

The University of Chicago

The American Mind Goes Inside

The Loss of American Citizen Learning Institutions and the
Individualization of Public Thinking

By

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***Abstract:** Alexis de Tocqueville famously argued that voluntary associations among citizens were the necessary corrective to the atomizing influences of democracy. One of those influences, he argued, was a tendency to promote individualism in the life of the mind, which in turn risked a public intellectual life dominated by the whims of popular fancy. Taking this concern as a point of departure, this paper proposes to chart the rise and decline of communal intellectual life in America. In Part 1, I deal with the history of America's most influential movements of what I call "Citizen Learning," movements of communal, voluntary, public intellectual life. In this section, I argue that these movements had a salutary effect on American public thinking, answering Tocqueville's concerns by promoting thinking as part of a community, developing tolerance of differences, and sharpening healthy habits of the heart and mind with respect to public conversation. In Part 2, I explore the reasons for the loss of these movements and the effect of their loss on our intellectual culture. Applying the research of contemporary sociologists to the question of communal intellectual life, I argue that the loss of these in-person, local intellectual institutions has been a factor in creating a public intellectual life that is more polarized, more radical, and more distrustful.*

I. Introduction

Americans once flocked by the millions to local halls to hear lectures on everything from Egyptology to Aristotle's ethics. For more than a century, such institutions for public learning and intellectual conversation held an important place in American life. It was within these halls that the likes of Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry David Thoreau, and many others brought their work before the public. It was here that Abraham Lincoln found his first platform, that Frederick Douglass campaigned against slavery, that Transcendentalism was expounded, that Susan B. Anthony stumped for suffrage.

These halls belonged chiefly to what is termed the "Lyceum Movement," one instance of a wider stream of community movements dedicated to the sake of the intellectual formation of ordinary working Americans, along with the Chautauquas, Athenaeums, and in time, the Public Forums of the

early 20th century. Remnants of these organizations still exist. Lyceum halls dot small towns and cities, where they serve as event centers or theaters; many city parks still bear the name of the Chautauquas they once hosted; even the University of Chicago is a legacy of the Chautauqua tradition.¹ As ubiquitous as these institutions of community learning were from roughly the 1820s to the 1930s, they all but disappeared from American life following the Second World War.

Theodore Roosevelt called these institutions “the most American thing about America.”² James Redpath declared them as deeply rooted in American life as the Sunday school or the caucus.³ Why a phenomenon so hugely influential in American life and so ingrained in its culture and self-conception would come to be effectively forgotten is a great mystery, but understanding it, as I hope the present writing will help us to do, may tell us something about larger trends in American life. I will argue that the loss of these movements played a role in *individualizing* popular intellectual life in America, leading to a culture of public conversation that is more fractured, lonely, polarized, and radical than in times past.

¹ Kieth, William *Democracy as Discussion* Lexington Books 2007

² Quoted in Canning, Charlotte *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance Studies Theatre Hist & Culture: 2005* [University of Iowa Press](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20mvbd9) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20mvbd9>

³ Eubank, Marjorie Harrell “THE REDPATH LYCEUM BUREAU FROM 1868 TO 1901” University of Michigan ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1968.6912091PP270 <https://www.proquest.com/docview/302307738?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>

In making this case, I will be drawing from across disciplines. While media and communications scholars who study popular learning movements, like Timothy Shaffer, Martin Carcasson, and William Kieth have studied the pedagogy and influence of these movements, and historians like Carl Bode and Donald Scott have written on their structural history and social context, no author, as far as I know, has integrated these perspectives with the sociology as a means of studying this history specifically in the context of individualism in the life of the American mind. In so doing, I will be integrating the perspectives of the aforementioned scholars with primary sources and with the sociological communitarian tradition stretching back to Alexis de Tocqueville and following through to Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam.

The aim of the present writing is to argue that Citizen Learning institutions, as I will refer to these popular movements of public learning, had a salutary effect on the life of the American mind. Those who came under their influence, I will argue, were more likely to be tolerant of different views, to be well-informed and well-rounded, to develop relationships of trust with neighbors across lines of difference, and to practice the habits of the heart and mind that make for good public conversation. In examining their rise, success, and decline, we will gain a better understanding of their impact on American culture and of the meaning of their loss. By understanding their decline, in particular, in light of changing technology and patterns of settlement, we will have a better picture of some of the causes of the current ills in our public discourse. Finally, I will argue that Citizen Learning institutions

existing locally and concretely, and not merely online, can still constitute a vital resource for creating a healthy culture of public thinking.

