the late 1990s, according to Didion, illustrated how omnipresent the political establishment’s sense of superiority and detachment from most Americans had become.

A 1998 *New York Times* editorial by Senator Alan Simpson argued that Republicans’ failure to win impeachment would have little consequence, since “the attention span of Americans is ‘Which movie is coming out next month?’” Mainstream commentators, giving no notice to Simpson’s stunning disdain for the public, illustrated a wider pattern. “What remains novel, and unexplained, was the increasingly histrionic insistence of the political establishment that it stood apart from, and indeed above, the country that had until recently been considered its validation. Under the lights at CNN and MSNBC and the Sunday shows, it became routine to declare oneself remote from ‘them,’ or ‘out there.’”<sup>10</sup>

Political attitudes among the establishment largely derive from the culture of higher education. The unconscious assumption of meritocracy even among leaders in higher education who call for reengagement with society is striking. Thus, in a 1989 lecture, Donna Shalala, then Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, made an impassioned plea for public service and social justice, for struggles against racism and sexism, for environmentalism and peace. She called for public universities to engage the world. And she wed these calls explicitly to meritocracy. For her, “the ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite” fired by the moral mission of “society’s best and brightest in service to its most needy.” The imperative is “delivering the miracles of social science” to fix society’s social problems “just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past.”<sup>11</sup>

These sentiments are the rule, not the exception, in elite research universities. Meritocratic assumptions are woven into the everyday fabric of life. “Access versus excellence” was the way Minnesota Public Radio framed its statewide discussion in 2001 on the future of the University of Minnesota. It took as self-evident the idea that large numbers of students of diverse backgrounds inherently meant a decline in “standards of excellence.”

Conventional research protocols and methods make much the same assumption. For instance, as Davydd Greenwood, an anthropologist at Cornell, and his colleague, Morten Levin have pointed out in *An Introduction to Action Research*, the ideal of expert-driven scholarship structures most social science research, which assumes that research agendas are best developed by detached researchers outside public settings and puts a premium on mathematical and quantitative approaches, predictive theories, and abstract formulations.

A hidden meritocratic approach shapes contemporary patterns of professional education, credentialing, and continuing education as theorists and historians of professionalism such as Donald Schon and Ellen Lagemann have demonstrated.<sup>12</sup>

The notion that only “experts” are in a position to judge first-rate scholarship is at work in purportedly blind peer review of academic journal articles. Meritocracy also visibly shapes the stance of sharp critics of professional systems such as post-modernists and deconstructionists. Their inaccessible language — as if defying the uninitiated to understand them — is a measure of distance from ordinary people.

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<sup>10</sup>Joan Didion, *Political Fictions* (New York: Knopf), pp. 28, 279, 253-4.

<sup>11</sup>Shalala, David Dodds Henry Lecture at University of Illinois, 1989.

<sup>12</sup>Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

In the twentieth century, an eclectic mix of conservative and progressive populists, from Robert Nisbet, Peter and Bridgette Berger, and William Schambra to Zora Neal Hurston, Simone Weil, Sheldon Wolin, Christopher Lasch, and James Scott, challenged the claims of overweening expert authority and positivist knowledge at the heart of meritocracy. They drew attention to the realm of the everyday, the vernacular, and the commonplace, to practical knowledge, and to rooted identities such as ties to place, family, religion, and ethnicity. They argued that the modernist imagination, reflected in progressive, liberal, and left wing politics ever since the Enlightenment, had treated everyday lives and cultures of ordinary citizens with disdain and condescension at best, hostility at worst. In the 1970s, this criticism was expressed in a challenge to the “geometric thinking” of the modernist mind, whose prejudices against religious groups, neighborhoods, families, and other human-scale institutions are embodied in many social and public policies.<sup>13</sup>

In the populist critique, the modernist imagination has been fed especially, if not solely, by a positivist philosophical rendering of science and technology. In positivism, models of knowledge supposedly based on scientific epistemology emphasize 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 practical knowledge mediated through everyday life experience.

