

CHAPTER 6

FREE SPACES

IN 1849, one of Herman Melville's characters in his novel *Mardi* presented to the people of Vivenza—the United States—a document that reminded them “freedom is more social than political,” meant to suggest that democracy depended upon the virtue and intelligence of the citizens themselves. In outrage, the Vivenzans shredded the document. The book's dismal sales in the mid-nineteenth century seemed to Melville a disgusting confirmation of his warning. Today, the same idea sounds to some a distant echo from the past.¹

“Democracy” is a term used frequently and with little content. American Presidents like Ronald Reagan, who, shortly after his election, declared to the British Parliament his intention to launch a program to spread “democracy throughout the world,” invoke it to separate the “free world” from “communist totalitarianism.” The idea of citizenship, however, was entirely missing from the President's discussion of democracy. Yet, as Sheldon Wolin has observed, “the silence on the subject is not peculiar to conservatives or reactionaries. . . . Most Marxists are interested in the ‘masses’ or the workers, but they dismiss citizenship as a bourgeois conceit, formal and empty.” The problem has a simple source. Notions of active citizenship and the common good have all but disappeared from our modern vocabulary because we have come to define the arenas in which active citizenship is nourished and given meaning as entirely outside of “politics” and “public life.”²

More than thirty years ago, Baker Brownell, a philosophy professor at Northwestern University who had been involved in a number of community development projects, wrote a book entitled *The Human Community*. It polemicized angrily against the academic world from which he came. “Truth is more than a report,” said Brownell. “It is an organization of values. Efficiency is more than a machine; it is a human consequence.” Captivated by technique, procedure, method, and specialization, Brownell argued, the educated middle class had lost sight of actual face-to-face relations—the actual life of communities themselves—which create the most important criteria for judging any innovation or change. “It is the persistent assumption of those who are influential . . . that large-scale organization and contemporary urban culture can somehow provide suitable substitutes for the values of the human communities that they destroy,” he declared. “For want of a better word I call these persons ‘the educated’ professionals, professors, businessmen, generals, scientists, bureaucrats, publicists, politicians, etc. They may be capitalist or they may be Communist in their affiliations, Christian or Jew, American, English, German, Russian or French. But below these relatively superficial variations among the ‘educated’ there is a deeper affiliation. They are affiliated in the abstract, anonymous, vastly expensive culture of the modern city.”³

Brownell stated the case starkly. He largely neglected motivations other than a narrowly individualist search for power and achievement that leads people away from settled communities.* And he paid little attention to the enormous com-

*In particular, Brownell neglected what Robert Bellah and others have termed the “expressive individualist” strain in American culture that is embodied in much therapeutic language— notions that the basic commitments and purposes of one's life come through the search for *self-realization* and self-expression. The focus on expressive individualism in American culture, especially as it has melded with consumerism and high rates of mobility and the like, may have contributed to the weakening of what Bellah and his associates call “communities of memory and hope,” more stable, continuous sets of relationships characteristic of working-class (and, interestingly in different terms, upper-class) life. But at times it is also the source of creative intellectual and artistic energy—much of the protean American spirit that is so attractive to other

plexity of community life. Ties of place, gender, memory, kinship, work, ethnicity, value and religious belief, and many other bonds may in different contexts be sources of communal solidarity or of fragmentation. Communities can be open, evolving, and changing—or static, parochial, defensive, and rigid. They can encourage new roles for those traditionally marginalized or powerless within their midst, or they can reinforce patterns of exclusivity and parochialism. Without attention to the specific features and processes that democratize community life, any invocation of communal values is prey to telling criticisms of sentimentality and naïveté.

Despite the complexity of communities, however, Brownell accurately identified an intellectual stance that has characterized thought across the political and social spectrum. Close-knit communities where people live in multidimensional relations with one another—what is called *Gemeinschaft* in social theory—are thought to give way with “progress” to relations based on reason, functional identities like work and profession, and voluntarily conceived association. As a result, conventional approaches marginalize or ignore particular identities of all sorts. As Arthur Schlesinger put it in 1949, “Modern technology created free society, but created it at the expense of the protective tissues which had bound together feudal society. . . . New social structures must succeed where the ancient jurisdictions

people in the world. And the fusion of expressive individualist and communal themes in free spaces gives public life a remarkable dynamism and vitality. The effort to balance communal commitments and individual expression has informed some of the richest explorations of the meaning of democracy.” Thus, for instance, for D. H. Lawrence, “the first great purpose of Democracy” was for each to be “spontaneously” themselves: “each man himself, each woman herself. . . . None shall try to determine the being of any other.” But Lawrence defined “freedom” in terms sharply different from contemporary cultural radicals who marginalize communal ties. Humans are free, he argued, “only when they belong to a living, organic, believing community.” Simple individualism for Lawrence led to commercialism, sex without relationship, and death of the spirit. Lawrence quoted in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), pp. 208–10, 212.

Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), especially chap. 11.

of the family, the clan and the guild and nation-state have failed.” Marshall Berman’s celebration of the modernist sensibility in 1982, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, conveys the same message. “He [modern man, personified in figures like Goethe’s *Faust*] won’t be able to create anything unless he’s prepared to let everything go, to accept the fact that all that has been created up to now—and, indeed, all that he may create in the future—must be destroyed to pave the way for more creation. This is the dialectic that modern man must embrace in order to move and live.”⁴

From a democratic perspective, more is lost through the eclipse of community than a sense of belonging and secure identity. Citizenship itself disappears from view. And the very arenas where it is nourished and given meaning—communally grounded voluntary associations of the sort we have called, throughout this work, free spaces—are defined simply as bulwarks of order and the status quo. Such a perspective, for instance, characterizes much of contemporary conservatism.

Neococonservative thought has as its central theme a reassertion of the importance of voluntary associations and communally based groupings like family, religious congregations, and neighborhoods. These are said to stand between, or “mediate,” the private world of the individual and the “public” world of large institutions like bureaucracy, profession, trade union, and corporation.

The intellectual roots of neoconservatism lie in the 1950s, when social critics like Robert Nisbet argued that totalitarianism depends upon the elimination of voluntary and autonomous communal ties of all sorts. Even the most innocuous, like musical clubs, were outlawed by the Nazi government, for example, because they were organized “for purposes, however innocent, that did not reflect those of the central government.” Current theorists like Peter Berger, drawing on such work, have maintained that communal groups create a bulwark against the discontents and dangers of modern life. “The best defenses against the threat are those institutions, however weakened, which still

give a measure of stability to private life. These are, precisely, the mediating institutions, notably those of family, church, voluntary association, neighborhood and subculture."⁵

But in Berger's perspective, like that of other neoconservatives, such smaller-scale settings are seen entirely in static, narrow, and defensive ways. For order and stability, one must have a generally accepted pattern of "morality," and such morality can only be taught effectively through experiences close to home. "Without mediating structures, the political order is [unsettled] by being deprived of the moral foundation upon which it rests." Thus, Berger sees change and social upheaval as a function of the weakness or disappearance of community institutions. Such a solely defensive perspective, ironically, produces a political and social vision which contributes to the erosion of the very community institutions neoconservatives purport to support. In a view like Berger's, every community is ultimately left on its own. Government becomes simply "the problem." And the marketplace and acquisitive individualism become the measure of "public" life. Such a perspective offers no model of collective action to regain control over massive economic dislocations, from plant closings to toxic waste dumps, nor any notion of how different communities might join together to pursue a common good.⁶

In mainstream liberal and left-wing thought, as well as neoconservative approaches, the emphasis has been on the ways voluntary associations and communal ties undergird and stabilize the status quo. Douglas Kellner summarized the usual argument: "[Dominant] ideology is transmitted through an ideological apparatus consisting of the family, school, church, media, workplace and social group." Thus, the left tends to see the delegitimization of such associations as the necessary prerequisite for progressive action. The notion of the collectivity is a solidarity based upon rational association by "masses": individuals whose ties to their communal roots of place, religion, ethnicity, and so forth have become sundered. The good social order is imagined, as John Rawls recently put it, as "a voluntary

scheme [whose] members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed." Such a vision of abstractly conceived individuals, in turn, is easily absorbed into an abstract "public" realm, defined as the state.⁷

Thus, a fascinating convergence of views, left and right, about such voluntary groups exists. Conservatives believed in defending voluntary, autonomous groups against the force of the modern state (though they slighted capitalism's impact on such structures). Radicals have tended to see their disruption as necessary for the creation of cosmopolitan consciousness. But both traditions have defined such institutions as bulwarks of the existing order.

