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Civic Prospects: Civic Engagement and the City

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Civic Prospects: Civic Engagement and the City

When I began studying cities some thirty years ago, the central questions concerned racial conflict, the movement of jobs and people out of the central cities, the resulting erosion of the tax base, and the quality of city services. Alas, these are the same questions that occupy most of us still. There is a kind of dreary sameness about city problems, it would seem, a sameness that applies not just to the passing years but also across cities. What is true of Pittsburgh seems to apply just as well to Dallas.

Now, as it happens, thirty years ago many people thought that the problems I have mentioned could be alleviated with a substantial increase in the use of federal authority and federal resources. This was done, although many have argued, with some plausibility that we did not do enough with regard to either resources or time commitment.

Still, if these are the quintessential urban problems, we were right then, and we would be right now, to give the greatest attention to the deployment of national socio-economic resources through the actions of the federal government. This is simply because the urban problems I have listed are largely consequences of a national political economy that has rarely produced full employment at reasonable wages; that has too often reinforced racial subordination; that has been slow at dismantling some of the principal effects of that subordination; that has done too little to cushion many citizens from the declining economic returns to unskilled labor; and that has done too little to moderate growing economic inequality.

There is, however, a sense in which the roots of economic and racial inequities *also* flow from the organization of local political life. They are, in part, a consequence of local government boundaries. We build whole new cities in the suburbs, and little of the wealth created flows to the central cities—and, indeed, some or perhaps even much of that economic activity actually hurts central cities by moving jobs that otherwise might stay in the center to places that low-skilled city dwellers find difficult to reach.

I should add, in this context, that cities themselves are engines of economic inequality. The burdens of redevelopment still fall on the

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poor and vulnerable, as they have during the whole post-war period. As well, the property tax, on which local governments heavily rely, is, on balance, regressive, if we assume that this tax is passed along to renters.

Not surprisingly, given these features of the politics of cities, we argue and struggle over how to make it easier for those hurt by redevelopment to have their voices heard; we worry about curtailing or altering the path of redevelopment; we attempt to improve the delivery of city services, especially to the needy and vulnerable; and we work to attract new businesses to the central city and attempt to keep in place the businesses already located there.

It is with these sorts of matters that analyses of city politics and city problems typically stop. We regularly repeat that we need to act nationally to mitigate the negative effects of national forces that are increasing inequality and reinforcing racial subordination. We consider ways to make the effects of city politics and policy less economically regressive. And sometimes we even consider whether the boundaries of local governments might be altered to enable them directly to attack urban problems thrown up by the effects of the parceling out of political authority to a large number of local governments in metropolitan areas.

However admirable such discussions and proposals are, something is missing. The words “city,” and “civic” suggest what it is. So far I have said nothing about citizenship, and neither, for the most part, have the politics and policies I have just mentioned.

This is very odd, since we are supposed to be, and to some degree are, a self-governing republic. This is the type of political regime where the citizenry carries the greatest burden of governing. They must choose who is to govern them, judge their performance, and directly participate in a variety of ways in the process of government itself. The question of citizenship is even more apparent once we recognize that, if our policies and politics are unsatisfactory, this must be in part because something is lacking in the citizenry. The qualities that citizens of a self-governing or democratic republic need are thus a matter of the first importance.

Here then is a fundamental problem. We must talk about the qualities that citizens need if we are to do much about the state of our

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cities because, to the degree that their state is a consequence of national and local policies, significant change in policy must almost certainly come from significant change in the citizenry. But—and this deepens the problem—we seem to lack the intellectual resources to think about democratic citizenship.

In what follows I will try to provide some of these intellectual resources. To look just a bit ahead, it should come as no surprise, given the link between city and citizenship, that crucial to my account of citizenship in a self-governing republic will be the links between the character of the citizenry and the character of local political life. Local political life is crucial to the fostering of a self-governing citizenry and thus to the overall shape of the politics and the policies we pursue. But, before taking up these matters, I want to spell out something of the poverty of our intellectual resources on the question of citizenship.

The Poverty of Our Intellectual Resources

I can best show the limits of our understanding of democratic citizenship by focusing on two of the major strands in our political thought. Between them, modern liberalism and conservatism make up much of our present thinking about political life—from what policies we ought to pursue to explanations about why our political life is so unsatisfactory. It will help to say that what we usually call conservatism is actually classical 19th-century liberalism. In this sense, virtually all Americans are liberals, just of different stripes. It is also worth noting that it is very odd that classical liberals have gone about calling themselves conservatives, since they worship at the shrine of the so-called free market, not realizing that the market—otherwise called capitalism—is the single most revolutionary force in the modern world. This is perhaps as good an indicator as can be found of the confusions in our political thinking of which our discussion of citizenship, such as it is, is so important a piece.