This is not to counterpose a wrongheaded science with a virtuous folk wisdom. Anne Fadiman makes the point in her book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*:

Once several years ago, when I romanticized the Hmong more (though admired them less) than I do now, I had a conversation with a Minnesota epidemiologist at a health care conference. Knowing he had worked with the Hmong, I started to lament the insensitivity of Western medicine. The epidemiologist looked at me sharply. “Western medicine saves lives,” she said. Oh. Right. I had to keep reminding myself of that. It was all that cold, linear, Cartesian, non-Hmonglike thinking, which saved my father from colon cancer...<sup>14</sup>

In politics, as in medicine, the key point is that there are different sorts of valuable knowledge, and it is the productive interaction of such a mix of knowledge and talent that has the potential to be profoundly educative and creative. A celebration of the scientifically educated expert as the singular actor in public affairs marginalizes the amateur and the vantage, talents, and knowledge she or he brings.<sup>15</sup>

It greatly impoverishes the knowledge-creation process as well. What are the dynamics of power and citizen politics in the “Information Age”? A closer examination reveals obstacles and suggests possibilities.

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<sup>13</sup>Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington: AEL, 1977); see also my own treatment of this from a populist perspective in *The Backyard Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), p. 276.

<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of the reliance of even ardent early 20th-century participatory democrats on positivist epistemology, see William Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985). For a stunning treatment of the devaluation of experiential knowledge around the world by governments operating out of “high modernist” ideology, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. 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.”



Without romanticizing the American past or glossing over its injustices, a considerable body of scholarship has illuminated the importance of work-centered understandings of democracy. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, democratic citizenship in America and our sense of politics were tied to what might be called a civic and populist view: democracy was a work in progress, something the people made. And work-centered democracy was accompanied by a robust culture of civic learning. To help make the world, people had to know about it.

Home libraries and reading groups, settlement houses and “schools as social centers,” community colleges and the great tradition of land grant and public universities, the Harlem Renaissance and the New Deal public arts and culture programs were all infused with this spirit of productive public work, democratic learning, and knowledge-creation. James Weldon Johnson captured the ethos in *Black Manhattan*:

Harlem is more than a community.... It is a large-scale laboratory experiment. Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing immemorial stereotypes.... He is 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; that he has given as well as received; that his gifts have been not only obvious and material, but also spiritual and aesthetic; that he is a contributor to the nation's common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization.<sup>16</sup>

In these terms, citizenship was understood not as the high-minded, virtuous, and leisure-time activity of gentlemen. Rather, it was the down-to-earth labors of ordinary people who created goods, who undertook projects of public benefit, who learned things in the process, and who showed the nation what they could do as creative agents. Citizenship was public work.

Citizenship as public work lent dynamism, spirit, and an everyday “political-ness” to American democracy. It accorded honor and authority to those who were “builders of the commonwealth,” whatever their birth or educational status. The authority gained through work with civic overtones meant that relatively powerless groups had multiple potential resources for gaining power. The people not only made the commonwealth. They *were* the commonwealth. And they had high regard for the commonwealths they helped to make — schools and libraries, parks and bridges, local art fairs, and civic holidays.

Americans radiated boldness in action and pride in work that amazed foreign observers. The civic aspects of many different kinds of work turned America into a seedbed for insurgent movements, utopian experiments, and popular politics of every kind. Even those excluded from the commonwealth, such as slaves, women, and the poor, found in its themes potent resources for democratic action.

Citizenship understood as public work largely disappeared in the 1950s and 1960s as Americans were slowly transformed from “producers” into “consumers,” and the intelligence and talents of most people became devalued. Today, much of civic activism has a far different character than it once did, taking the form of aggrieved outsiders asking the government to do things for them. Meanwhile, accounts of citizenship as volunteerism obliterate questions of power and politics altogether.