Thinkers on both sides overlook the dynamic character of communal spaces. Under certain conditions, communal associations become free spaces, breeding grounds for democratic change. Indeed, the historical evidence now suggests that popular movements with enduring power and depth always find their strength in community-based associations. As sociologist Craig Calhoun has put it, "communities give people the 'interests' for which they will risk their lives—family, friends, customary crafts, and ways of life."^{8*}

Thus, for instance, the new labor history demonstrates clearly that people draw upon a range of ethnic, kinship, religious, and other traditional relations in fighting back and in developing a collective consciousness: even within the factory, people are never merely "workers," and other aspects of their identities

"Throughout *Free Spaces* 'community' is intended as a concept suggesting density and texture of a relationship. Thus, though community in this sense most often has a spatial dimension—a 'neighborhood' implication—such a dimension is not part of the definition; rather, communal ties depend on a complex set of social relationships that overlap and reinforce each other. Craig Calhoun has characterized community in these terms as meaning a 'greater 'closeness' of relations' than is true for society as a whole. 'This closeness seems to imply, though not rigidly, face-to-face contact, commonality of purpose, familiarity and dependability.'" Craig Calhoun, "Community: Toward a Variable Conceptualization for Comparative Research," *Social History* 5 (January 1980): 111.

prove centrally important. In turn, capitalist development has, indeed, fragmented such identities, distancing workplace from community life. Such fragmentation has reinforced and facilitated the growth of large-scale, bureaucratized unions and political parties, which normally work carefully within the framework of the system and see their members largely as clients, not active participants. One strong theme in democratic movements, as we approach the present day, in fact, has thus been the repair and revitalization of memories, communal ties, and voluntary associations weakened by modern corporate and bureaucratic institutions. The labor protests of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the farm workers' movements of recent years all have had, as an essential component, "bringing our country back to the wells of democracy," as Martin Luther King described the purpose of the sit-in demonstrators.

Our concern in *Free Spaces* has been to understand the ways in which the defensive and limited impulses which spark most social protests, especially in their early stages, can be transformed into democratic initiatives. What are the features of the environments in which people discover their capacities to overcome deferential patterns of behavior, outgrow parochialisms of class, race, or sex, and form a broader conception of the common good? How do people develop new visions in which elements of tradition become resources for democratic activity? In the course of *democratic* movements, as a people move into action, they change. They discover in themselves and in their ways of life new democratic potentials. They find out new political facts about the world. They build networks and seek contacts with other groups of the powerless to forge a broader group identity. In turn, for such processes to occur requires more than local, communal roots. Such spaces must also be relatively autonomous, free from elite control.

Thus, the *voluntary* aspect of such community environments is an important element. Unstructured by the imperatives of large and bureaucratic organizations, communal groups that

people own themselves allow them to rework ideas and themes from the dominant culture in ways which bring forth hidden and potentially subversive dimensions. Thus, black churches have served as the organizational and visionary heart of the movement from slavery to civil rights. There, black ministers were able to draw on insurgent, populist themes within the very Christian tradition that had been taught to slaves as a method of pacification.

Some social spaces have a long history of autonomy. Within them, collective action seems almost as natural as breathing. Groups which have had little experience of collective strength and self-confidence, however, remain vulnerable to manipulation by demagogic appeals. Their democratic self-consciousness—not only of themselves but of themselves in egalitarian relation to other powerless groups—is weak. Among lower-class southern whites, for example, where voluntary associations and communal life remained largely under elite control, movement culture in the Knights of Labor or the populist cooperatives depended upon newly created free spaces. The defeat of these movements, in large part because of successful elite manipulation of racist traditions in the South, cut off a historical process of self-discovery that had only begun. By contrast, where free social spaces were deeply embedded in community life—as in the Richmond black community—the Knights of Labor served as a catalyst to bring the mobilized power of the community onto a stage of broader action.

With the emergence of enormous institutions of government and economic life in the twentieth century, the difficulties in maintaining autonomy have taken new form. Government programs, the lure of subsidies, commercialized packaging of candidates, corporate grants, the mass media—all such pressures can severely erode the freedom of action and initiative possessed by voluntary associations, and can obscure the broader civic and democratic implications of civic involvement. Yet in the very different environment of 1960s activism, young organizers at times also gained an understanding of the need for free

space that recalled the insights of activists a century or more earlier. Casey Hayden, a young white southerner who spent years working in the civil rights movement, argued in 1965:

I think we've learned a few things about building and sustaining a radical movement: People need institutions that belong to them, that they can experiment with and shape. In that process it's possible to develop new forms for activity which can provide new models for how people can work together so participants can think radically about how society could operate. People stay involved and working when they can see the actual results of their thought and work in the organization. . . .⁹

