A New Democratic Politics

Our nation, and in particular our urban areas, needs a new politics, one that recognizes that meaningful political participation on behalf of individuals, families, and communities requires a politics that is both accessible and associational. That is, there can be no meaningful political participation, no just and accountable public policy, without a politics that is accessible to those who are at the bottom of society, those who are currently left out of the political process. And there can be no meaningful political participation for any of us without a politics that is associational, that is deliberative, that enables us to come together to talk about our families, our property, our education, and other issues important to us.

This new politics is very different from the democratic politics practiced today. It represents a unique—or, for some, authentic—kind of democratic politics. This new politics is absolutely essential for an effective and accountable public sector. It is absolutely essential for a just society.

A New Democratic Politics: From Aristotle to the Industrial Areas Foundation

There is a dimension of politics and public life that is requisite to the human condition. Aristotle said it best, when he said that we are social beings. We are beings whose personhood emerges to the extent that we are involved in deliberations about those matters that affect the commons, the community: education, the raising of children, the pressures on families, how families grow and thrive, and what happens to property. For Aristotle, these deliberations, which took place around the agora or the public square, were politics. They defined politics.[1]

This basic vision of politics is shared by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). For more than 50 years, its primary mission has been to make this kind of deliberative politics a reality in communities throughout the United States. In short, the IAF teaches ordinary people how to do democratic politics, recognizing that this kind of politics requires a special craft, a special perspective, a special attitude. It involves deliberative skills: the capacity to engage in the kind of conversation that is politics.

However, despite reflecting Aristotle's basic vision, the politics of the IAF also are very unique. That is, IAF politics are not only associational, they are accessible. In contrast, Aristotle's politics were not accessible. In fact, Aristotle thought politics were for those who had the time and energy and capacity to see beyond themselves, as he put it. He thought that politics were for men who had leisure time, such as the members of the Hopolite Army. From Aristotle's perspective, the most important people who existed in Ancient Greece were the Hopolites. These were the characters who could afford their own armor, because they came from families who had the resources to provide them. These were the characters who could see beyond their private need and thus should participate in the deliberation that was politics. Accordingly, Aristotle thought that everyone else, women, immigrants, slaves, people who worked with their hands, and everybody else, were into their needs and necessities, and therefore were "idiots," because that is what an idiot meant—one who was totally into one's own private life. Aristotle thought that those people who were idiots should not participate in public life.

Recognizing this limitation of Aristotle's politics, the IAF's politics are inclusive. The IAF shares the perspective that politics is the birthright of everyone, a point to which this article will return. In this way, the IAF takes what is best about Aristotle's politics and enriches it, creating a politics that is accessible as well as associational.

Politics Today . . . or Electioneering

Creating a new politics in America is a great challenge. That challenge is underscored by the contrast between the kind of politics practiced today and the new democratic politics described above.

The conversation that defines democratic politics unfortunately is becoming a lost art in today's society. Instead of engaging in conversation, most of us engage in "station identification," where we basically identify ourselves and then listen appropriately while we are thinking about what we are going to say next. Or we avoid conversation completely, especially if we know it has the potential to expose tension and conflict, which political discussions often do. As a result, the real conversations of engagement—of listening, and particularly of listening to the other person as another, as someone who has a

different perspective, a different point of view, a different story or history—do not exist anymore.

Our culture has developed a disdain for politics, because our politics no longer has any meaning; it is disconnected from real conversations about relevant issues. And what people normally mean

if only they could be connected to institutions, such as families, schools, congregations, unions, and other voluntary associations, that can mentor, guide, and teach them how to be relational and practice politics. But unfortunately these kinds of intermediate institutions have been imploded or blown apart.

A Relational Culture and its Institutions: The Foundation of a New Democratic Politics

The deterioration of the institutions that cultivate our capacity to practice democratic politics has been documented. Authors from Robert Putnam, to Benjamin Barber, to Robert Bellah, have written about and decried the loss of civic capacity and our capacity to engage in those kind of negotiations which are important to and at the center of public life.

But not so long ago these institutions existed. When I grew up in San Antonio back in the ’50s, there were 250 adults organized against each child. There were 250 adults who felt they had a responsibility and ownership of my life. However, when I began organizing in east Los Angeles in 1976, instead of 250 adults organized against one kid, it was 50-60 kids organized against one adult, and the adults were living under house arrest, afraid to go out at night.

Today in Los Angeles, that situation is even more true. It seems that more and more the ideal and most important right of every member of the Los Angeles community is the right to be left alone, the right to be disconnected, the right to be apart. Nirvana for people in Los Angeles is living in their gated community.