Modern liberalism has its origins in the New Deal, and its meaning was deepened and extended by the Great Society programs of the 1960s. Insofar as its proponents have concerned themselves with the question of citizenship at all, for the most part, they have conceived of the problem as one of providing citizens with the wherewithal to

participate in the life of the larger society. They have thus concerned themselves with such matters as providing all with a minimum income, necessary health care, economic security, equal protection of the law, and civil rights. One underlying promise of modern liberalism is to guarantee equal rights to all—not just that there *be* rights, but that the ability to exercise them be more or less equally distributed. A second, related promise is that there be political equality: that all have a chance to be heard politically, and that no group distinguished by race, gender, religion, ethnicity, occupation, or similar marks, be denied a political voice.

To redeem each of these promises requires that all citizens be guaranteed a minimum level of resources. Equal rights means none should be without the resources to exercise their rights—and to participate politically means to have the time, economic security and information, and similar resources that allow a person to turn from domestic pursuits to a concern with the public world.

There is one strand in modern liberalism as it developed in the 1960s that points beyond a concern with equality of resources and opportunities to a more direct concern with citizenship. I am thinking here of arguments and practices that traveled under the rubric of participatory democracy. Its main home was, and is, in a strain of political thought oblique, even antagonistic, to modern liberalism, *viz* what might be called the theory of strong democracy—that body of thought that frames citizens not as (equal) recipients of the largesse of the state but as political doers, people directly engaged in governing themselves. To be a consumer of services is to be less than free, since the great decisions that affect one's life will be made by others. This is an old theme in American political thought, having been announced at the time of the founding by various anti-Federalists, and it found a very sophisticated expression in the writing of that most acute of founders, James Wilson.

In a moment, I will say a bit more about the tendency of modern liberalism to see citizens as clients of bureaucracies. Here, I want to note that in the War on Poverty this emphasis on direct participation in political life briefly found a home in modern liberalism. It was, however, an unhappy home. It was soon noticed that citizens encouraged to take political life into their own hands became critical

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of the administrators and public officials who thought it their task to provide the less well-off of their brethren with the wherewithal to lead a life of minimal decency. It was a result of such clashes that participatory democracy was read out of the modern liberal lexicon and returned to its original home in New Left political movements. Again, I will return to this matter.

Now, it is a giant step forward to see that the promise of American life to realize equal rights and political equality requires a lessening of the inequality of resources and opportunities that afflict us. But resources and opportunities are not enough, if we are serious about fostering democratic citizenship. At a minimum, such a focus neglects the dispositions and competences that a democratic citizenry needs if it is to carry out the defining task of a democracy, *viz self*-government.

The chief failure in modern liberalism's conception of citizenship stems from its being a centralizing doctrine. In this, conservatives are correct. And in this, modern liberalism is much like its cousin, European social democracy—the political outlook of those who created the welfare state. Social democrats are not really interested in citizens except in their role as voters who provide the majorities that are needed to govern, and as the clients of a state that is to provide them with a wide variety of services.

The principal concern of social democracy is equality, not self-government. A social democratic regime relies on strong political parties, bargaining among political elites, and a disciplined civil service that will do the bidding of its political masters while acting as a custodian of the public interest. These features of the regime allow it to pursue major initiatives by insulating political leaders from the views of the citizenry. The citizens make their views known at elections; in between elections, it is the job of political leaders to lead and to listen to citizens only when they are deeply divided, or when leaders have few other choices.

Modern American liberalism is not so centralizing and not so insulating in its intentions. Not the least of the reasons is that American politics is so structured as to make both of these impossible on the scale of European social democracies. Still, the center of gravity of modern American liberalism is not to energize citizens, nor to provide opportunities for them to participate in the act of self-

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government. As with its cousin, its principal task is to provide citizens with resources, services, instructions, and information. A fully realized modern liberal state would necessarily be highly bureaucratic and centralized. It would seek uniformity in how it treats citizens and would resist the particularism that is an inevitable feature of a strongly democratic politics.