Finally, movements also require means for developing a broader public vision and sense of the common good. While certain forms of older divisions, like ethnic cleavages, may no longer be as sharply etched, new problems stand in the way of any broader sense of community. Many traditional public meeting places, from village town square to neighborhood grocer, have largely disappeared. Citizens have few ways to talk about public values and purposes across their immediate lines of friendship and private life. On the one hand, in "normal" times mass culture imposes a chilling silence on public discussion. Politics resembles a "marketplace" where citizens become consumers and are encouraged to think of themselves in the most narrowly self-interested of terms. On the other hand, in times of widespread social unrest like the 1960s, the weakening of deep communities and communal discourse can lead to a rapid commercialization and trivialization of protest, where "media stars" and rapidly shifting political fashion replace deliberation and responsible democratic politics.*

*Todd Gitlin examines this phenomenon in detail in his work on the student movement, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). "The media brings a manufactured public world into private space," Gitlin argues. "From within their private crevices, people find themselves relying on the media for concepts, for images . . . for guiding information, for emotional charges, for a recognition of public values, for symbols in general, even for language" (pp. 1-2). Gitlin, however, neglects the role of free spaces as an

Communal roots and independence are insufficient to generate Walt Whitman's large-spirited and generous citizenry. Indeed, authoritarian and parochial protests—the Ku Klux Klan, book burnings, religiously bigoted movements and the like—also emerge from communal settings where people have capacity for independent action. Thus, democratic action today, as in the past, also depends upon an open and participatory public life that can bring together diverse communities and nourish the values of citizenship. The richness and vitality of public life in free spaces stands in marked contrast to the static and thin quality of "public" in reactionary protests.

"The reabsorption of government by the citizens of a democratic community," Lewis Mumford once wrote, "is the only safeguard against those bureaucratic interventions that tend to arise in every state." Democratic movements have always expressed this sensibility—in contrast to the conventional assumptions that "public" and "government" are virtually identical. They have seen government as properly the agency and instrument of the self-organized community, neither itself the problem (as conservative ideology tends to view it) nor the solution (the typical perspective of modern liberalism). Thus, for instance, as the nineteenth-century Knights of Labor engaged in electoral activity, they understood such involvement to be an *expression* of values and community life, not as an end in itself.¹⁰

For a well-developed consciousness of broader community and generalized, active citizenship to emerge requires ways for people to build direct, face-to-face and egalitarian relationships, beyond their immediate circles of friends and smaller communities. Thus, a prelude to democratic movement, visible in different times and settings, has been the emergence of ave-

intermediate place between private identities and large-scale institutions. When free space has deep roots in ongoing "communities of memory and hope"—as in the black church base of the civil rights movement, for example—movements are much more resistant to media fads and rapidly changing fashions, and the possibilities for serious alternative media are far greater.

nues for wider sociability. From the Hicksite Quakers and female abolition networks to benevolent societies in Richmond's black community or the large-scale ethnic associations in Steelton which laid the groundwork for the steelworkers' unionization, such associations create a consciousness that many people can act together. Moreover, when public arenas that allow active participation become politicized in the context of changing conditions, they offer broad opportunities for the acquisition and development of basic skills of public life. People learn to speak in public, run meetings, analyze problems and their sources, write leaflets, and so forth—the sorts of skills that are essential to sustaining democracy.

As democratic movements develop, they create movement institutions and networks that generate still more inclusive understandings of "the people." The Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Knights of Labor, and the Farmers' Alliances in the nineteenth century found counterparts in twentieth-century movement institutions such as the CIO in the 1930s, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s. The public life that emerges out of such networks constitutes an alternative movement culture, an identifying feature of democratic movements. Movement cultures have been visible in the lecture circuits, newspapers, and mass encampments of the 1890s Populists; the celebrations, labor press, and labor education schools of the 1930s, the Freedom Schools of civil rights, and the alternative institutions of the women's movement, alike. In movement cultures, a newly open and vital intellectual life takes hold. Alternative media, like newspapers, magazines, and movement schools, offer forums for new ideas and an ongoing process of movement education. Diversity and difference may help people simultaneously to experiment with novel and unorthodox ideas and to think differently about their histories and traditions. They unearth buried insurgent elements in their own traditions, find out new facts about the world, debate alternatives, develop a vision of the common good that transcends limited and particular interests.

The nature of free social space also shapes specific leadership styles, with powerful consequences for social movements. From the time of slavery, the black church served as the training ground for black leaders, creating a unique, powerful, and largely male rhetorical style. The charismatic tones of the preacher, from Andrew Bryan to Jesse Jackson, have led hundreds of diverse struggles. Yet the dispersed nature of black churches and religious associations also guaranteed the constant production of new leaders, curbing in some ways the antidemocratic dimensions of charisma. By way of contrast, populist movements, whose underlying culture had little opportunity to develop such strengths, proved vulnerable to the manipulation of a long line of southern demagogues, from Ben Tillman to George Wallace.