For all the obstacles, it has been the premise of our work at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship that the new information society with its changing power dynamics and patterns of

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<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, Gordon Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution* and Robert Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of Democracy*, and Harry Boyte and Nan Kari, *Building America*. Johnson quoted from Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1984), p. 34.

work holds potential for reviving a populist politics of public work and a commonwealth that is our common creation.

Effective citizen action in our times is possible if — and only if — citizens develop the abilities to gain access to information of all kinds and the skills to put such information to use. Possibilities for a popular sovereignty are dependent not only on information and knowledge but also on what might best be called “wisdom,” the ability to frame and guide action with integrative concepts and a clear set of public values and purposes. Without a sense of “why” the action is undertaken, activism leads inexorably toward “activity,” a scattered and often frenetic busyness.

The characterization of our country as an information society grows particularly from the work of theorists like Raymond Aron and Daniel Bell. Bell and others draw attention to the increasing role of knowledge-creation as a source of power in its own right. Richard Florida has recently argued that knowledge workers, or what he calls “the creative class,” account for 30 percent of the workforce, and locations where such workers and their occupations are most concentrated are the main centers of economic growth.

Energy generated by steam and electricity transformed preindustrial societies into industrial societies. Money replaced raw materials as the main strategic resource. Today, data-transmission systems and the theoretical knowledge required to organize information are the driving forces of innovation, strategic resources and power, shaping a world economy and changing the pattern of human relationships. “The industrial era was characterized by the influence of humankind over things, including Nature as well as the artifacts of Man,” wrote Harlan Cleveland, an astute analyst of knowledge as a resource. “The information era features a sudden increase in humanity’s power to think, and therefore to organize.” Such a process, in turn, puts those who do the conceptual organizing in a particularly powerful position. Bell assumed meritocracy, seeing a “knowledge elite” of scientists, mathematicians, economists, engineers, and professionals of all sorts progressively replacing the traditional governing groups of managers, capitalists, and business executives.<sup>17</sup>

One does not have to subscribe to the most extravagant arguments that we are entering a qualitatively new world, or that the forms of organization, social and class structure associated with capitalist society are rapidly dissolving, to note the profound changes in patterns of power and politics that the growing centrality of knowledge and its use are bringing about. In many ways, the current knowledge revolution represents an acceleration of trends that have increasingly shaped our world throughout the twentieth century.

We are at the end of a long period of time — what might be called “the meritocratic era,” or the age of welfare state politics — in which citizenship has been defined in weak and attenuated ways in significant part *because* of the centralization of knowledge, reflected in and significantly produced by institutions of higher education. In the twentieth century, Americans handed over to experts, technicians, and professionals the power to make the key decisions about our commonwealth — the basic public goods, or what is sometimes called the social and economic infrastructure, that were widely seen as essential to the society.

Today, knowledge itself has become more and more central to patterns of domination, on the one hand, and democratic action, on the other. Power is gathered not only in distant corporate

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Kenneth Boulding, *Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 2002); Harlan Cleveland, *The Knowledge Executive* (New York: Dutton, 1985), p. 20. For critical perspectives, see Peter N. Stearns, “Is There a Post-Industrial Society?” reprinted in Leigh Estabrook, *Libraries in Post-Industrial Society* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1977), pp. 8-18; and Michael Harrington, “Post-Industrial Society and the Welfare State,” *Ibid.*, pp. 18-29.

boardrooms; it is as close as the doctor's office, the social service agency waiting room, or the child-rearing advice manual. In our educated, service society, most middle-class and professional people can be both the power elite and the powerless, depending on the system or institution.<sup>18</sup>

In the twentieth century, control over information-generating processes and control over information have resided in large-scale institutions such as governments and corporations, which have the resources and personnel necessary for accumulating, processing, and storing specialized knowledge. Such centralization has been justified on the grounds that large-scale problem solving is simply too difficult for ordinary citizens: the highly trained specialist — the expert — has been touted as the appropriate handler of information.

