



THE PUBLIC'S DISENCHANTMENT WITH PROFESSIONALISM: REASONS FOR RETHINKING ACADEME'S SERVICE TO THE COUNTRY

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Colleges and universities take pride in their service to the country. Service means providing both professional expertise (from agricultural extension to clinical medicine) and an army of professional graduates (lawyers, accountants, scientists). These professionals and their expertise have changed the country, largely for the better: better livestock, crops, machines, medicines.

Yet, we are now seeing a growing public disenchantment, not so much with individual professionals as with "professionalism," the philosophy that has grown up around professional practice, which I will describe in a minute. Higher education needs to understand this public disconnect. That understanding could — and I argue should — reshape the way our institutions serve the country and the way they educate professionals.

It is no secret that the public is angry with the political system, a system people think is run by a class of professional politicians (lobbyists, elected officials) and the experts and professional bureaucrats who serve the system. To talk of a citizens' revolt in the early nineties is not much of an overstatement. Levels of public cynicism are at an all-time high. Americans don't see any place for themselves as citizens in this system, so they are without representation, voice, or agency. The anger and cynicism aren't just directed at government. Polls show that we are losing confidence in most all of our major institutions.¹

The public's disenchantment is tied to the way people feel about the "systems" controlling their lives. They don't think that the economic, health-care, judicial, or educational systems are working as they should. They don't feel they have control over them; they aren't even sure that the professionals who manage them are really in control. The systems appear to have minds of their own, all with an anti-public bias.

How can this be? After all, the professionals who are in the systems are there to serve the public. To answer the question, we should look more closely at what Americans are revolting against. To repeat what I've just said, people aren't revolting against individual *professionals* so much as they are revolting against *professionalism* as a mind-set. Americans usually like their local representative, the teachers they know, the doctor who treats them. We all rely on competent professionals, that is, those who excel in their craft. No one wants a dentist who pulls the wrong tooth.

What people don't like about professionalism are its assumptions about the public, its role, and its abilities. Professionalism reduces a sovereign public to patients, supplicants, clients, consumers, and audiences. The public, by these lights, has emotion and need, but little else.

Professionals and the Public: Origins of the Disconnect

Americans' perception that professionalism has little use for them has a basis in the history of the twentieth century when this philosophy developed in response to what leaders saw as an unreliable, even dangerous citizenry. To put it bluntly, the popular unrest in the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s scared the devil out of the establishment. Spokesmen for angry farmers, with descriptive names like "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, threatened the Democratic and Republican parties alike, drawing away such stalwarts as William Jennings Bryan into a new people's or Populist Party.² The threat of popular, working-class discontent was still strong in the Great Depression, when Father Coughlin sounded old Populist themes, infused with appeals to racial and religious prejudices, to rally a substantial national radio following.

The popular movements developed in an age when political corruption was widespread. Votes were bought, ballot boxes stuffed, unfavorable returns thrown out. "We had to do it," one of the established leaders later confessed. "Those d___ Populists would have ruined the country!"³ Even though the Populists didn't control the polls in most cases, they were blamed for the heightened corruption. This corruption was one of the issues that brought a new class of political leaders to power in the early twentieth century. These sons of well-established families and well-to-do businessmen became the dominant force in shaping the mentality of modern America. Because they all wanted some kind of "progress," they are usually called "Progressives."⁴

The new leadership wrote a new compact for America. They said, in effect, we will take care of the public's problems — but we are going to do it our way. And the public, by and large, deferred to this rising class of professional leaders. Citizens bought what the professionals were selling — expertise.

Though the new leadership initially considered using democratic means like popular referendums for dealing with the worst of the corruption (political bosses who ruled like warlords), it ultimately settled on creation of a professional class that would manage the country's affairs with scientific precision and dispassionate objectivity. Whatever the leadership's faith in the self-governing capacities of a democracy, it was not as strong as their faith in a generation of college-educated men who would save the country from the kind of popular disobedience dramatized in the Hay Market riot and the Pullman strike. The new leadership thought the public treated politics as a game, an unruly game that interfered with the orderly functioning of the country. They thought of politics as a science and, to some extent, a business.

Making politics into a science was only one episode in a larger romance America was having with science in the early twentieth century. It was a peculiarly modern kind of science that attracted us, one highly empirical that equated evidence with things that could be counted.⁵ This science reshaped our understanding of social reality. What was real were things that could be described with numbers. Politics, like the universe itself, was also thought to be driven by forces undetectable to the untrained eye — forces that only experts could see. These experts focused their critical attention on "realities" they thought their predecessors had neglected — interest groups, power relations, and the economic forces that defined interests and led to power.