In understanding American conservatives, it will help to contrast them with what might be termed "real conservatives," those found in Europe. These conservatives are no great believers in democracy or the market, both of which are destructive of traditional patterns of authority rooted in lineage, family history, and religion. These patterns are typically hierarchical, and thus any ideas of political and social equality, which are at the heart of democracy, are to be resisted, as are forces that emphasize impersonality, as does the market.

There are some echoes of these views among American conservatives, but they are faint. No matter how grudgingly, most American conservatives believe in popular self-government, individual liberty, and private property. (The future is less clear: some religious conservatives have begun to suspect that the market is not their friend, but they are unlikely to dominate any political party that wants to win national elections.) As I have said, then, most American conservatives are classical liberals—and are thus suspicious of government, and are wedded to the private sphere and the market as the principal means of governing the society. When resort must be made to government, they argue that it is best to use local government, which is "closer" to the people and which allows a choice of governments in a way that employing the national government does not. Even in the governmental sphere, market principles should rule.

American conservatism has some attractive features. With conservatives' help, many Americans have come to understand that government is not always benign. It can, and often is, the engine of privilege, more often than not rewarding those already organized as against the broad mass of the citizens or, of less concern to conservatives, the poor and the vulnerable. Government can also be worse than an engine of privilege and injustice. As conservatives have long argued, it can turn into a tyranny of the few over the many, or even of the

many over the few, when the few are stigmatized and weak. Finally, conservatives have helped make clear to their fellow citizens that local governments are especially valuable in democracies, because their workings are more comprehensible, participation in their affairs is easier to manage, and, should any particular local government prove unattractive, reliance on local governments offers a low-cost means of escape by allowing easy exit to other governments.

However, in their advocacy of local government as a principal vehicle for governing the society, conservatives have looked away when it comes to a close examination of local political life. They have seen clearly the kinds of advantages I have set out, but have neglected the fact that local government has been an easy, convenient device for maintaining racial subordination and economic inequality, corrupting the public realm and depriving a wide range of citizens of basic rights to privacy and speech. Thus, conservatives' views of democratic citizenship must be deeply suspect: those who do not recognize the ways in which small-scale polities can be used to subvert democracy are unlikely to be very good guides in the delineation of the essential features of a vibrant, politically engaged, democratic citizenry.

Equally troubling for those concerned with fostering a genuinely democratic citizenry is the conservative reliance on markets as the paradigmatic form of social choice. One plausible interpretation of conservative thought in this respect is that it isn't concerned with citizens and citizenship at all. We are, first and foremost, consumers in this view. And this being so, markets are the best form of social coordination: each person gets what he or she wants (and can pay for). But how are we to learn to govern ourselves—since we will still need government, unless we are given to anarchist utopianism? How are citizens to learn to restrain themselves from reaching for government to cope with their problems? A classical liberal citizenry must learn to be the careful, self-contained, private cooperation-loving people just as much as any other kind of self-governing citizenry.

The problem of fostering a self-governing citizenry, especially one in which citizens are reluctant to look to government for help, is especially pressing for conservatives, because it isn't in my or your interest to be a citizen who looks to his or her own resources to solve

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their problems. And self-interest is one of those motives that market conservatives are given to praising. Let us not rely on other-regarding motives, they say, for these motives are weak and lead to the reign of hypocrisy. But it is in my self-interest, and in the interests of people who are in situations much like mine, to use government to help line our pockets, and thus to use the powers of the state to transfer other people's money into our hands. Moreover, it is in my and similarly situated people's self-interest to use the power of the state to help create and protect opportunities for us to enrich ourselves and to wield power over others whose activities may interfere with ours. If we all do this, we will, of course, get active, large-scale government, which is not a hopelessly distorted version of how we have come to the present pattern of government in the United States.

Thus, it is far from clear how we are to learn to exercise the self-restraint that is necessary if we are to get the kind of government conservatives favor. We are certainly not going to learn it through market participation where the lesson of self-interest is regularly taught. In short, free market conservatives make it harder for us to think about citizenship.

Democratic Citizenship

How, then, shall we think about the content and sources of a self-governing democratic citizenship? What intellectual resources do we have to help us think about this problem?

I have mentioned the New Left concern with participatory democracy. In its form as an argument for what came to be known as community action, this strand of political thought was instrumental in organizing poor and minority communities as part of the War on Poverty. By law, their participation was required in decisions about just what services were to be provided and to whom they were to be delivered. There is little doubt that this exercise in "maximum feasible participation" helped organize low-income communities and made them stronger bargainers at the pluralist table. This strand of New Left thought pointed to a crucial aspect of democratic citizenship—the citizen as bargainer for the largesse that government can dispense.