II. The Individualist Cast of Mind and the American Philosophy

“I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States;”⁴ so begins the second volume of *Democracy in America*. Americans, Tocqueville said, had little use for the likes of Voltaire and Descartes, and didn’t read them. The burgeoning nation was occupied with practical matters, but it nonetheless had a philosophical method, unspoken and unwritten, but real. The condition of social equality, which seems inadequate to us today, but which was a huge departure from prevailing conditions in Europe, meant that the individual was thrown back in on herself. Her class did not tell her what to believe and, in many respects, no toweringly impressive figures of authority bound her to a tradition of belief. Americans, therefore, tend to “evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, ...to tend to results without being bound to means, and to aim at the substance through the form.”⁵

This intellectual self-reliance came with benefits and risks. On the one hand, it led Americans to seek rigorous reasons for their beliefs, not in self-expression or in existing social relations, but in human

⁴ Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America* Translated by Henry Reeve 1997
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>

⁵ *Ibid*

nature itself. On the other hand this detachment from tradition, the force of social kinship in belief, and religion comes with serious risks. It may lead to the anarchic violence of a country for whom this rejection of tradition became almost absolute, as in revolutionary France, or it may lead to an intellectual tyranny more fearsome than that of kings or clergies of old.

Absolute self-reliance in intellectual matters, however, is unsustainable socially and individually. Without a common vision there can be no common action, and without common action there is no society; therefore social life requires something more than private intellectual investigation. At the same time, Tocqueville points out, no individual, even a subtle philosopher, could move forward in life without resting somewhere on authority, for otherwise her investigations would be so many and so long that she would never make progress. Authority being necessary, then, a society must seek it *somewhere*.

Democratic citizens, having turned aside from tradition and seeing that their neighbor is their equal, find authority not in an individual, but in the great mass of men. In other words, rather than believing what is pronounced from an authority on high, they believe whatever is popular at the moment:

Thus intellectual authority will be different, but it will not be diminished; and far from thinking that it will disappear, I augur that it may readily acquire too much preponderance, and confine the action of private judgment within narrower limits than are suited either to the greatness or the happiness of the human race. In the principle of equality I very clearly discern two tendencies; the

one leading the mind of every man to untried thoughts, the other inclined to prohibit him from thinking at all...after having broken all the bondage once imposed on it by ranks or by men, the human mind would be closely fettered to the general will of the greatest number...For myself, when I feel the hand of power lie heavy on my brow, I care but little to know who oppresses me; and I am not the more disposed to pass beneath the yoke, because it is held out to me by the arms of a million of men.”⁶

For Tocqueville, the great counterweight to this risk is Christianity. Americans do not bring an intellectual hyper-individualism to bear on matters of faith, in the manner of the 19th century French, but rather accept the authority of the Church as a background against which other intellectual questions can be asked and upon which common projects can be built. The other bulwark against degenerative individualism is voluntary association. The concern that Tocqueville has about individualism creating a system where the majority can tyrannize the rest intellectually is part of a broader concern that if the space between the individual and the state is vacated, tyranny will ensue. Voluntary association, which means the sort of mediating institution that stands in the space between private enterprise and government, counteracts the democratic temptation to private selfishness on the one hand and government overreach on the other by drawing citizens together freely for the common good.

⁶ *Ibid*

Just as community groups foster the health of civil society against private greed or domineering government, so too does voluntary intellectual community combat the parallel ills of the mind. It is to this former concern that the research and advocacy of the social capital literature is addressed, but the specific concern about civil society's effects on the life of the mind has often gone unidentified.

Tocqueville came to America in 1831, when the Lyceum was only 5 years old. Whether he knew of the Lyceum's existence is not clear, given its relatively small footprint at the time. Nonetheless, it does seem to constitute a kind of answer to some of his concerns. The Lyceum was precisely a voluntary association where communities could gather to explore liberal learning, including philosophy, and it played a significant role in the development of American philosophy writ large, providing a platform for Emerson, Brownson, Thoreau, and countless lesser known philosophers, moralists, and theologians.

Despite the lack of interest in academic philosophy, Tocqueville identified among Americans a unique level of interest in what he called "general ideas," that is, in abstract, conceptual thinking. The Lyceum provided a tutoring and communal force shaping this passion for general ideas. It made Americans more informed, better at handling ideas, and better at engaging in fruitful dialogue with neighbors.

In his history of the Lyceum, Carl Bode characterized it as the "town meeting of the mind." Here, the town meeting – so praised by Tocqueville as a key ingredient in the special sauce which made American

democracy work – found its parallel. Here, community, religion, philosophy, and scholarship came together to provide a ballast to American public thinking. This does not mean that all ideas expressed in the Lyceum were sound, all arguments reasonable, all dialogue generous and wise, but it does mean that the Lyceum constituted an essential resource in responding to the risks of intellectual individualism and in providing Americans a place to develop their thinking in healthy community.