The science of politics raised even more doubts about a public already discredited by its unruliness. Maybe the public wasn't real because it could

not be reduced to numbers or described objectively. When Walter Lippmann charged that the public was a myth, a phantom, the charge stuck. New leadership set out — deliberately and systematically — to make sure everyone understood that the citizenry was a mass, morally and intellectually incapable of governing itself.⁶ They argued that American democracy had to have guardians who would do for the public interest what a mass citizenry could never do. These guardians would include the managers of a new civil-service system, along with a new class of professionals who could be counted on to resist popular passions and to do what the facts indicated they should.

All of these developments — the creation of a new professionalism, the romance with scientific objectivity, the displacement of the public, and, ultimately, the redefinition of politics — happened in many fields, all in much the same way and for much the same reasons. It happened in education, in philanthropy, in medicine, in social work — even in journalism. For instance, at about the same time professional city managers and civil-service bureaucrats were beginning to replace elected mayors and their cronies, professional caseworkers were replacing the “friendly visitor” of Jane Addams’ settlement houses. These new caseworkers were scientifically trained in psychology and sociology. The citizens they ministered to became their “clients.”⁷

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Self-trained, unspecialized doctors who sat by the bed were replaced by scientifically trained physicians, specialists who practiced in a hospital. This was no accident. In 1910, The Carnegie Foundation hired Abraham Flexner to recommend reforms in medical education, and the foundation sold its reforms to the citizenry through a carefully orchestrated strategy. In the process, Carnegie and other foundations themselves changed from charitable to philanthropic institutions — a transformation Ellen Lagemann chronicles in *Private Power for the Public Good*.⁸ Foundations came to be staffed by professionals and to rely on professional advisors.

Higher education also changed in order to educate scientifically trained professionals. According to Thomas Bender, scholars moved into specialized fields and relied on an expert language that was unintelligible to the public. Rather than address the public (or what Bender calls the “city”), academics mainly talked to one another. Speaking in public to the public became suspect.⁹

The new professionals were not unsympathetic to their clients. On the contrary, their relationship with the public was shaped by their professional concerns, concerns that grew out of a conviction that the public was deficient and that what was missing could be supplied only by the professions. The

operative assumption was that the public was “sick” and could not possibly get well without professional help. Professional service was based on what science gives professionals — objective truth, expressed in facts.

Given this professional paradigm, there is no way to understand the public other than as a passive mass without the capacity to understand or act in its best interests. There are no competing ideas. Citizens couldn't be anything other than various kinds of clients — patients, consumers, readers. The idea that the public is a diverse body of citizens who claim responsibility for and act on their problems, an idea that lived in the nineteenth century, almost died in the twentieth. So did an appreciation for “publicness” as a quality of human relationships — open, civil, inclusive, pragmatic. The notion that publicness has to be created by the concerted effort of people who want to form themselves into a community just about disappeared, despite the best efforts of some twentieth-century philosophers. So we stopped trying to create or re-create publics and began debating what the public was or wasn't, as though it was a static entity with fixed characteristics. Now the term “public” has lost so much of its original meaning that it has become little more than an adjective for restrooms that anybody can use.

It was only a short step from this concept of the public to a widespread belief among professionals that citizens were apathetic — and happily so. (If people had little to do except vote every so often, it shouldn't be surprising that they were seen as being in a deep civic sleep most of the time.) Inactivity was actually considered a blessing, because an active citizenry would inevitably interfere with the work of professionals. The code of professionalism called for the public, once people had hired or elected professionals, to leave them alone to do their jobs. It was impossible to think of the public helping professionals do their job because, by definition, citizens had no competencies — all competencies were professional.

The conventional wisdom of professionalism, that people were uninterested and content in their apathy, stopped being persuasive in 1992. A citizens' revolt in the presidential elections left no doubt that there was, indeed, a public, and that it was not apathetic. That anger was dramatized by — but not reducible to — the support garnered by Ross Perot. It came from all sorts of people, not primarily interest groups; and it was not just a function of economic self-interests. The public's cynicism was rooted in a frustrated conviction that there ought to be better running of the country. The citizens' revolt was implicitly a repudiation of the way professionalism defined politics. And the revolt is still going on, as the elections of 1994 demonstrated.

Dealing with an Angry Public

Today, professionals must decide how to deal with an aroused public. One option is to do nothing, to believe (and hope) that the public will burn out on its frustration and go back to sleep. Another is to try to “PR” the public into liking professions they distrust. Some associations have hired public-relations firms to do just that. A third option is to embrace but sentimentalize citizens' efforts to have a greater political voice. Citizens are in fashion now, and letting them blow off steam is seen as good therapy.