But a self-governing republic requires more from its citizens than that they be adepts in the art of interest-group politics. A democratic

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citizenry must, at the least, also have a significant measure of public spiritedness. Many, perhaps most citizens, must think that there is a public interest and that lawmakers are to try to give it concrete meaning. Democratic citizens, moreover, must also be proudly independent, that is, be confident and proud of their ability to judge their existing and prospective lawmakers. These are the minimum requirements.

I think many Americans understand these requirements, even as they find it difficult to display much public spiritedness and independence of judgment. It is now a common view that Americans in general display a growing cynicism about the workings of government and broadly distrust it. Fewer and fewer people believe that their fellow citizens or their governors have any abiding concern for the public interest. More and more citizens, partly as a result of their observation about the behavior or dispositions of others, are increasingly disengaged from political life. They vote less often, they "bowl alone," and otherwise consign political life to the back of their emotional burner.

As for worries about the proud independence that a democratic citizenry needs, some of it comes out in the form of worries about those who, through a variety of life paths, cannot seem to manage their own lives, no less think that they should concern themselves with the broader life of the society. Another way in which worries about a lack of proud independence comes is in the form of criticism of those who are all too independent. These are thought to behave as those figures Tom Wolfe portrayed as "masters of the universe." Their pride is overweening, and they think it is their right to pick and choose among all the world's fruits. As a result, they are uninterested in what happens on their own doorstep; they are proud and independent, but they do not use these attributes in the service of our collective life.

For the rest of my remarks, I want to concentrate on the problem of public spiritedness. It is in worse repair than the disposition towards proud independence. The forces promoting the latter are still, I think, visibly at work.

If we are to think carefully about democratic citizenship—about the qualities citizens need in a democratic regime—we need an account of the kind of political order we Americans are supposed to

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be. To put it more grandly, we need a theory of the political constitution of our self-governing republic, of how to constitute it.

Where are we to look for one? The appropriate place to start—and it is all I will consider here—is Madison's account in *The Federalist*. This is the most comprehensive and compelling body of thought that we have on how to constitute the American republic which we are dedicated to realizing. It is also the most authoritative account, as the recent impeachment struggle makes clear; it is the place where we typically look when we need guidance on how our republic is supposed to work.

I will focus here on a central element in Madison's account. He argues that, in the kind of democratic republic he hoped we would be, there must be political institutions, notably the legislature, that display what might be termed deliberative ways of lawmaking. The legislature is to "refine" the people's voice. Through reasoned discussion among lawmakers, the people's views will be sifted, evaluated, and made clearer and stronger. Moreover, this reasoned discussion is to be directed at giving concrete meaning to the public interest. The generalities that must attend any overall account of the public interest must be given practical and detailed life via lawmaking.

This being so, a well-ordered democracy requires a citizenry capable of choosing lawmakers who are disposed to deliberate about the concrete meaning of the public interest as that question arises in discussions of particular policy questions. In short, the citizenry must be public-spirited. Many, perhaps most, of its members must believe to some degree that there *is* a public interest, that, among other things, lawmaking should be designed to give it concrete meaning, and that lawmakers must be judged according to how well they perform the task of giving the public interest legislative life.

We would be well on our way to an attractive political life, if we could assume that the requisite amount of public spiritedness would be produced as a matter of course, as a by-product of things that occur in a day-to-day way, regardless of whether we think and care about public spiritedness. But we can assume no such thing: there are too many things in our lives and in the life of the society that undercut public spiritedness. Thus, there is the operation of markets that run on self interest; there is also the fact that, for many of us, our identity is

substantially formed by attachments to ethnic, sexual, and similar groups, who are regularly engaged in conflict with one another; and there is the regular experience of economic insecurity that for many us strengthens the natural inclination to look to the protection of those we count as nearest and dearest.

Thus, we must make provision for *fostering* public spiritedness. Where shall we focus our efforts? John Stuart Mill argued that it is only in local political life that a significant number of people can gain the kind of political experience that is necessary for engendering public spiritedness. And it is experience we need; public spiritedness cannot easily be learned from books or in school. Even if it is not engendered by experience, it certainly can only be given form and direction by actual involvement in an effort to make sense of the public interest. As a very perceptive student of these matters said, when men and women do not participate in public affairs, they have *obsessions* about these matters and have difficulty disentangling their nightmares and fondest dreams from the shape of the world as it is and might reasonably become. Walter Lippmann commented in the same vein that "the kind of self-education which a self-governing people must obtain can only be had through daily experience."