Modern Los Angeles exemplifies this idea that part and parcel of our inability to do politics has to do with the fact that those institutions that undergird our political activity—families, communities, labor unions, political associations—have been imploded. We really can’t do politics unless we are, as Aristotle and Crick define it, connected to, and are part of, a relational culture.[2] And we can’t develop a relational culture by ourselves. Relational cultures emerge from institutions that connect us, that give us a larger vision of what society is all about, that challenge us to think beyond that which is immediate.

because they connect us and help us understand the social nature of our existence and development, enlarge our vision of self-interest, our vision of life, challenging us to think beyond that which is immediate and narrowly individual.

So, Tocqueville thought that America's intermediate institutions—congregations, family, networks of political associations and voluntary associations—were foundational to the creation of the kind of political community requisite for a democratic life and republican

vision was limited. He thought that only certain people were capable of developing the deliberative skills and participating in the culture of conversation, argument, and judgement requisite for real political activity. Simply put, Aristotle was a white, European male who felt that only certain elites could be political.

In an essay titled "Contract and Birthright," Princeton Political Science Professor Sheldon Wolin offers a very different view. In that article, he introduces the idea of a birthright, which he asserts is the inheritance of every American. That birthright is our "politicalness;" it is "our capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life."[4] Wolin argues that this heritage, our birthright, is about the struggle of those people that Aristotle thought were "idiots," those people that Aristotle thought had no right to participate in the deliberations of the public square. Our birthright is the inheritance that came from the struggle of those people—to wit: women, slaves, immigrants—to gain their rightful place at the public square. Our birthright is that which was inherited from the abolitionist movement, the anti-slave movement, the struggle over women's rights, working people's rights, immigrants' rights, etc., etc.

In spite of this political tradition, however, Wolin argues we have become an apolitical people. We are no longer concerned or identify with this tradition because we are isolated and disconnected, and because those institutions that have nurtured our capacity to tell the story, to connect to and reinterpret the story of our traditions, the stories of our grandfathers and grandmothers, have imploded due to our lack of investment in them. As a result, we now define ourselves as consumers, customers, and clients and no longer see ourselves as people who have responsibilities and obligations of citizenship. We no longer see ourselves as situated selves, as selves who are constructed in narratives and stories, as selves who are immersed in the deliberative struggle of politics. In effect, what this means is that we have contracted away our birthright, our "politicalness," the capacity to participate in our common life and concerns and to make decisions.

In this respect, Wolin argues, we are like Esau in the book of Genesis. Esau, too, had a birthright. It, also, was inherited, concerned

a collective identity, and involved rights and obligations. And, although it was an entitlement, it was something that had to be claimed, taken care of, improved, and passed on, just like our birthright. Wolin uses the story of Esau and Jacob to help us understand the importance of our political birthright and to help us think about why we are failing to claim it.

Esau and Jacob

The story of Esau and Jacob is from the book of Genesis. Esau was a hunter, a powerful man, kind of crude and primitive. He liked to be alone. Jacob was soft of speech, kind of demure. Jacob was domestic, a good cook.

One day Esau was out hunting, and he had been unsuccessful. When he returned home, he was starving to death, and he came across his brother boiling pottage. Esau says to Jacob, "my brother, feed me, or I'll die. I've been unsuccessful in my hunt." Jacob replies, "brother Esau, you know you can count on me. Of course, I'll feed you. But what do I get for it?" "Well, what do you want?" says Esau. "Brother Esau," says Jacob, "sell me your birthright." Esau, pausing for a moment, responds, "what good is my birthright? It's not going to feed me; it's not going to keep me warm at night. What is my birthright? I'll tell you what is my birthright. It's my identity; it's my father's obligations; it's all those quarrels, all those deaths, all the responsibility, the land, the people. Of course, I'll sell you my birthright." According to the book of Genesis, from that day forward, Esau despised his birthright.

You, me—all of us—we are Esau, because we have contracted away that which we cannot contract away. We have reduced our birthright, our "politicalness," our heritage, our traditions, our history, to something that can be negotiated and commodified. And we have sold our birthright for material goods and services. We have decided, like Esau, that the responsibilities, risks, and sacrifices of our birthright are a worthless burden compared to the bounties of a mass consumption society.

In many ways we are like the Czech intellectuals and middle class in 1968, who—when Russian tanks and planes came into Prague, Czechoslovakia, and pointed guns at their heads—accepted an offer

they could not refuse. The offer was that we, the *nomenc* , will make all the decisions of public life, in exchange for which you, the Czech intellectuals and middle class, will have all the goods and services of a mass consumption society. You will have the restaurants, the summer homes, the cars—everything you want. Just don't associate with one another or deliberate with one another. That is our job. Havel then argues that the Czech intellectuals and middle class underwent an internal migration. They withdrew into themselves and became absorbed with their private concerns. They became like Aristotle's idiots.

