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THE FUTURE OF DELIBERATION AND DIALOGUE STUDIES

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THE CHAPTERS OF THIS BOOK describe the contemporary movement to develop sustained dialogue and public deliberation as means of deepening and enriching the participation of individuals and groups in society. The case our authors have made is both theoretical and practical—“pracademic,” in our terminology. Dialogue and deliberation are at the heart of the concept of democratic participation in solving entrenched problems, and such public conversations can work in a variety of settings to enhance the role of citizens as active members of a democratic society.

Sustained dialogue and democratic deliberation may be seen as part of an ongoing intellectual movement that finds a basic test of democracy in the quantity and quality of public dialogue that it engenders. We share with many, many others the intuition that democracy has come nowhere near exhausting its potentials and that much more is possible in our governments, communities, and public institutions. One of us has recently suggested that three criteria be included when we seek to comprehend and extend the reach of democracy in the institutions of our time (Van Til 2008). Citizen action, he argues, is most appropriate and effective when it is:

1. Conducted through the practice of sustained dialogue and democratic deliberation
2. Directed toward tasks that reconstruct society's commons
3. Aimed toward constructing politics of relationship

To elaborate:

1. Sustained dialogue and public deliberation, as we have seen in this volume, are forms of structured human interaction that address, name, and

frame issues of mutual concern. These approaches involve processes of public deliberation or public talk wherein citizen participants engage in designed and moderated discussions with the goal of increasing understanding and reducing conflict among themselves and the solidary groups to which they may belong. The argument here is that if democratic participation is to mean more than adding one more data point to national opinion polls, participatory networks will need to social-capitalize—to provide and facilitate methods by which opinion is cultivated and assured and not simply mobilized.

2. Reconstructing the commons is an approach that draws upon the pioneering work of one of our editors, Roger Lohmann (1992b), and Elinor Ostrom (1990) and, most recently, Yochim Benkler (2006). Lohmann has argued that public life is formed and structured in and through the institutions, resources, and common goods of voluntary action and that communication is the primary vehicle for this. As such, the third sector is a social space within which caring, sharing, and communal action may be advanced. “What really counts is the informed, voluntary, and self-actualizing activity of individuals, joined with others in a search to build a better, fairer, and more productive society.” The worth of a society “should be judged by the content of the actions and outcomes these structures generate and assure” (Van Til 2000, 214).

3. Building a genuine politics of relationship has been highlighted as a central criterion in the recent work of Robert Putnam (2000), Michael Gecan (2004), and Harold Saunders (2005). What makes a difference here are “connections among people who know one another” (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2003, 9). Saunders elaborates the dimensions of such relationships as “giving hands and voice to the process of continuous interaction in political, social, and economic life. It is both a framework for analysis and an instrument of change” (Saunders 2005, 60).

Sustained dialogue is not only important theoretically as a component of active democratic participation, but it is also a tool to advance the quality of individual and community life. At West Virginia University, we have been striving through the Nova Institute to promote the use of dialogue and deliberation to enhance citizen-to-citizen exchange; to rebuild the commons and the sense of community and shared enterprise that goes along with it; and to advance understanding of the ways in which human social relationships figure importantly in this process. This book is an important step in that direction.