Nothing very complicated is being said here. In the politics of a properly structured democracy, the participants are constantly pressured to justify the proposals they are making in terms larger than their self-interest. It is embarrassing and costly to argue that my fellow citizens or lawmakers should support some policy because it will make me rich or enrich my constituents. We must, that is, think about larger interests, the public interest, if only to have the language to cloak our real interests. Moreover, as in much of life, if we pretend long enough, we come to learn and appreciate the point of the words we mouth. Thus, we find in many religions that this is one of the reasons offered for engaging in prayer and the doing of good deeds: if we go through the motions long enough, we will actually come to believe in the Divinity or see the reason for charity. In addition, as we become practiced in argument directed at giving concrete meaning to the public interest, we become more skilled at judging the efforts of others in this regard, especially those whom we elect to speak for us. Through our experience of public-spirited argument in the public arena, we become more adept at judging our lawmakers.

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Thus, we are brought to think about the political life of cities in considering how it might be structured to provide more citizens with the necessary experience of arguing over the concrete meaning of the public interest. As I have suggested, the citizenry must itself have the experience of deliberating over the concrete meaning of the public interest—and to do it in the context of making real decisions, ones that affect their own lives and the lives of their fellow citizens—if it is to judge whether lawmakers are inclined and capable of doing so and have, in fact, made the necessary effort, at least some of the time. The politics of cities affords the only possibility for large numbers of people to engage in public deliberation whose outcome will affect more than their own lives and the lives of those with whom they closely identify. Here, we have at work the most important law of social science: it takes one to know one.

But there is necessary and complex prologue to any such discussion of the political life of cities. No matter how we structure and restructure local political life so as to afford large numbers of citizens the experience of arguing over the meaning of the public interest, the institutions will fail to provide the desired effects unless the citizenry brings a certain set of qualities to local political life. If this is not the case, rather than teaching public spiritedness, the experience of local political life will teach cynicism and frustration, as it has often done in the past and is doing now. Indeed, many of our urban reforms have failed precisely, in part, for this reason: no effort was made to see that citizens brought to the new political environment any of the qualities that I am pointing toward here. Otherwise said, citizens must be receptive to what a deliberative, public-spirited local politics can teach. And, we can add, they must also be capable of acting on these lessons.

What qualities, then, must citizens bring so that deliberative local political institutions will succeed in fostering a public-spirited citizenry? There are at least six:

1) Citizens must come to these institutions with the beginnings of the idea that there are public interests and private interests.

2) Citizens must have a significant measure of proud independence.

3) They must come to political life with a degree of trust in other citizens.

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4) They must have the capacity to make moderately complex judgments about public matters, i.e., they need to have some measure of cognitive complexity.

5) They must have some degree of respect for their fellow citizens, and, thus, there must be a substantial degree of mutual respect among the citizenry.

6) They must be concerned with the esteem in which others hold them—and, central to the granting of such esteem, there must be a reputation for reasoned analysis of public matters.

There is no time to talk here about all of these, even at modest length, so I will content myself with making a few remarks about several of them. Each of the ones I will comment on has a substantial implication for how we organize our society.

To even get started on the project of fostering public spiritedness, citizens must have some inclination to judge political life in terms of interests broader than any narrow account of their own interests and those of their immediate circle. Political life can only reinforce or diminish dispositions; it cannot create them from scratch. People who cannot imagine why they should help a frail stranger across the street are people for whom political life can do little—except perhaps to secure their possessions and provide them with largesse that will make them and their circle comfortable. Talk of the public interest for such people can only seem hollow words spoken by cynical and self-serving opportunists.

From where will a concern for the good of something larger than oneself come? The usual places. Among the first lessons we learn, if we are emotionally healthy, is that there are other people in the world and that at least the well-being of some of them is important to us. Call this a functioning family. Sometime after that, we learn that we are part of some larger group—of neighbors, of members of a religious congregation, of families connected by a common place of work, and we come to see that our well-being is tied to the fate of others. Call this community. While not everyone will grow up in this fashion, a great number must, if there is to be a public-spirited citizenry. A concern for the public interest starts, then, with a child learning the connection between his or her own interests and the interests of others. This then is stretched and reinforced, until, for many, it stretches to include the larger whole of which one is a part.