III. Where Citizen Learning Began

I have referenced above my intention to refer to these movements in adult education in the liberal arts and science by the name “Citizen Learning.” I choose this term because it captures something of the element of civic and community responsibility that constituted a throughline in the ethos of these movements, and because it connotes the democratic, broad-based nature of these institutions, which belonged to the citizenry at large rather than to any sect, class, or party. In telling the story of these early movements, I hope to give a picture of their nature, their ethos, and their effect on public thinking observed by contemporaries. Understanding the cultural milieu in which they emerged and flourished will help us, likewise, to understand why they disappeared.

The Lyceum, which constitutes the first major chapter in this story, first grew up in the midst of a diffuse cultural impulse toward public learning that followed the turn of the 19th century in America. Its origin point has been sometimes identified as the Mechanic’s Institute of England,⁷ which gave

⁷ *Supra* 1 pp. 216

working men access to university-level instruction. These began first as lectures in science and engineering, but soon expanded their content to liberal learning writ large, and their influence to France and the United States. America was a sort of ready vessel to receive this kind of institution. Decades earlier Benjamin Franklin had founded the Junto and the American Philosophical Society “for the diffusion of useful knowledge”⁸ in Philadelphia, and similar circles had sprung up in various American cities.

It was a Connecticut farmer, Josiah Holbrook, however, who organized the Lyceum into a concerted movement, and one that spread far and wide. Holbrook initially adopted the practical, scientific elements of the Mechanic’s Institutes, but the Franklinian strain in American culture meant that philosophy would always have an important role to play in these movements. Indeed, early chapters of the Lyceum network were sometimes merely called “Franklin Institutes,”⁹ and it was not just Franklin the *philosophe* who prized philosophy as a goal and constitutive element of republican society, but many of the founding figures of this country echoed the classically-shaped John Adams: “I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy.”¹⁰ Indeed, John Quincy Adams would later become the leader of the Lyceum in the nation’s capital.¹¹

⁸ Franklin, Benjamin “A Proposal for a Society Promoting Useful Knowledge” 1743 National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text4/amerphilsociety.pdf>

⁹ Bode, Carl *The American Lyceum: Town Hall of the Mind* pp.52

¹⁰ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, post 12 May 1780
<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17800512jasecond>

¹¹ Bode

From even this early stage the key elements of the Citizen Learning ethos were in play:

1) The first and perhaps most obvious was the idea of granting access to liberal learning to those outside of the university's scope. The Mechanic's Institute began when Andrew Birkbeck, a professor at St. Andrew's University in Scotland, sought to bring university-level instruction to the working man in 1824.¹² And Holbrook, a son of Yale, sought to develop an intellectual center in Hartford for those whom Yale did not reach.¹³ "The Lyceum was a place for the youthful workmen, the overtired artisan, the worn-out factory girl," who would rush, as one observer wrote, "after the toil of the day is over...into the hot atmosphere of the crowded lecture room."¹⁴ As historian Donald Scott put it, the Lyceum would "embrace all members of the community, whatever their occupation, social standing, or political and religious affiliation."¹⁵

2) The goal of this liberal learning was, according to Holbrook, "the general diffusion of knowledge and the raising of moral and intellectual tastes" of the public.¹⁶ Holbrook makes explicit, then, not only the practical use of this kind of education, but points out its formative aspect. On the one hand, it was thought that a citizen of participatory democracy ought to be

¹² *Ibid* 3

¹³ *Ibid* 52

¹⁴ Quoted in Postman, Neil *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of show Business* Penguin Books 2005 pp. 40

¹⁵ Scott, Donald "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America" *The Journal of American History*, Mar., 1980, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Mar., 1980), pp. 791-809 Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1887637>

¹⁶ Holbrook, Josiah "Association of Adults for Mutual Education" for the *American Journal of Education* October 1825

well formed intellectually, in order to play the role of a good citizen, and on the other, it was thought that the activities of the Lyceum were “a powerful influence for the reformation of morals,” as one newspaper put in the early Lyceum days.¹⁷ This moral formation included both the habits of discourse and the application of energy to something ennobling rather than to vice.