Leaders have played crucial roles in articulating the democratic and empowering threads within the American ideological heritage. Republicanism and the biblical themes of justice, community, and equality have provided democratic resources for an extraordinary range of movements. At the same time, such traditions also provide the ideological underpinning of antidemocratic impulses. For example, the right-wing version of republicanism justifies unbridled economic individualism and greed, just as biblical themes can be used by those who advocate racial and sexual subordination. The appropriation of democratic possibility depends on the collective experience we have identified with free social spaces. Simply, democratic ideas only make sense in the context of democratic experience. When people begin to see in themselves the capacity to end their own hurts, to take control of their lives, they gain the capacity to tap the democratic resources in their heritage. Thus, workers drew on biblical, artisanal, and republican traditions throughout the nineteenth century and on ethnic cultures shaped to the new environments of urban, industrial America. The separation of home and work spaces made the existence of community institutions such as taverns, churches, reading rooms, clubs, and other groups all the more essential in order to create a vocabulary in opposition to the emerging industrial order, with its

focus on individual achievement and consumption. That women were excluded from most of these spaces, that few environments permitted much cross-cultural sharing, that republican traditions themselves were filled with contradictions—all represented limitations on democracy.

The richness and complexity of these processes has become apparent to a new generation of social historians, exploring the lives and experiences of those whom traditional historical approaches largely overlooked. As Gerda Lerner noted some time ago, "The very term 'Women's History' calls attention to the fact that something is missing from historical scholarship, and it aims to document and reinterpret that which is missing."¹¹

But the broader implications have yet to be explored in detail. Conventional social-science approaches to the study of social movements normally assume that there is no analytical difference between democratic and nondemocratic movements, and thus manage to obliterate the issue. Even when the question of democratic participation is posed, themes of citizenship, "citizenship education," and the common good are rarely explored. Conservatives and leftists, convinced that the communal associations of daily life represent bulwarks of the status quo, fail to see the sources of democratic change. None of these perspectives can comprehend the tragedy built into the logic of many social movements throughout modern history. As social movement leaders over time became distanced from the communal foundations of democratic revolt, and adopted dominant categories and vocabularies of change that rendered the experiences in such foundations largely invisible, they often forgot or dismissed the very histories that had shaped them, thus hastening the process of bureaucratization and incorporation of protest into the language and terms of modern, centralized authority.

Yet the processes of communal transformation that generate democratic change continue to grow in modern America, sometimes despite great difficulties. These "experiments in democracy" regenerate community and create a space linking public

activity and private identities that also has an integrity and specific existence of its own. They maintain some measure of autonomy, and revive notions of citizenship and civic virtue. Most free spaces remain embedded in the institutions of daily life: voluntary groups, religious congregations, union locals, schools, neighborhoods. Others represent new experiments, redefining communities and asking new questions about the past. Whether their insurgent and visionary possibilities will be realized remains impossible to predict, but it is important to recognize the existence of these free spaces, and to develop an understanding of democracy that appreciates their crucial role in reviving active citizenship and conceptions of the common good.

A public housing project in St. Louis provides one dramatic example of community renewal leading to broadened forms of civic involvement. This area in St. Louis is perhaps most famous for Pruitt Iago, a housing project so violent, filthy, and damaged that the city decided to blow up the buildings, erasing its existence. Cochran Gardens was an older project in the same area of the city, also a high-rise, with many of the same problems. By the 1960s, its tenants were all black and the city housing authority had virtually abandoned its maintenance responsibilities. Terrorism by youthful gangs, alcoholics, and drug addicts shaped tenants' lives. Killings were common. Graffiti covered the walls, and elevators reeked of urine. Social workers, service companies, even the police feared to go there. Cochran Gardens was a prime candidate for demolition.

Yet today Cochran Gardens is meticulously clean. Its twelve-story high-rise buildings have been renovated according to plans developed by committees of residents working with architects and planners. Playgrounds were moved, for example, to locations that could be observed from within the apartments. A senior-citizens' building has its own small enclosed play area for visiting grandchildren. Green grass and flowerbeds have replaced dirt, mud, and broken glass. Hallways are always freshly swept, each family taking their allotted turn.