Perhaps the option which promises to create the most support is one that appeals to the best of professional civil servants: to respond to the outcry by

giving the public more efficient government, better schools, or more responsive services. The reasoning seems to be that if the professional systems worked better — if they were a better “buy” — then people wouldn’t be so upset.

Of course Americans want efficiency and better service. But what this last option misses is that they also want a different relationship with their institutions and the professionals who staff them. Take the case of government. While citizens are likely to applaud government reforms such as reductions in the bureaucracy, it doesn’t necessarily follow that good government is a satisfactory substitute for better politics. After all, in the United States, good government has meant more than efficient government; it has meant *our* government. People’s determination to have greater control over the problems that invade their lives is a powerful incentive to have greater control over political as well as other systems.

The option I like best is one in which professionals would take the public at its word, admit that they have only part of what it takes to make democratic politics work and challenge the public to do its job with the same excellence that professionals strive for. This option is rooted in the proposition that all of us have to do everything we can to put the public back into the public’s business, whether that business is politics, education, social services, health care, crime control, or some other public enterprise.

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What does this option mean in practice? Who should do what? Two strategies come to mind:

We have to create a new professionalism that has a civic character. Professions should reconstitute themselves as civic professions. Modern professionalism distances itself from the public because it assumes it is self-sufficient; it doesn’t need anything else. Civic professionalism assumes professionals can’t do their work *without* the public.¹⁰ Civic professionals are secure in what they do well without thinking of their professions as self-sufficient.

Here is the rationale behind this new form of professionalism. It comes from the work of Ronald Heifetz, a physician now teaching government at Harvard University. Heifetz knows from his medical background that there are significant differences in types of problems and that these differences require different remedies. Medical problems range from routine conditions that can be cured by a physician to more serious ones where the diagnosis is not clear-cut and for which there are no technical fixes. Think of the difference between a broken arm and diabetes; there is a technical remedy for the former but not for the latter. For the most serious problems, the patient and physician have to combine forces. Similarly, the most serious

problems in America are those where the very definition of the problem is unclear and the nature of the treatment undefined. These are problems that professionals can't fix by themselves. Without an engaged public, there is little hope of healing.

I am suggesting that the professions rewrite the compact they struck with the public around the turn of the century — crassly put, “We professionals will take care of the public's problems our way . . . you citizens should just do what we tell you.” That compact makes an active citizenry indolent, and that indolence makes it impossible for the professions to do what they promised. The old compact built a high wall between professionals and citizens — the interaction, where there was interaction, went only one way. A new compact would have to tear down that high wall. It would have to create a two-way traffic between citizens and professionals.

Professionals might also question the predilection to see the public as a collection of deficiencies. That perception is not the objective reality it claims to be. It is a corollary of the way professionalism tends to see professionals — as those who remedy deficiencies.

Finally, civic professionalism should take the public seriously enough not to patronize or romanticize citizens. Civic professionalism should not be based on an unquestioning faith in the citizenry. The alternative to seeing the public as bad, as too selfish or ignorant to control its own destiny, is not to see the public as good, unselfish, and all knowing. Civic professionalism has only to be open to the possibility that people can, with sufficient effort, constitute themselves as a public or give their relationships public qualities. When that happens, people have capacities as public citizens that they don't have as detached individuals.

Civic professionals should align their practices with the processes that create a public. I said that “we need to do everything we can to put the public back into the public's business.” While a fair statement of the objective, the phrase implies that there is some “we” outside the public that can induce citizens to be a public. Perish the thought; it conjures up images of another class of guardians. Professionals need a responsible public as a partner, but they can't create a public. The reason is simple. Publics are formed by people voluntarily joining together out of a sense of shared responsibility. The sense of being responsible for our fate, the sense that we can't wait around for someone else to save us, that we have to take control of our future and act accordingly — that is a product of intense interactions among us — eye to eye. It can't be induced from without by guardians, however well-intentioned they may be. We can't be empowered; we have to generate our own power.

So professionals are caught in a Catch 22; they need a public but they can't create one. However, professionals can align or harmonize what they do with the process that forms publics out of a mass of people — provided they understand that process. That is, they can see to it that the way they practice their profession promotes the creation of public life. I'll try to explain how.