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On proud independence (as one of the foundations of public spiritedness, not with regard to its intrinsic value): however public-spirited a citizen might be, if that person doesn't have confidence in the worth of his or her own opinions, that these opinions deserve to be heard, that his or her views ought to affect public action, and that his or her efforts will have some prospect for success, then being public-spirited will matter little. The person will not act. In general, citizens must bring to political life a sense of *pride* in their own powers of judgment: it is their *right* to judge lawmakers, and they are able to do so.

What are the roots of this proud independence? A significant portion of it can be traced to the world of work, particularly to non-routine, loosely supervised work. Dull work dulls the mind, as Adam Smith saw at the dawn of the Industrial Age. So, the organization of work is crucial for the fostering of a public-spirited citizenry. So is economic security, which is also tied to the organization of work; lack of security undercuts both pride and independence.

As for the ability to make complex judgments, we need the wherewithal to make them if we are to judge our lawmakers. We need not be experts—after all, most lawmakers aren't either—but we need to be able to weigh different factors and follow a chain of reasoning at least a few steps. Again, we are led to the world of work, because one of the roots of this ability is almost certainly to be found in the kind of loosely supervised work that gives us a good deal of independence to make our own judgments.

Finally, mutual respect. This is a long, complex subject, and I can only say a few things here. Mutual respect is necessary if deliberation is to occur. If we are dismissed by others as in some way unworthy, we cannot participate with them as equals in public discussion. Unequals cannot deliberate. The roots of mutual respect are many. One is certainly some degree of economic equality. How much? Probably more than we have now. Thus, someone from a family with an income at the median—say, roughly $31,000—is not likely to be awed by someone from a family with $150,000. But at $20,000 and $300,000, matters look different. We are now talking about people in different worlds. About one-fourth of the American population—those living in families with incomes under approximately $20,000—are outside the system of mutual respect.

Already, we can see the profound implications for the society, if I am correct about the sources of what citizens must bring to local political life. Thus, we would need stable families and neighborhoods, substantial reorganization of work, widespread economic security, and greater economic equality.

But this is not the end of the need to consider major structural reforms of the society, for we need to consider the organization of city politics itself. Again, I can only touch on the matter.

The basic point is that, if local politics is structured as it is now, even if citizens come to local political life with a fair measure of public spiritedness, the citizenry will not have its sense of public spiritedness reinforced and expanded.

Which features of city politics are inhospitable to learning the lessons of public spiritedness? Two are worth singling out:

1) Citizens who participate in city politics soon learn that it is centrally concerned with the advancement of private interests, especially in land use decision-making. Land use questions are fundamental to the well-being of the local citizenry and simultaneously the political lifeblood of local politicians and their closest allies.

2) There are few opportunities for deliberation in local political life as it is now structured. Local politics is heavily executive-oriented, with mayors, chief executives, and department heads being the central players. Partly as a result of the focus on the executive, local politics is heavily dominated by bargaining among major interests, the details of which are largely screened off from the citizenry.

Perhaps even more important than local political structure, it is unlikely that in a significant number of localities the citizenry *can* be drawn into a discussion of the concrete meaning of the public interest. First consider the residents of relatively homogeneous and prosperous suburbs. For them there is likely to be little sense of the tension and complexity in any reasonable conception of the public interest. One reason that the public interest is so difficult to define and serve is precisely because it is complex and full of internal tensions. Thus, for residents of these suburbs, it is likely to seem obvious that businesses must be free to move around the landscape as they please. Local prosperity will still remain high, and government can be kept limited, that is, not employed in the effort to keep and attract business

activity to the locality. Otherwise said, the citizens of these localities need not worry very much about how the mobility of business can undercut the prosperity of local communities, need not concern themselves with the sources of local prosperity, nor think about the role of government in securing that prosperity. For these citizens, the public interest will seem a simple matter: all the pieces nicely fit together.

By contrast, consider the citizens who live in places like East St. Louis or East Cleveland. They cannot deliberate about the content of the public interest, because they don't as a municipality have any choices. They lack the resources to affect their environment, and so policy discussion is largely a futile and, therefore, not very attractive, undertaking.