In the early pages of his classic *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam quotes an early Lyceum leader, Thomas Greene, from the whaling town of New Bedford, Massachusetts expressing the communitarian moral reality of the Lyceum. His words are worth reproducing here:

We come from all the divisions and classes of society...to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered...in the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother...we may return to our homes and firesides [from the Lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Supra* 6 pp. 40

¹⁸ Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* Simon and Schuster 200 Pp. 23

A. The Cultural Conditions of The Rise of Citizen Learning

The cultural milieu in which these institutions first took flight has often been identified with the tradition of the early American Town Hall, which William Kieth, a scholar of communication, has traced back further still to the *folk moot* of England.¹⁹ The point is that the United States, and especially New England, had a well-developed and long-standing culture of public deliberation. These town meetings were restricted generally to men who had lived in the town for a long time, but the Lyceum opened public dialog up to the general population of men and women alike. At the moment that the Lyceum arose there was a populist impulse that the American republic belonged, not just to patricians, but to ordinary men and women, too. It was a time of devotion to public education, libraries, and schools.²⁰

At the same time, the fabric of community life, as observed by Alexis de Tocqueville, was defined both by a tightly knit, self-governing township model, but also by the joiner impulse, a culture of mediating institutions that formed spontaneously wherever Americans were gathered:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small...Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the

¹⁹ *Supra* 1 pp. 215

²⁰ *Ibid* pp. 217

*support of a great example, they associate. Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.*²¹

In this milieu, it is perhaps not surprising that the Lyceum caught on so rapidly and spread so broadly. Americans were accustomed to voluntary association as the very matter of their life, the habits of the heart (as Tocqueville called them) developed by the township lent themselves toward self-organizing into Citizen Learning communities.

In addition to the communitarian impulse gleaned from Christian tradition and a philosophy of civic republicanism propounded by early and influential American thinkers, the media environment of the day was conducive to the sustained attention and interpersonal cooperation that Lyceum gatherings required. Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, argues that a media culture shaped by the written word formed societies prepared for patient, thoughtful engagement with ideas, whereas in an image-based society—such as one in which television is the most prominent medium of information—entertainment, spectacle, and show rule the day. In a world in which the Lyceum was in “practically every village,”²² America was “dominated by the printed word and by *oratory* based on the printed word.”²³

²¹ Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America* Translated by Henry Reeve 1997
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>

²² *Supra* 11 pp. 40

²³ *Supra* 11 pp. 41

B. The Chautauqua and the Rise of the Forum

What became of this associational life so typical of early 19th century America will be the subject dealt with below. For now, it is important to get a basic sweep of the rise and decline of the Citizen Learning movements. The Lyceum, in its earliest iteration, reached its zenith just prior to the Civil War.²⁴ Until the war, the Lyceums bore some level of resemblance to the original Mechanic's Institutes. They served to collect books and scientific instruments and specimens for communities that had no university and no library. This early iteration of the Lyceum reached as far west as Iowa and Minnesota. Postwar, as rail lines and telegraphs developed and as libraries became more ubiquitous (in part thanks to Lyceum groups funding them), the Lyceum lost some of its function as a repository of knowledge, but the facet for which it is most remembered, namely, public lectures, came to the fore.

These lecture circuits persisted, in one way or another, until the early 20th century at great scale, when their place was taken up by an innovation out of Iowa, the traveling Chautauqua. These were weeklong, touring meetings for entertainment and education that spanned much of the Midwest well into the early 20th century. Based on the famous Chautauqua institution in New York, they had the flavor of a religious camp meeting mixed with an escape to nature for recreation and learning. Starting in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, estimates from the time put the national audience at some 40 million annually.²⁵ "The grand aim of the Chautauqua movement," one contemporary observer said, "is to

²⁴ *Supra* 1 pp. 217

²⁵ Kolbet, R.M. [Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century](http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/traveling-culture/about.html) Library of Congress American Memories Project <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/traveling-culture/about.html>

elevate the masses; to give the community at large a mental, moral, social and spiritual uplift, by drawing them together in social assembly and bringing them into contact with the most cultured minds, eloquent orators and brilliant artists of the American platform.”²⁶

In time, both the Lyceum and the Chautauqua began to shift away from the learned lecture alone and added entertainment.²⁷ Intermingled with talks on pressing political matters, moral philosophy, and science, were first bands and musicians, and, eventually, storytellers, and comics. The Chautauquas in time became the more prominent of the lecture and entertainment circuits, and these lasted until the 1920s.

The Redpath Lyceum Bureau, the most famous agency organizing Lyceum Lectures, and the one which represented and booked Mark Twain, ran until 1925, by which time it largely supported Chautauqua audiences. In 1932, the last ever circuit Chautauqua was held, and with its close, and the closing of the old Lyceum bureaus, the Lyceum chapter in American history finally ended.²⁸ This might have been, in part, because the Great Depression killed off the financial model sustaining the Lyceum and Chautauqua bureaus. Up until that time, the bureau’s worked by acting as the middleman between speakers and local venues; in the depression days, expendable income for

²⁶ Peterson, WJ “Chautauqua Vignettes” in *Palimpsest* pp. 232-233
file:///C:/Users/natha/Downloads/palimpsest-25467-petersen.pdf

²⁷ Bode pp. 200

²⁸ Gould, Joseph Edward *The Chautauqua Movement: An Episode in the Continuing American Revolution*
State University of New York Press, 1 January. 1970 pp 85

participating in intellectual and cultural events was in short supply, and the bureaus depended, not just on single city with enough stability and wealth to support programming, but on a broad level of prosperity across the market. A new model for Citizen Learning was needed.