Behind these surface evidences of order and mutual respect lies the story of a community that reclaimed itself. Today Cochran Gardens is tenant run. A tenant manager lives in each building. Tenant councils decide and enforce policies for admission, standards of behavior, and plans for the future. Tenants run several day-care centers, programs to bring together the elderly and the young, food service companies to provide meals for seniors and day-care, a security service, and a new community center. It all started when Bertha Gilkey, herself a young mother on welfare who had grown up in Cochran Gardens, began to organize in a single building. Their first victory was the installation of a laundry washer in an abandoned first-floor apartment. They celebrated with a ribbon cutting and party. Then she organized tenants, floor by floor, to paint their hallways. Gilkey remembered the days when Cochran was a safe and clean and friendly place to live. She was determined to convey that memory, and to see tenants gain control over those forces which had rendered them helpless and dependent. As people began to win specific victories, looking to each other for strength and support, they came to share the vision. And their participation led to active involvement with other poor communities around the country.

Bertha Gilkey now serves as national co-chair of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, a different kind of experiment. An organization of women in an ethnic, blue-collar area of Brooklyn with affiliates in several cities, the National Congress has consistently avoided taking stands on issues which many see as basic to feminism as conventionally conceived, such as the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion. It began in 1974 when Jan Peterson and other feminists sought to extend the women's movement to working-class and poor women in a manner that would respect their high commitment to neighborhood and family.¹²

As the organization became ethnically more diverse and began to place a positive value on that diversity, organizers developed a sharing process which extends in new directions

the notion that "the personal is political." At NCNW meetings and conferences, "identity groups"—defined as participants choose to do so—meet to discuss the meaning of their shared heritage, both the hard parts and the positive dimensions. Each group then presents to the whole what they would like others to know about themselves and their culture. The result is a series of histories: the spiritual values of traditional Lakota culture and their long history of resistance against the loss of their land, their hunting economy, and their sacred places; the racial diversity of Puerto Rico and the importance of Spanish as a mother tongue; the experiences of Italian immigrants on Ellis Island; the historic strength of black women in their communities. And in each case there is also an explanation of the pain caused by stereotyping: the Mafia jokes, the blame heaped on "black matriarchs," the combination of romanticism and disrespect for Native Americans in our popular culture. The impact for many participants is a rediscovery of the bonds among women in a context which does not require the shedding of other identities. For Bertha Gilkey, involvement in the National Congress revealed the feminist dimension of her work. Most of the residents in Cochran Gardens are women. The movement they organized was led by women, and today women occupy most positions of leadership. This recognition also broadened their sense of who could be their allies.¹³

The growth of numerous neighborhood and citizen efforts in recent years that transcend barriers of parochialism, defensiveness, and powerlessness are other instances of free space. The reclaiming and redefinition of citizen participation in public life is evident, for instance, in what has come to be called "value-based community organizing." This method adapts participatory understandings of democracy to the dilemmas of modern culture and the era of large-scale institutions like government and corporations, recognizing as problematic such terms as "community," "tradition," and "public life." In recent years, such groups as the Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio, East Brooklyn Churches, the San Francisco

Organizing Project, and others have linked particular issues of concern to their members with extensive processes of community renewal, value discussion, and "citizenship education."

Ernesto Cortes, the first organizer of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), distinguished between "self-interest" and "narrow self-interest," or selfishness.¹⁴ He argued that people's basic concerns are not only financial or narrowly for themselves but also include communal ties such as the happiness of their families, the well-being of their neighbors and friends, the vitality of their faith and their traditions, and their own feelings of dignity and worth. Workshops that Cortes and others in COPS have conducted reflect on the communal and civic values people learn from American democratic traditions, their churches and neighborhoods—participation, pluralism, civic involvement, the dignity of the individual, equality, community, love of neighbor, concern for poor. People talk about the ways in which such values are constantly undermined by the dominant principles of corporations, large bureaucracies, and the mass culture. And COPS combines such value and ideological discussion with a tremendously detailed process of what they call "citizenship education," teaching tens of thousands of people the basics of running meetings, analyzing problems, dealing with the press, conducting research, and planning campaigns around issues.

COPS defines itself as a new sort of "public arena" that in many ways is self-conscious of the dimensions of "free space." COPS sees itself reflecting the values of the democratic tradition and the Judeo-Christian heritage, and it advances the concrete needs of families, neighborhoods, congregations, and individuals. But is also takes on an independent life of its own, different from private life, on the one hand, or large "public" institutions, on the other hand. Though it intervenes with remarkable effectiveness in the political process—COPS has won more than \$400 million in community development projects in the Mexican communities, mounting an extraordinary challenge to traditional political and economic elites in the process

—it makes a clear distinction between its notion of political involvement and "politics as usual." COPS, according to Cortes, "is like a university where people come to learn about public policy, public discourse, and public life."¹⁴