Hannah Arendt in her book, *Men in Dime* , says the same phenomenon happened in Germany when the German intellectuals and middle class, disdainful of the Weimar democracy, disdainful of parlimentarianism, disdainful of all the squabbling, underwent an internal migration.[5] They, too, became self-absorbed and withdrew into themselves, leaving the public square naked for the thugs and hooligans of nazism. And, of course, we know what happened then.

We—that is, Americans today—are making the same kind of decisions. But we don't have the excuse that the Czech intellectuals and middle class had; we don't have any guns pointing at our heads. We are doing it sl 0 -80 (.s2 g) -8512-80b80 (n) -80t-0 (0 -a8r98 3have) -75 (the 9 (i) -8p1b 9 v

It requires calculated vulnerability. It is the power that emerges from collaboration, from conviviality.

Relational power ultimately means treating people decently and not humiliating them. It means not treating adults like children or second class citizens, which too often civilized societies do, as pointed out by a Jewish philosopher by the name of Avishai Margalit. In a book titled *The Decent Society*, Margalit argues that there is a difference between a civilized society and a decent society.[7] A civilized society is a society in which people treat each other decently, they do not humiliate one another. A decent society, on the other hand, is a society in which the people *and* the institutions of that society do not humiliate.

The humiliation often inherent in the institutions of a civilized society is exemplified by the story of the Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor is a chapter in the book called *The Brothers Karamozov* written by the great Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky.[8]

The Grand Inquisitor

The Grand Inquisitor is the story of a conversation between two of the Karamozov brothers, Ivan Inq 7 39IvaET B9Inq (,) -25 (Fyod849 4.5 0 1t Tc

themselves, their bread turns to stone. It is only when they give it to us, can we give it back to them as food. So be gone, lest we have to crucify you again." And the story ends. Christ kisses the Grand Inquisitor and goes out into the night.

The Grand Inquisitor represents a style of leadership where adults cannot be trusted, where they cannot accept the responsibilities and anxieties of freedom. They have to be taken care of. They have to be told what to do. We teach them to be dependent. We teach them learned helplessness. It is the kind of leadership based on unilateral power.

Unfortunately, the Grand Inquisitor is alive and well in all too many of our institutions. The Grand Inquisitor is alive and well in our workplace, in our churches, and in our schools, where the definition of a lecture course is where the lecture goes from the lecturer's notebook to the notebook of the students without going through the heads of either one of them. Neil Postman said our kids enter school as question marks—with energy, vibrance, and vitality—and leave as periods.[9] The Grand Inquisitor, unfortunately, is also alive and well in

We read in the scripture that one day Moses comes across an Egyptian overseer oppressing a Hebrew. Upon seeing no one who had come to the aid of this Hebrew, no one who would stand up to injustice, Moses strikes and kills the Egyptian. The next day Moses comes across two Hebrews fighting, and he says to them, "You should be brothers, you should be organizing; you should be getting together." "Moses," they reply, "who made you our leader? Who gave you authority to tell us what to do? And, besides, what are you going to do if we don't do what you say? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?"

At that moment Moses realizes his deed is known, and he wonders who told. The guy he killed is dead, buried. He didn't tell. There was no one else around. Moses realizes that his own people turned him in. Moses says to himself, "I don't need this." And he leaves town and goes to the suburbs. He gets a good job and marries the boss's daughter. He gets a big home, and all the fine accoutrements of suburban life—the furniture, the TV, the big pool, the big car, etc.

But Moses has got a problem: his memory. His memory was shaped by these stories told to him as a child. This memory now formed his identity. This memory that, when his passions have cooled, when he's matured, confronts him in the burning bush, because his anger has got to become mature and cold, it's got to be that fire that does not consume, that anger that is rooted in loss and grief, that anger that is relational, that anger that comes from the Greek word for meekness, " ," as Aristotle taught us. Moses begins to identify with his memory, because he hears the voice of Yahweh saying, "Do you hear my people crying out against their oppression?" The Hebrews are like a lot of us, they lament and they cry out. And the din is so strong that Yahweh feels like he's got to act.

So Moses finally figures out what he's got to do. He confronts God and says, "Look, the people have rejected my leadership. If I go to Egypt, who will I say sent me?" "Don't worry about that Moses," God

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THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

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