III. The Public Forum Era

In this period the last nationally significant Citizen Learning movement came about in the form of a family of programs generally grouped as public forums. The first and most individually famous forum was the Ford Hall Forum in Boston, founded in 1908, which hosted W.E.B. DuBois and Clarence Darrow, among other leading speakers of the day.²⁹

The movement really took off, however, in the work of John Studebaker, the superintendent for public schools in Des Moines, Iowa. In the first 9 months of his experiment, Studebaker was able to bring in more than 13,000 adults in Des Moines, a city with barely 70,000 adults in total.³⁰ This program was so successful, it was eventually adopted by the Roosevelt administration's Department of the Interior, which saw its propagation across the country, where it reached millions of Americans across scores of cities.³¹ W.E.B. DuBois called it "the only method by which we are going to achieve democracy in the United States."³² It saw great success in terms of attendance, with other cities, like Minneapolis,

²⁹ See Lurie, Reuben Levi *The Challenge Of The Forum: The Story Of Ford Hall And The Open Forum Movement 1930*

³⁰ Lepore, Jill "The Last Time Democracy Almost Died" *The New Yorker*, February 2020
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/03/the-last-time-democracy-almost-died>

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

replicating Des Moines' impressive numbers with tens of thousands of attendees per year, but was shuttered at the onset of World War II as it lost federal funding. The Public Forum Movement was not the only federal initiative to promote Citizen Learning at the time: USDA also hosted rural Schools of Philosophy and Farmer Discussion programs, which ran through the extensions systems of universities, but these, too, met their end around World War II.³³

A. The Philosophy Behind the Forums

John Studebaker conceived of the public forum explicitly as “education for democracy,” education designed for a citizenry to maintain democratic government in the face of emerging radicalisms. “It is clear that these nations,” Studebaker said, speaking of the authoritarian regimes of Europe, “were *driven* into dictatorial control of government and restriction of thought because they had failed to build through education the firm foundation of understanding and the necessary habits involved in the concept and practice of democracy.”³⁴ Studebaker took as his own sort of motto the words Washington had uttered in his farewell address, “promote, then, institutions for the diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.”³⁵

³³Oliver, Leonard P.; Feldmann, Ann, Ed. “The Art of Citizenship: Public Issue Forums.” Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Dayton, OH.

³⁴William M. Keith, *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007, p. 266, citing John W. Studebaker and Charles S. Williams, *Safeguarding Democracy through Adult Civic Education*, United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education Bulletin 1936 (Misc. No. 6, 1936): 14.

³⁵Studebaker, John *Education for Democracy* United States Department of the Interior pp. 6

For Studebaker, the forums had a social and political purpose in addition to the moral. Where earlier Lyceum organizers would talk of moral formation and the elevating of character, and Chautauqua leaders would speak of building Christian values and seeing God in all things,³⁶ Studebaker was focused on forming good political judgment and cooperation. Forums could, he believed, free democratic citizens from the “push and pull” of pressure groups, media, political parties, and so on.³⁷ For Studebaker, the forum format was “democracy at work,” a process of gaining liberation through knowledge. Liberating because it offered citizens the opportunity for the free exchange of ideas, where they could reach their own conclusions together as a community and not be subject to outside pressures. The motives of the Lyceum can still be identified in the forum. Studebaker believed the forums would increase the understanding of participants, develop healthy intellectual habits, promote open-mindedness and acceptance of others, and build a sense of public spiritedness and neighborly friendliness.³⁸

The program of the Public Forums, likewise, shows that “civic education” was not conceived of as the sort of things that might be termed “civics” today. There were discussions on present political issues, sure, but many of the forums were occupied by political philosophy, working to go to the root of

³⁶ John Vincent, the founder of the original Chautauqua assembly urged leaders of the movement to “*Look through microscopes, but find God. Look through telescopes, but find God. Look for him revealed in the throbbing life about you, in the palpitating stars above, in the marvelous records of the earth beneath you, and in your own souls. Study the possibilities which God unfolds, and make of yourself all that you can. The harder the struggle, the brighter the crown. Have faith and holy purpose.*” P. Norwin, “Citadel of Christian Culture,” *American Mercury*. July, 1929, P* 369«

³⁷ *Supra* 32 pp. 13

³⁸ *Ibid* pp. 14

liberalism, fascism, and communism, and to many other questions besides. Still other forums were dedicated simply to questions of moral philosophy. The organizers of the USDA Program Study and Discussion, placed still more emphasis on the centrality of philosophical and spiritual questions. The words of M.L. Wilson, Undersecretary at the Department, are worth quoting here:

