

PREFACE

AT LEAST SINCE THE “war on poverty” in the 1960s, with its famous strategy of “maximum feasible participation of the poor,” community organizers and social administrators in social work and colleagues in related disciplines have been concerned with questions of the place of citizen involvement in postindustrial democracy. The dawn of the Obama administration in January, 2009 had every appearance of a major departure from the public practices of recent decades in a number of different respects. Obama’s 2008 campaign had appeared to suggest the possible beginning of a dramatic and entirely new approach to national government in the United States, with greater involvement from individual citizens and the general public in the business of government. Burdened in the short run by economic and international concerns and the polarities that the health care debate exposed, participatory politics has taken something of a backseat, and advanced forms of “e-government” still appear a ways off. But there is little doubt that there was greater emphasis on social networking and grassroots involvement in the Obama presidential campaign than at any time in the recent past. It also appears that the new administration is seeking to take fuller advantage of approaches to citizen participation and involvement that have developed as a community-level field of practice and have been discussed by small groups of community practitioners and political theorists for the past four decades.

By necessity, such activities have largely been conducted outside of mainstream public talk about public affairs for at least two reasons: Most important, within the media-generated public sphere, public talk has been increasingly held captive by the banal, barren, cliché-ridden pronouncements of political factions largely bereft of ideas and, it appears at times, thought

itself. Meanwhile, within the academy, assorted older models of representative democracy have largely held sway, with few notable exceptions, and the role of citizen has been seen as limited largely to casting periodic votes for elected officials, who are still viewed as the main actors in public life. Theoretically, the debate between representative and participatory forms of democracy is a legitimate and ongoing one in political philosophy, with a rich literature by contributors such as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Michael Sandel, Benjamin Barber, Charles Taylor, Robert Nozick, and many others. While much of this discussion has been highly theoretical and abstruse, it has also served to legitimize a climate for practical experimentation and involvement in many communities.

Over against a national climate of deliberately cultivated divisiveness, many independent, community-level efforts have sought to promote serious citizen-to-citizen conversations across racial, gender, ethnic, religious, and other political frontiers. International efforts have included those of CIVICUS, one of whose board members is a contributor to this volume. These diverse efforts have produced a bewildering variety of models and approaches, as well as some efforts at coalition building among the advocates and convenors of public talk, such as members of the National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue. Much of this practical effort has involved more advocacy than critical reflection within the academy or in the community. A body of critical reflection on the multitude of practice models, to stand alongside the growing body of theoretical reflection, is long overdue. Two models with wide applicability to social work and community practice—public deliberation and sustained dialogue—are the central focus of this volume.

Within a social work context, public deliberation and sustained dialogue can be juxtaposed against all forms of therapy and counseling as different but allied forms of strategic talk. This obtains in more than a shared sense of presumed wellness, for the point appears to hold for approaches based on the strengths perspective as well. The adjectives in the titles of the two approaches are where the main difference is to be found: “Public” generally refers to issues of public or general interest as opposed to the private, intimate, personal, and confidential interests of therapy and counseling. Likewise, “sustained” refers to ongoing as opposed to short-term, one-time or quick-fix conversations, whether private or public. Deliberation and dialogue may be differentiated from therapy and counseling further in terms of the assumed equality of discussion leaders and participants as opposed to

the implicit inequalities—of knowledge, skill, and values—implied by professional models of therapist and client. Deliberation among fellow citizens over social problems and issues can be clearly and carefully differentiated from conversations between therapist and client on this basis. Such assumptions have long set community organizers, social administrators, and social policy analysts apart from “clinical-” and “direct-” practice perspectives in social work. Even so, as the entry on family therapy in this volume shows, such divisions are by no means absolute or unbridgeable.

Another underlying assumption of nearly all approaches to deliberation and dialogue is that a candid, open, and frank exchange of views is preferable to most alternative approaches to dealing with conflict. Illustrative of this phenomenon was a public deliberation held on a university campus recently: Upon reading an announcement of an upcoming deliberation called “Alternatives to War,” a loose network of roughly two dozen Vietnam-era veterans attended the event as a group. Apparently assuming from the title that the event was to promote a distinct ideological antiwar or pacifist focus, they came ready for a fight (in a few cases, literally). Instead, under the skilled leadership of the moderator (who is one of the contributors to this volume) they were invited to participate in discussions of all sides of the question and did so alongside Marxists, pacifists, and all shades of opponents, skeptics, and supporters of the Iraq War. Every experienced moderator has similar stories to relate, most often with similar results: Discussions on controversial issues have been held in many settings between faculty and students; between black and white students; among Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other students; between Jewish and Islamic congregations; and across many other lines of disagreement and difference. Sometimes those dialogues result in actual changes in behavior or circumstances; sometimes they are just prelude to more talk. In either case, the result is preferable to most alternatives.