The result has been not only material changes in the barrios but also changes in mood and spirit. Leaders speak about the "cultural changes" they have seen, as people have come to value the broader community good and ask what areas of town are most in need of aid. Young people increasingly remain, rather than fleeing for the northern areas of town. Women have taken on unprecedented leadership roles, including the last several presidencies of the organization. Individual congregations have seen a democratization of their internal life, with lay leaders emerging in every aspect. This sort of activity, making affirmation of democratic values integral to its definition, begins to repair bonds that have been gravely weakened by mass culture and economic pressure.¹⁵

The COPS model of community renewal, citizenship, and cultural revitalization has begun to have significant impact elsewhere in the organizing world. For example, the San Francisco Organizing Project (SFOP) has applied such techniques to the heterogeneous communities of the Bay Area. The organizing effort began with in-depth community renewal and work on issues in specific congregations, community groups, and labor union locals. In parishes like St. Elizabeth's, for example, a largely white ethnic area in the southeast section of the city, congregation members were trained to interview residents in the neighborhood about their concerns and problems, whether or not they were Catholic. Through such interviews they developed a detailed sense of community issues and created ties to people who were all but invisible. Workshops on values gave people a unique chance to talk to others, often for the first time in any public setting, about what had been troubling them. "One day, we had fifty people show up for a brainstorming session that lasted five hours," related one woman. "We talked about what we believe in—our families, neighborhoods, love,

respect for each other, being tolerant. And we talked about what threatened those values. Large corporations. How much of society today is being run by media hype. How can you bombard children with all of this and not have them buy into it?" For some months people held such discussions and others on concrete organizational skills, and combined them with work on particular issues like the uses of an abandoned school building. Then the parish held a large convention. It recognized and celebrated different groups in the community, and made decisions about priority areas for action.¹⁶

This kind of organizing process not only involved traditional community "activists," but as in the case of COPS and similar groups, it built directly upon the core leaders involved in sustaining and renewing community life. These are the people—often women—who work, frequently behind the scenes, to keep the PTAs going, to organize block parties, to run children's sports activities, and so forth. Value-based organizing gives such community leaders new skills, support, and public recognition, changing the very definitions of "leadership" and "public" in the process. Moreover, in the context of a pluralist and diversified organizing effort like SFOP's, such organizing introduces people to other communities in ways that allow serious dialogue.

Nationally, citizen initiatives have now resulted in efforts like Citizen Action, a diverse coalition of community, labor union, senior citizen, rural, environmental, and other groups which defines itself as a "new democratic populism." Since its formation in late 1979, Citizen Action has developed a presence in twenty-five states, and has played a key organizing role in campaigns from toxic waste and farm foreclosure to energy prices and plant shutdowns. Indeed, the changing economic and political environment of the 1980s has tended to generate this sort of larger-scale coalition, in ways that may presage the formation of new citizen movements. "It's a very different time than when I started out organizing ten years ago," recounted Robert Hudak, Citizen Action's field director, in 1985. "In the 1970s,

if your community group had a problem you'd go to the county board. They made a decision and it made a difference in people's lives." But Hudak had seen a rapidly growing recognition that coalitions are the only possible way to win against intransigent opposition. "You take a local dump site activist who's been concerned about kids being poisoned by toxic waste. They go to the bureaucracy and get a runaround. It's very easy for them to understand that the only way this sort of problem is really going to be solved is if the government clamps down on corporations and establishes a cleanup fund."¹⁷

In sum, the historical and contemporary record calls for a new attentiveness to the life of rooted communities themselves, whose institutions are the foundation and wellspring for any sustained challenge to autocratic power. It is through the structures of community life, which sustain and reproduce a group's shared bonds of historical memory and culture, that an oppressed people begin to come to self-consciousness. Through their activity in new contexts, groups may acquire public skills, reinforce democratic values, and form new links between sub-communities into larger networks and organizations. And it is through such processes that a powerless people constitutes itself as a force for democratic transformation of the broader social structure and as a school for its own education in a democratic sensibility. Loss of organic connection to the communal sources of social movement can lead to the amorphous and rootless stridency of the late new left on the one hand, or to the bureaucratic stagnation apparent in many contemporary trade unions on the other.

Yet the evidence also draws attention to the *complexity* of community life, and the relative powerlessness of communities by themselves, from a democratic perspective. If democratic movements necessarily draw their strength, vision, and power from communitarian settings, these also limit the nature of such movements. Leaders, organizational forms, and broader strategies may help movements overcome parochialism and ethno-

centrism, may expand the democratic processes within the group life, may make the decisive difference in how effectively the movement influences the broader society. But the requirement for such developments is a willingness to admit and address communities' limitations, as well as a respect for communities' importance.