I have always believed that no single specialist or expert, nor any single body of scientific knowledge, can ever deal adequately with even a relatively small and apparently detached agricultural problem....And we should realize that any solution or policy that is decided upon is bound to have effects upon human life and conduct that none but philosophy and religion openly profess to judge. Economic wisdom alone, therefore, is not enough for proper consideration of agricultural problems that by common consent are defined as economic problems. We cannot escape getting involved in questions of moral, philosophical, and spiritual values whenever we touch upon any social problem.³⁹

Both programs were inspired by the belief that ordinary citizens were capable of deep, common reflection on problems relating to the public good. They were both inspired by confidence in democratic dialogue to enlighten participants. They were weakened, in some respect, by their attachment to the federal government, which made some attendees suspicious of ulterior agendas, but, during their limited run, they enjoyed a great deal of success. It is to the impact of these movements and those that came before that we now turn our attention.

³⁹ Shaffer, Timothy J. "Farmer Discussion Groups, Citizen-Centered Politics, and Cooperative Extension in Jumping into Civic Life: Stories of Public Work from Extension Professionals Paperback – Kettering Foundation August 22, 2018

IV. The Impact of Citizen Learning

A. The Lyceum

Citizen learning movements, as we have seen, professed to have a wider social importance than an evening's diversion or self-improvement. For Holbrook and those who followed the "gospel of the Lyceum," this kind of learning was morally formative, giving neighbors the habits of the heart to judge better on moral and political questions; it was also socially valuable, imbuing attendees with public spiritedness and with a generosity towards members of their community who might belong to different groups or sects. The Public Forum, likewise, professed to form good intellectual habits in its attendees, to moderate their sentiments and promote a tolerance of difference. It, too, sought to promote engagement in common concerns beyond the sphere of private life of economic exchange.

In both movements, we see why it matters that the events be both locally situated and intellectual in content. What made the Lyceums morally formative, as described by contemporaries, was that they brought together a single local community across lines of difference in a shared intellectual endeavor. Counter to our one-off online encounters today, or even sustained online interaction, these were experiences taking place within a wider relational context of shared life. Because the partners in discussion know each other as human beings and encounter one another in various roles in the whole of life, and not merely as a set of viewpoints or opinions, they are more likely to express ideas in a moderate way and to form relationships of trust and compromise, especially when they engage in a

formative institution with a definite set of moral norms around discourse and disagreement. The intellectual content of these movements, furthermore, brought the salutary effects of bridged differences into the realm of ideas and public thinking.

The sociological theory behind these effects will be explored further on, but for now, we will look at historical testimony that Citizen Learning conferred precisely these benefits and in precisely this way. Certain difficulties face the investigator of the Lyceum's impact, since the Lyceum movement was so diffuse and locally organized, kept few official records, and since there is no home today that serves as a clearinghouse for such documentation.⁴⁰ With that being said, historical testimony will have to provide our starting point. In section IV, Part B, evidence from contemporary social science research into similar forms of deliberative discourse across differences will be marshaled in support of the plausibility of the historical testimony of the organizers, participants, and appreciators of these movements.

We have referred previously to the testimony of Thomas Greene on the effect of the early Lyceum on his community, and the very enthusiasm with which the gospel of the Lyceum was taken up in the following decades speaks to its effectiveness in producing the goods Greene identified. Fourteen years

⁴⁰ Ray, Angela "What Hath She Wrought? Woman's Rights and the Nineteenth-Century Lyceum" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Summer 2006, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 183-213 Published by: Michigan State University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940049>

later, one of American history's most famous educators, the abolitionist and whig Horace Mann, testified to the success of the Lyceum in promoting a healthier intellectual culture:

It seems undeniable that the Lyceum class of institutions confers benefits...They win both adults and youth from places where time would otherwise be misspent or worse than misspent. . . .They supply better topics and elevate the tone of conversation. . . .It has often been repeated, by numerous and accurate observers, that in the city of Houston the general topics of conversation and the mode of treating them have been decidedly improved since what may be called the reign of popular lectures."⁴¹

Another observer of the early Lyceum, S.C. Phillips, an education reformer, described their effects thus:

It calls together all who wish to improve themselves. It renders them instrumental in the improvement of others. Who does not perceive that at its weekly meetings society assumes a different form from any which in our community is elsewhere exhibited? . . . Here is none of the extravagant display of fashion, no excess of luxury, no arena for political strife or religious controversy. The Lyceum is dedicated to the single object which all sects and parties may cordially concur.... Is there not presented here a wide scope for the influence of the best principles and the best affections? Who has not experienced that social improvement and enjoyment are blended upon such occasions?"⁴²