As knowledge becomes increasingly a source of power, the struggle around its accessibility and use becomes more and more central to democracy. The success of contemporary citizen politics in a variety of contexts depends on the ability to discover key information, often against the efforts of powerful interests to restrict information access. From the housewife who worries about local school dropout rates to the rancher fighting to preserve the open range from energy conglomerates, from community activists organizing around toxic waste to owners of small businesses trying to increase the pool of resources available in their areas for entrepreneurial start-up projects, people need information to act. They also need the organizational and communicative skills to organize. Studies of grassroots leaders have found that the most successful have developed considerable talents at gaining access to information, and the organizing skills that facilitate action.<sup>19</sup>

There is a further, broad problem with the structure and pattern of knowledge in our society that is harder for citizen activists to overcome. Large-scale organizations and centralized bureaucracies not only centralize information; they also fragment it and strip it of meaning in ways that mirror the excessive specialization we learn in academic life and the professions. Data about housing, for instance, is rarely related to crime statistics, or health care patterns, demographic information, or environmental problems. Issues are separated from the larger context in which they appear. We have lost the longitudinal knowledge needed to see questions in perspective.

Narrow specialization breeds a historical forgetfulness that has disastrous consequences for democracy. A character in the novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, by Milan Kundera, rages against the obliteration of history in communist nations: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Shoshana Zuboff, one of the most perceptive observers of the information revolution, echoed such sentiments in a different context. Without an active, informed, thoughtful citizenry, she told *Harvard Magazine*, new technologies create a "social amnesia" that obliterates any strong value perspective. "As the sense of how things were fades from awareness, we may be oblivious to what we're losing in the quality of our world." Zuboff maintained that education's role is more crucial than ever: "to remind students of the classical themes in human experience, create a sense of kinship between present and past, and heighten understandings of the continuities in the human condition. What we're talking about is preserving our humanity and our human values in a world whose forces and pressures and seductions tell us to believe in technology and technological solutions."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>For the "clientization" of the citizenry, see for instance, Barton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976); Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); and Joseph Tussman, "Obligation and the Body Politic," Henry Kariel, *Frontiers of Democratic Theory* (New York: Random, 1970), pp. 18-21.

<sup>19</sup>For instance, Joan C. Durrance in her book, *Armed for Action: Library Response to Citizen Information Needs* (New York: Neal Schuman, 1984), studied a cross-section of citizen activists and found almost all successful leaders were sophisticated consumers and users of information, skilled in knowing where to find out what they needed to know.

<sup>20</sup>Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin, 1981); Zuboff quoted in Garry Emmons' interview with Zuboff, "Smart Machines and Learning People," *Harvard Magazine*, November-December, 1988, p. 60; see also Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

Knowledge needs to be guided by wisdom — broader frameworks, concepts, and values that integrate information and the knowledge of how to use it, that contextualize, prioritize, and guide action. But it goes against the grain of the times to think in broad and integrative ways about civic practice. Much citizen activism in recent years, on both local and national levels, has addressed itself to fairly narrow issues. Activists do not often ask what their work “means” in a larger sense, where they are going in the long run, or how their particular efforts might add up to more than the particular or localized campaigns they engage in. Citizen activism has frequently gained voice for marginal, poor, or minority communities historically left out of most decision making. It has done so, in large part, by generating effective ways of getting information citizens need, and teaching the skills to organize significant numbers of people. But like conventional politics, much grassroots activism has spoken a thin, sometimes cynical, language of narrow interests and protest detached from any enlarged social and political vision. Such activity neglects the way in which citizen politics ultimately depends on political arts and capacities such as the skillful use of power, imagination, judgment, and learning from experience, that are only developed through self-conscious cultivation. And while such activism may succeed in important issue fights or local struggles, it does not do much to change the wider pattern of power relations nor the political culture.