In present-day America, recognition of both the centrality and the limitations of communities assumes no small urgency. Where are the places in our culture through which people sustain bonds and history? What are the processes through which they may broaden their sense of the possible, make alliances with others, develop the practical skills and knowledge to maintain democratic organization? What are the languages of protest, dissent, and change that express moral and communal themes in inclusive ways that reach beyond particular boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, and class? Such questions confer the dignity of historical authorship upon ordinary people.

Finally, democratic movements, drawing their spirit from voluntary associations of all sorts, have not only sought structural changes to realize a wider, more inclusive and participatory "democracy." From the commonwealth vision of the WCTU, the Knights of Labor, and the nineteenth-century Populists, to the Citizenship Schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1960s and the citizenship education programs in community groups today, such movements have also illustrated the inextricable links between participation and citizenship. Thus, such movements, and the free spaces at their heart, suggest the need for a basic reworking of conventional ideas about "public life" and "democracy." They call attention to that vast middle ground of communal activity, between private life and large-scale institutions, as the arenas in which notions of civic virtue and a sense of responsibility for the common good are nourished, and democracy is given living meaning. And they remind us, repeatedly, how ordinary people can discover who they are and take democratic initiatives, on their own terms.

SOURCE NOTES

1: "The People Shall Rule"

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 60-61.
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5. Aristotle and Plato quoted in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1976), p. 83.
6. Ball and Winstanley quoted in George Woodcock, "Democracy, Heretical and Radical," in C. George Benello and Dimitrios Roussopoulos, eds., *The Case for Participatory Democracy: Some Prospects for a Radical Society* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 16, 18.
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8. Williams, *Keywords*, p. 84.
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34. Moore, Brown in *ibid.*, pp. 72-73; Buhle, *Women*, p. 84.
35. Watson in Woodward, *Watson*, p. 208; Nugent, *Tolerant Populists*, pp. 231, 233.
36. Watson in Woodward, *Watson*, p. 220.
37. Watson in Margolis, "Two Sides," p. 9; *Alabama Sentinel* and Corothers, Goodwyn, *Promise*, pp. 284-85.
38. Story of Mississippi Populists in Brad Piggott, "Populist Revival in Mississippi," *Southern Changes*, January-February 1983, pp. 12-17; Arkansas and Texas, Goodwyn, *Promise*, p. 298.
39. Story of effort to save the Texas Exchange, Goodwyn, pp. 127-39, 170.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
41. Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 32. See also Buhle, *op. cit.*
42. Palmer, *Men*, pp. 35-37.
43. On Goodwyn's argument about the "shadow movement," see, for instance, *Promise*, pp. 207-10. Critics of Goodwyn have raised questions about his data on the cooperatives and populism in states like Nebraska, but detailed studies of the populist movement, such as Steven Hahn's fine work on Georgia populists, *The Roots of Southern Populism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), largely substantiate the argument about populist "movement culture." The most detailed criticism of Goodwyn is found in Stanley B. Parsons et al., "The Role of Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism," *Journal of American History* 69 (1983): 866-85. See also Martin Ridge, "Populism Redux: John D. Hicks and *The Populist Revolt*," *Reviews in American History* 13 (March 1985): 142-54. For a discussion of the strike by black sharecroppers, and other issues involved in populist historiography from a Marxist perspective, see James Green, "Populism, Socialism and the Promise of Democracy," *Radical History Review* 24 (Fall 1980): 7-40; and also Green, "Culture, Politics and Workers' Response to Industrialization in the U.S.," *Radical America* 16 (January-April 1982): 101-28; also Barry Goldberg, "A New Look at Labor History," *Social Policy*, Winter 1982, pp. 54-62.
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- 6: Free Spaces
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6. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
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10. Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), p. 282.
11. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. xiv.
12. Gilkey story taken from Harry C. Boyte, *Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots* (New York: Harper, 1984), pp. 95-113.
13. Sara Evans interviews with leaders and participants in National Congress of Neighborhood Women: Marie Bueno, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 4, 1983; Jan Peterson, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 19, 1983; Jan Kowalsky, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1983; Alice Quinn, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 20, 1983; Sally Martino Fisher, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 21, 1983; Francine Moccio, Brooklyn, N.Y., Apr. 21, 1983.
14. Harry C. Boyte interview with Ernesto Cortes, San Antonio, Texas, July 3, 1983.
15. COPS impact described in Boyte, *Community*, chap. 5.
16. SFOP described in *ibid.*, chap. 6.
17. Harry C. Boyte interview with Robert Hudak, Des Plaines, Ill., Apr. 27, 1985.