⁴¹ Horace Mann, "Third Annual Report of the Board of Education of Massachusetts", *Connecticut Common School Journal*, VII (1840), 140, as quoted in Hayes, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴² S. C. Phillips, "Usefulness of Lyceums", *Introductory Discourses and Lectures (Proceedings) of the American Institute of Instruction*, II (1931), 85, as quoted in Hayes, op. cit., p. 30

Joining the chorus of luminaries praising the Lyceum was the renowned jurist and supreme court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, "When you have said every enthusiastic thing that you may, you will not have half filled the measure of its importance to Boston and New England and the country at large...No noble or more helpful institution exists in America."⁴³

An 1865 report in *The Atlantic Monthly* sought to make an assessment of the state of the lecture system following the war. In the Lyceum, it found the same universal impetus toward intellectual tolerance observed by others, calling it:

The relentless foe of all bigotry in politics and religion, the constant opponent of every form of bondage to party and sect, the practical teacher of the broadest toleration of individual opinion...Now, thanks to the influence of the popular lecture mainly, men have made, and are rapidly making, room for each other. A man may be in the minority now without consequently being in personal disgrace...There certainly has never been a time in the history of America when there was such generous and general toleration of all men.

In addition to this effect, which we will see in later iterations, of promoting broad-mindedness and placidity in the public mind, it also elevated, as the early Lyceum organizers had hoped, the tastes of the public to higher things.

⁴³ As quoted in Cf. Cecil B. Hayes, *The American Lyceum : Its History and Contribution to Education* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), pp. viii.

Another good which may be counted among the fruits of the popular lecture is the education of the public taste in intellectual amusements...They have found something better, — something with more of flavor in the eating, with more of nutriment in the digestion...The quickening social influence of an excellent lecture, particularly in a community where life flows sluggishly and all are absorbed in manual labor, is as remarkable as it is beneficent..⁴⁴

One could go on quoting at length the assessments of contemporary observers and participants that the Lyceum was salutary in lifting the intellectual life of the country, in providing benefits to the community and to the individual mind. What is more than this praise, however, is the actual shape of public conversation at the time, which did really reflect habits of the intellect strikingly different from those that prevail today. Neil Postman, for his part, takes the paradigmatic instance of the Lincoln-Douglass debates to illustrate the change. Unlike the rapid-fire exchange of taglines and personal attacks that characterize our political debates, it was not uncommon for Lincoln and Douglass to speak for three hours straight, apiece.⁴⁵ This style and length of oration was by no means exceptional at that time. What sort of audience must this have been? Postman asks. One with extensive attention spans, with the ability to comprehend very complex sentences and ideas, and one with the requisite knowledge of the issues of the day. Neither were these the elites of Boston or Washington, but the ordinary townspeople of Springfield or Freeport, Illinois.⁴⁶ They were “a diverse audience made up

⁴⁴ Holland, Josiah Gilbert “The Popular Lecture” *The Atlantic Monthly* March 1865 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1865/03/the-popular-lecture/628941/>

⁴⁵ *Supra* 11 pp. 44

⁴⁶ It may be pointed out that the Lyceum held significant cultural sway during the time of the Civil War. Were the Lyceum truly an inspiration to civility and moral formation, it might be asked, how did it coincide with the most cataclysmic internal conflict that America has known? In answering this question, it must be noted that the Lyceum grew up and

of both men and women, ranging in age from the mid-teens through the late fifties or early sixties, and drawn from an occupational spectrum that included artisans, mechanics, farmers, lawyers, teachers, professors, doctors, clergymen, shopkeepers, and merchants, as well as people in a wide range of commercial and service trades.”⁴⁷ In other words, the content of public debates and lectures, with their rhetorical and logical subtlety, their frequent allusions to universally understood classic texts and scriptural references, show an intellectual competence across class and profession.

While Postman attributes this ability to handle complex ideas patiently to a society dominated by the written word, he also acknowledges an *oral* culture concomitant with the “typographical culture” of the day, notably in the Lyceum itself. It is reasonable to think that listeners to the Lincoln-Douglas debates were primed by the prevalent Lyceums in Illinois, by a culture fostered by a sustained history of Lyceum discourse. Indeed, it was at the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield that Lincoln gave his first ever Lyceum speech. In that speech, a passionate indictment of lynching, Lincoln represented “mobocracy” as an immediate threat to the ongoing existence of the country. A parallel mobocracy might be said to have threatened the life of the mind, if Tocqueville was right. It is worth quoting

flourished in the North, rather than the South, which had a distinct civic culture, more aristocratic than township democratic. Its role in public conversation, antebellum, therefore, must be considered in the states and territories where it actually existed. Furthermore, to expect the Lyceum, as valuable as it might have been, to have reconciled the economic, moral, and political contradiction of slavery is to make larger claims than Citizen Learning ever made for itself. Nonetheless, as we note in this essay, the Lyceum did play an important role in the developing moral conversation around slavery in the North.