The job becomes a bit easier as we learn more about how public life takes shape or, if you prefer the vocabulary of Europe and South America, how “civil societies” are formed. Robert Putnam's analysis of civil society in Italy, Victor Perez-Diaz's book on how modern Spain emerged from Franco's fascism, Vaughn Grisham's career-long study of Tupelo, Mississippi, and

Douglass North's Nobel prize-winning work on the social forces at work in an economy are all instructive.¹¹

One of the most critical processes in forming a public is making choices together about what kind of community or country we want to live in. Making choices together generates responsibility. We generally take more ownership of decisions we have participated in making than of decisions others have made for us. Making public choices together requires a particular kind of thought and speech which, among other names, is called deliberation. I am going to use public deliberation to illustrate what I mean by professionals aligning their practices with critical public-forming processes.

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The National Issues Forums conducted by thousands of civic and educational organizations around the country over the past 15 years are designed to prompt deliberation, so they are a good source of information on what this kind of dialogue is like. It is certainly not like a general discussion or debate; people explore different scenarios, try out ideas, and listen carefully because they have work to do. They have to make a decision together about issues like stopping crime or improving the schools. They consider a range of options, not just one solution an expert has proposed or the bipolar opposites of ideological partisans. They weigh carefully (as the word "deliberation" implies) the pros and cons of each alternative.

A great many professionals — city managers, school superintendents, and journalists to name a few — need public deliberation. In the case of journalists, for instance, people trying to make choices together are more likely to become serious readers, listeners, and viewers. As Jay Rosen, one of the leaders in a new movement in civic professionalism called "public journalism," puts it, the media's job is to inform the public, but if there isn't a public, the job changes. Recognizing the need for public deliberation, some in the media first organized deliberative forums themselves. But that put them in the business of actually trying to create publics, an inappropriate and impossible role. Now news organizations such as the *Virginia Pilot*, the *Mobile Press Register*, the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Dayton Daily News* — to name a few — are framing issues in such a way as to provoke deliberation. They lay out a range of options and describe the pros and cons of each one. Local civic organizations like the Miami Valley National Issues Forums in the Dayton area or the state library system in California provide the forums.

Aligning professional practices with public processes, however, isn't as simple as encouraging more public forums. It often requires changing

established practices. For example, the press typically reports on issues in technical or expert terms. The options are options that professionals prefer. While valid, this practice has the unintended consequence of shutting out the public. Citizens usually have a different "take" on issues than experts or institutions.¹² They are more likely to respond to issues described in a public language that is based on everyday experiences and the things people consider most valuable. For example, Americans are inclined to see stopping drug abuse as a family or community issue rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. Naming the problem in legal terms shuts out the people who see drug abuse every day in their neighborhood and think of it as a problem of failed families, weak communities, and lack of economic opportunity.¹³

Reinventing Service to the Public

Higher education is implicated in the charges the public is bringing against professionalism. Even as academe set out to — and, in fact, did — serve the public interest, it sometimes participated in pushing the public to the back of the bus and as far as possible from the driver's seat. Like the journalists, it's time for academics to consider changing some established practices so that what is done by our campuses aligns with, rather than contravenes, efforts at creating a richer, healthier public life in America. Falling back on better technical assistance or relying on new ways of delivering facts on the Internet won't do the job. We need to reinvent the practice of service to the public on the assumption that the public is no phantom but a real and necessary agent of our democracy. ■

¹ National Opinion Research Center, "The American Enterprise Public Opinion and Demographic Report: Confidence in Institutions" *American Enterprise* 4 (Nov/Dec): 94-95.

² John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963).

⁵ Henry Stoll Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 310-35.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1930).

⁷ Ellen Lagemann, ed., *Jane Addams on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985).

⁸ Ellen Lagemann, *Private Power for the Public Good* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

⁹ Thomas Bender, "The Cultures of Intellectual Life: The City and the Professions," *Intellect and Public Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 3-15.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Thomas Bender for the phrase.

¹¹ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Victor Perez-Diaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Vaughn L. Grisham tentatively titled *It Can Be Done: The Tupelo Model* (Washington, D.C.: Rural Economic Policy Program, Aspen Institute, in press); and Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹² Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

¹³ Using the issue of how to deal with the drug problem has the advantage of illustrating the difference between the way experts or professionals may approach an issue and the way citizens experience an issue. However, this example has the disadvantage of seeming to suggest that citizens should make choices about means and not ends. Actually, the most important decisions made are about objectives, purposes, and directions. The details of implementation are usually the province of professionals. In the case of the drug issue, however, there was already a public consensus on the objective. There is little controversy over whether we need to combat the abuse of street drugs like crack cocaine.