In themselves, technology, science, and the knowledge and political modes of thought they generate, are detached from human ends and values. In a technological world, Kundera’s dictum can be reordered: the struggle to remember, and to build the communal frameworks through which to remember, constitute central ingredients of the struggle for power. Lasting, large-scale citizen efforts that begin to revitalize a strong sense of public life renew communal traditions and value frameworks.


If an information society has dangers, it also offers opportunities. While large institutions try mightily to keep secrets, they find it harder and harder to do so. One of the distinctive features of the “knowledge revolution” today is that information is more difficult to hoard (community-organizing lore abounds with stories of the “inside sympathizer” who leaked information at critical moments of a community struggle against a bank, a developer, or a chemical company). Information is not used up if it is given out. In many cases, it increases in value. Efforts to hoard information, in fact, lead to inertia and stagnation — a lesson learned by Soviet Bloc officials, by tobacco company executives, and by intelligence officials after 9/11. Information lends itself to sharing transactions, rather than the exchange transactions of the marketplace. And if it is unusual to think about the values and concepts that frame and guide activity in our age of excessive specialization, skillful efforts to do so produce considerable power in their own right. Anne Fadiman’s book about a disastrous encounter between American medical practice and Hmong culture contains striking examples of alternative democratic practice that *increased* the power and effectiveness of professionals who showed respect and paid attention. Doctors like Dwight Conquergood were successful in introducing public health practices in Thai refugee camps by drawing on Hmong cultural symbols and by showing connections between Western medicine and traditional practices.

Information without public discussion of its meaning is, in itself, a barren form of communication. Citizen initiatives or professional practices that recognize and seek to remedy this void, especially when carried out in collaborative ways that create a broad sense of ownership, speak to the immense hunger that has developed in our society for reintegrating the human element into large systems and technological modes of thought. And, as Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland demonstrate at length in writing about health policy efforts like Oregon Health Decisions, widespread civic involvement in the formulation of public policies can also generate civic authority that expert-led processes never generate.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>One of the frustrations during the New Citizenship effort I coordinated in association with the White House Domestic Policy Council was that we could not convince the administration to pay attention to such lessons during the health care debate. For a description built on this experience, see Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001). Their book is a powerful examination of the power of “civic learning” in several domains, including community organizing and environmentalism.

Citizen groups and initiatives that engage in such work revive the conception of politics as the activity of equal citizens engaged in argument, debate, dialogue, conflict, and common work. They provide a political education adapted to a modern, complex, and technological society, through which individual citizens and smaller communities come to understand the interconnections of their lives with others who are different from themselves.



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*Higher  
Education as a  
Civic Learning  
Organization*

Higher education is the premier “information” institution of modern society. It socializes professionals. It creates credentialed knowledge. It generates and diffuses the conceptual frameworks that structure practices and institutional cultures of all sorts, from global finance to parent education. It educates students for occupations. If higher education becomes infused with what Harvard President Charles Eliot called, long ago, “the democratic spirit,” it will become the seedbed for a new politics, with dramatic effects.

The latent democratic and political power of higher education is widely understood. Indeed, it was a regular topic of conversation in the public forums with diverse constituencies that were part of the provost’s Civic Engagement Task Force at the University of Minnesota over the last two years. As one forum participant put it, “The whole future of the state of Minnesota is bound up with the university. If the university recovers its public purposes, it will have an impact everywhere.”<sup>22</sup>

In higher education, renewed attention to questions of civic learning and civic engagement is driven not simply by broad visions of democracy but also by gritty questions of self-interest and even survival. Especially for public universities, the trends of decreasing support in state legislatures, mixed with increasing use of market criteria and language such as the redefinition of students as “customers” and competition from on-line for-profit colleges or business colleges, make strategies for change of enormous importance.