Conclusion

If we Americans wish for a substantial measure of self-government, we must have a public-spirited citizenry. For that we need a citizenry with a certain set of dispositions and a certain sort of local political life. In turn, to secure the dispositions and the appropriate form of local politics, we must undertake a set of significant changes in the society. If we wish to come closer to realizing our aspiration to be a self-governing republic, then we have no choice but to undertake the kind of major reforms I have pointed to here. Our devotion to the Constitution, the blueprint for the republic to which we aspire, requires this of us.

In evaluating my case for these changes, it is crucial to see that the argument is neither liberal nor conservative, as these terms are conventionally understood. It is, instead, an argument about how best to realize the American republic. All sides say that they share this purpose, and I am, just as they are, a patriot. My argument says to the conservative: If you are serious about fully realizing the American republic, you must work to see that there is more economic equality than we have now, changes in the structure of work, more economic security than is presently the case, and less economic inequality among local governments. My argument says to the liberal: If you wish to realize fully an American republic, you must work to see that there are stable families, churches, and neighborhoods and that local governments are sufficiently free from a centralizing national

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government that they can serve as a school of citizenship, rather than as local administrative arms of federal government bureaucracies.

We need, I think, a new political vision, one that takes more seriously than many liberals and conservatives do a full realization of the American republic and all that this entails. At the heart of this vision must be a revivified and restructured local political life. At the risk of some confusion, we might call this a "republican" (with a small "r") vision. It is republican, because its central concern is the realization of the American republic. We do not wish to be just any sort of democracy employing just any sort of popular rule. Rather, we wish to bring to fruition the republican form of democracy, where the people are capable of holding their leaders to a vision of the public interest. This was Madison's hope for us, the kind of political order he hoped would emerge from the passage of the new constitution, which is still our constitution.

Thinking about cities and citizenship is not then a luxury, something over and above thinking about poverty, race, violence, and the other staples of urban discussion. Our ability to handle these matters is affected by the overall shape of our political order; this, in turn, is affected by the kind of citizenry we are; and that is shaped by the character of our local political life.

There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg problem in all that I have been saying. A citizenry poorly equipped to govern itself will have a local political life poorly equipped to foster those very qualities that democratic citizens need. In turn, citizens without public spiritedness and other qualities that a democratic citizenry needs make it unlikely that we will pursue the national policies that make it possible for cities to foster democratic citizenship. Instead, we are likely to enact policies that will make the forming of citizens difficult, and even policies that significantly undercut the foundations of democratic citizenship that are already in place.

There is nothing unusual in this circularity. All complex problems have mutually dependent elements. Everything *is* connected to everything else. We are rarely, if ever, in a position to build a secure foundation first and then tackle the rest of the problem; the rest of the problem keeps pouring sand into the foundation. Thus, we are always trying to start in midair. We are always having to act as *luftmenschen*,

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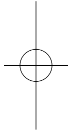
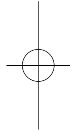
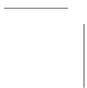
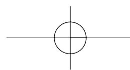
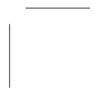
self-levitating airmen, using our hopes and purposes to get us off the ground. We are *always* having to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Notice, however, that because things are interconnected, if we *can* get started, the good things start reinforcing one another. There are not only vicious circles, but virtuous ones as well.

Our present situation then is not so different from that which obtained before other great periods of reform. If we can take the initial steps, there is the real possibility that a virtuous circle will take hold. We will then look back in astonishment and wonder how we did it.

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THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The leaders of Southern Methodist University believe that a university does not fully discharge its responsibility to its students and to the community at large if it hands out knowledge (and the power which that knowledge eventually yields) without posing questions about its responsible uses. Through the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, SMU strives to foster the moral education and public responsibilities of those whom it empowers by:

- Supporting faculty research, teaching, and writing in ethics that cross disciplinary, professional, racial/cultural, and gender lines;
- Strengthening the ethics component in SMU's undergraduate and professional curriculum;
- Awarding grants to SMU students who wish to study issues in ethics or engage in community service.

SMU also believes that a university and the professions cannot ignore the urban habitat they helped to create and on which they depend. Thus, while not an advocacy group, the Maguire Center seeks to be integrally a part of the Metroplex, attending to the moral quandaries and controversies that beset our common life. To that end, the Center:

- Has created an Ethics Center Advisory Board of professional and community leaders;
- Organizes local seminars, colloquia, and workshops featuring SMU and visiting scholars;
- Publishes occasional papers and books based on the Center's endeavors that will be of interest to both academics and the general public.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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