For a brief time in 2008, numerous political commentators suggested that the “wedge politics” of division, discontent, fear, and suspicion of others that originated four decades ago had been defeated. The presidential campaign of 2008 appeared to many to reveal huge untapped reserves of pent-up citizenship. (For details on the strategic nature of wedge politics, see Perlstein 2008.) It was anticipated that in the wake of the 2008 election, many new approaches to democratic governance might enter mainstream American political society. Only gradually did it become clear, however, that defeat in a single campaign does not equal disappearance. Underlying

tensions and differences, aggravated by the wedge politics of recent decades, remain, and they emerged again in the Tea Party movement of 2009. The great insight upon which almost all approaches to citizen involvement are based is that of civil comity—the belief that, all other things being equal, it is better for those who differ to honestly and openly confront, discuss, explore, and examine their differences than to simply attempt to overwhelm, defeat, or destroy one another.

Many people in the hyperpartisan environment in the United States today have made very public note of their contempt for civil comity and bipartisan discourse of any type in both domestic and international arenas. This was particularly evident in the congressional health care debate in 2009. Previously, the obvious public rejection of wedge politics meant that both presidential candidates in 2008 ran on platforms promising greater “bipartisanship,” and it is likely that the immediate future will also see dramatically increased interest in methods of deliberation and dialogue. The obvious failure of bipartisanship in Washington since the 2008 election, however, raises an important question: If community leadership for honest, open discussion of difference cannot be expected from national political leaders and the media, where is it to come from? Higher education, even in the most engaged universities, is still notably ill prepared in this particular area, but disciplines like social work could become more and better prepared relatively quickly.

ORPHAN TOPICS

Public deliberation and sustained dialogue, along with most other forms of deliberation and dialogue, are among a shrinking group of serious intellectual topics and issues that have yet to find secure academic homes. At the higher reaches of theory, public talk falls safely within the domain of political philosophy, which is itself something of a vagabond discipline, long forced to roam between political science and philosophy departments, not entirely comfortable in either. Methodologically, a home might be found in interdisciplinary conflict-resolution programs, which are scattered widely throughout modern universities in assorted social science, management, labor relations, and communications departments and a bewildering additional variety of other locales (including English departments, communication studies, and elsewhere). Social work, with its policy and community-problem-solving foci, is one of several places in the modern uni-

versity where a logical home for deliberation and dialogue efforts might be found.

At the same time, from predominantly grassroots origins a large and rapidly growing international practice community in peace and reconciliation centers, mediation and conflict-resolution programs, and an astounding array of community programs devoted to purposive communications to enhance understanding has emerged. Many of these efforts across perceived ethnic, religious, racial, gender, generational, identity, and other boundaries have arisen as part of the general expansion of national nonprofit, nongovernmental, or third sectors.

One of the longer-term issues, only touched on briefly in this volume, will be to separate out the genuinely unique and distinctive practice wisdom from the bewildering variety of unique labels and entrepreneurial claims of proponents of various approaches. First, however, some preliminary conceptions and models of practice that transcend the interests of particular organizations and approaches are needed. Indeed, the continuing need for such a critical perspective on practice is one of the strongest arguments for the approaches laid out in this volume.

Social work is well suited to providing a base for institution-building and practice-oriented academic programs in this area. For social work, such programs fit with the historic origins of the field in the settlement house movement, with its Americanization, citizenship, and multiethnic dialogues and deliberations, as well as with more recent efforts. Thus, it is appropriate that a broad interdisciplinary attempt to frame the practice of public deliberation and sustained dialogue like the present volume be included as part of the Columbia University Press social work program.

THE PRESENT VOLUME

The work presented here was organized and developed under the auspices of the Nova Institute within the Division of Social Work at West Virginia University. It has been produced by faculty within the School of Applied Social Sciences and other units of West Virginia University, along with invited faculty and alumni affiliated with other institutions, including Princeton University, the University of Virginia, Rutgers University, Portland State University, University of Nevada–Reno, Bucknell University, and Ulster University in Northern Ireland, as well as practitioners in Vermont, New Zealand, and South Africa.

The principal focus in the present work is on two general approaches to deliberation and dialogue, chosen from among many possibilities: Public deliberation, the encouragement of open, public discussion by groups and assemblies of citizens, is one of the oldest and most widespread practices in this area. Sustained dialogue, extensive, binary focused discussions between two parties with a history of animosity, misunderstanding, or conflict, is one of the newest.

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Most of all, we would like to acknowledge the vital role of Dolly Ford in the initiation and early development of this project. As a graduate assistant and then as a key staff member of the evolving Nova Institute deliberation and dialogue effort, Dolly was instrumental in the success of this effort. Early on, she was actually a coeditor on this book, until the demands of her own social work career took her in other directions.

Also making important contributions were Noelle Lee, who organized, emceed, and wrote the grant for one of our first community public deliberations; Kelly Reimenschneider, who did a field placement with the Nova Institute; Jacki Englehardt, coordinator of professional continuing education at the Division of Social Work; and numerous staff members at the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, who included us in their programs over several years.

RESOLVING COMMUNITY CONFLICTS AND PROBLEMS