Increasing public engagement in higher education will involve, necessarily, broad alliances across different political traditions, views, and approaches. Populists need to work with proponents of the “best and the brightest” — a politics which, in different variants, is now dominant in research universities. If this view lacks respect for the intelligence of ordinary citizens, its partisans are also deeply concerned about withdrawal of public support from public institutions. Out of their concern for justice, they are also often allies on crucial issues such as the importance of multiracial and multicultural campus cultures, or the importance of access for lower-income students.

Information-age populists also need to make alliances with conservative advocates of a service ethic in higher education. However much the rhetoric of “service,” “volunteering,” and “helping the needy” can create patterns of dependency and self-righteous solicitude, advocates of service do, nonetheless, seek to change the cultures of disengagement and ivory-tower detachment that settled in as the norm in the 1950s. Many conservatives who may fear “the power of the people” nonetheless can be enlisted in efforts to engage higher education with communities.

If higher education is to become a vital force that genuinely “informs the discretion” of the people for democratic self-governance, we need to develop a richer and more extensive populist poli-

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<sup>22</sup>Or as the *Star Tribune* put it, in calling for “a statewide conversation about the university’s needs and its role in the state” as part of the search for a new president, “The university [is] the single most important shaper of Minnesota’s future.” June 1, 2002.



tics for the information age. In part, this means retrieving a largely unknown but vibrant populist heritage that runs as a subterranean thread throughout the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

It also means articulating key features of a model civic learning organization.

If higher education is to become a civic learning organization it will mean giving conscious attention to the *public and productive* qualities of the creation and diffusion of knowledge. Putting the “public” back into public universities means multiplying public spaces, where people with diverse views can wrestle with controversial issues. As Edwin Fogelman, chair of the University of Minnesota’s Civic Engagement Task Force, and Victor Bloomfield, vice provost for research, have observed, recognizing and naming the public impact and purposes of every kind of scholarship hold wide implications for change in the university culture. In immediate, strategic terms, one task is to begin integrating questions about public impact into activities reports and criteria for promotion and tenure.

Developing public dimensions of university research requires support structures for reciprocal, long-term partnerships with diverse publics and higher education. It means re-thinking the “tripart mission” of research, teaching, and outreach as more like a stack than a “three-legged stool.” It means keeping knowledge creation public, open, and accessible — resisting trends toward the privatization and patenting of knowledge. Five other features of a Civic Learning Organization are also critical:

**1) Power-building: The civic learning organization is committed to the empowerment of citizens and communities.** Surveys of civic engagement efforts at the University of Minnesota have turned up numerous examples of partnerships that empower communities and citizens. The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a learning and public work partnership with new immigrants in the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, for example, has helped forge productive relationships with the regional Immigration and Naturalization Service, successfully pressed for congressional recognition of Hmong veterans, and undertaken educational reform efforts of many kinds. Public Achievement, an international civic engagement effort for young people, has proven highly successful in teaching skills and concepts of everyday empowerment. The College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture has sought to revive the land grant partnership approach, working with communities to strengthen their power to shape the quality of their built environments. In one instance, the college helps suburban communities resist the sales pitches of giant civil engineering firms, that seek to sell sewer systems that are so expensive it takes urban sprawl to pay for them.

**2) Pedagogical: The civic learning organization is educative and attentive to civic pedagogies.** Here, there is much to build on in the movements for experiential learning, service-learning, and learning organizations. Learning theorists have mounted sustained criticisms against most educational environments, which they see as static, fragmented, and one-directional. Margaret Mead called such static environments “the vertical cultural transmission model”; Dewey called them “the cold-storage ideal of knowledge”; the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire said they used “the banking theory of education.”

An explosion of interactive, engaging practices and pedagogies have sought to challenge and

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<sup>23</sup>Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford, 1978); Boyte and Riessman’s edited collection, *The New Populism* with Sheldon Wolin, Elizabeth Minnich, Robert Bellah, Ernesto Cortes, Manning Marable, Cornell West, Gianna Pomata, and others (Philadelphia: Temple, 1986); and Boyte, *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Christopher Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*; Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000); Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); David Levering Lewis, “Martin Luther King and the Promise of Nonviolent Populism,” *Journal of African Civilization* 9 (1987); and scholars on Black Populism, [http://kalamumagazine.com/black\\_populism\\_intro.htm](http://kalamumagazine.com/black_populism_intro.htm).

change “the cold storage ideal.” In higher education, for instance, Campus Compact reports that now more than 12,000 courses emphasize active, community-based, and service-learning.

Civic learning adds a sustained attention to the “so what?” of learning, both for individuals and organizations. It stresses learning, like knowledge production, as “work,” with the larger aims of solving public problems and building democratic society. It integrates self-conscious attention to political and civic concepts, such as politics, power, and citizenship. We have seen repeatedly the power of such explicit civic and political language among young people and students of every age.

**3) *People-oriented: The civic learning organization is relational.*** It builds public relationships that cross the rigid boundaries that characterize higher education today. It must recognize the complex humanity of people involved in higher education, resisting the reductionism that comes from seeing individuals through the narrow prisms of a particular discipline or theory.

Such recognition is both an ethos of the civic learning culture and a means of change. One of the key distinctions in the world of organizing over the last generation is between “mobilizing” (getting people out for some project or protest), and “organizing” (involving deep culture change).<sup>24</sup> Organizing involves retrieval of the histories of a particular place or institution, making explicit networks and “relational leaders” who may not be visible but who bear the culture and traditions of a community. Finally, organizing means recognition that we need to develop sustained alliances with those seeking to reinvigorate civic dimensions of disciplines, as well as with other higher education institutions, especially those undertaking systemwide change. Developing public relationships takes longer, but it is the crucial foundation for deep change.

**4) *Place-based: The civic learning organization is contextual.*** It thinks deeply in terms of “place,” and the identities, rhythms, histories, and cultures that surround a place. It also thinks about the campus itself as a place that is both a text for learning and a context for research. Thinking contextually also means thinking about the larger public environment and policy context in which we seek change. A key lesson in the work at the University of Minnesota over the past two years has been the need to pay attention to the implications of policy debates in the state legislature. We also have learned to see the civic engagement effort at the university as tied to civic efforts in other parts of the state ranging from reform efforts in K-12 schools to reform in health care.

**5) *Prophetic: Finally, the civic learning organization is visionary.*** This means understanding and claiming the distinctive missions of public involvement that animated colleges or universities in the past. It also means an important role for higher education in developing a different kind of politics to deal with the elusive but often overwhelming power of the entertainment and communications industries to define reality.

There is deep discontent about values and purposes in America today, reaching to the center of suburbia. William Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, works with middle-class families in a group called Putting Family First. Its aim is

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of the difference between “organizing” and “mobilizing” in the American civil rights movement, see Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995).

to “take back our kids” from a commercial and competitive culture spinning out of control. Doherty and his colleagues are seeking to reconceptualize the disciplines of psychotherapy and family education in more public terms, as “catalytic partnerships” in which families and ordinary people are the central actors.<sup>25</sup>

The Imagining America coalition of colleges and universities, based at the University of Michigan, is dedicated to bringing academic humanists back into public life through sustained, reciprocal partnerships. Imagining America, according to Julie Ellison, its director, “is a strategic advocate and citizens’ lobby for artists and humanists aiming to build a national movement in support of ambitious public scholarship.” It also “offers an example for other disciplines to emulate as they reclaim their public soul and public muscle.”

We need a lot of public soul and public muscle in America today. We also need a different kind of politics that is public and productive, empowering, relational, contextual, educative, and expansive in vision. Insofar as institutions of higher education become civic learning organizations, they can be key players in effecting this transformation.

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<sup>25</sup> (see [www.puttingfamilyfirst.info](http://www.puttingfamilyfirst.info))