⁴⁷ See *Supra* 12

some of the language therein, in order to give a picture of the substantive content and rhetorical subtlety which are not to be found in our television pundits or even politicians today:

Another reason...has done much in maintaining our institutions thus far. I mean the powerful influence which the interesting scenes of the revolution had upon the passions of the people as distinguished from their judgment. By this influence, the jealousy, envy, and avarice, incident to our nature, and so common to a state of peace, prosperity, and conscious strength, were, for the time, in a great measure smothered and rendered inactive; while the deep-rooted principles of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge, instead of being turned against each other, were directed exclusively against the British nation. And thus, from the force of circumstances, the basest principles of our nature, were either made to lie dormant, or to become the active agents in the advancement of the noblest cause--that of establishing and maintaining civil and religious liberty.

But this state of feeling must fade, is fading, has faded, with the circumstances that produced it.

“Both the speakers and the audiences were habituated,” Postman writes, “to a kind of oratory that may be described as literary.”⁴⁸ Calling upon the greatest luminaries of media scholarship, from Erasmus to Elizabeth Eisenstein to Walter Ong, for support, Postman argues for the influence of a culture dominated by the written word in the direction of a calmer, more rational, and more analytic style of thought and expression. Not that this is the medium’s only possibility, but that it is its bias. During this time, he writes, “American public discourse...was serious, inclined toward rational argument, and

⁴⁸ *Supra* 11 Pp. 48

presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content.”⁴⁹ The Lyceum intentionally worked to develop this moral ecology, to create a community of practice that made the citizenry more informed, ennobled by learning, and more open to the experience and insights of other cultures.⁵⁰ In this way, oral culture and written culture existed in a sort of symbiosis, where the common American diet of the Bible, Shakespeare, classic literature, and the daily paper, promoted *by* the Lyceum culture, were then digested in community with neighbors in and *through* the Lyceum’s events.

Postman calls this era the Age of Exposition, in that it was a time where a more patient, ordered, and rational kind of discourse prevailed, only to be replaced, in the 20th century, with the Age of Show Business. One must not take these distinctions to be too absolute, and Postman himself acknowledges that the Age of Exposition was not universally rational, measured, and deliberate. It was a time with demagogues, charlatans, and quacks like any other. Likewise, the Age of Show Business still held much intellectual output of serious value. Rather than think of these categories as absolute, one must understand them to describe the predominant *bias* of a period.

At the same time it can be argued that the Lyceum created a public out of the disparate parts of American society. Such indeed is the argument of the historian Donald M. Scott, who wrote that

⁴⁹ *Ibid* pp. 52

⁵⁰ *Supra* 15 pp. 804

In its [the Lyceum's] organization and structure, in its intellectual form and content, and as a public ritual, it transcended the divisions that fragmented the society and culture. The miscellaneous audience, drawn together in public space to an event under neither sectarian or partisan dominion, was thought to be an embodiment of the entire democratic community. Containing young and old, male and female, Methodist and freethinker, Whig and Democrat, farmer, mechanic, merchant, professional man, and tradesman, the "lecture-room [was] neutral ground upon which all parties and conditions ... meet."⁵¹

This process could be described as the cumulative effect of what Thomas Greene and so many others noted, namely, the capacity of the Lyceum to bring together Americans across various pluralistic differences, whether of class, creed, or occupation, and bring them into a common and level field of discussion. Without enforcing consensus or conformity, it thereby created a sense of belonging to a shared democratic community.

It is worth considering another facet of the Lyceum's development before moving on to the world of the Public Forums. This facet was the democratic and equitable nature of the system. It has been noted above that, while women were excluded from town meetings and most political affairs, the Lyceum provided a space where they could participate, as speakers and listeners, in the public life of the mind. The Lyceum became the platform for the North's reconsideration of abolition, and, while pulpits and universities were hesitant to present the likes of Frederick Douglass, he became a frequent attraction at

⁵¹ *Supra* 12

Lyceum halls from Iowa to Massachusetts. In Douglass' own oratory, we find a rhetorical mastery, a complexity of argumentation, and a philosophical substance that stands out against contemporary public discourse today, and a set of allusions to literature, both classical and scriptural, that assume a broad familiarity among the audience with great works of writing.

Not all local Lyceums were welcoming to black members, especially prior to the Civil War, but the Lyceum's leading lights, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Horace Mann, refused to speak at Lyceums that did not admit black audience members, which spurred on integration of audiences. And where black Americans did run into barriers, they developed their own Lyceums, which provided a system for intellectual growth among their own communities.⁵² Amy Matilda Casey, an African American woman, founded the Gilbert Lyceum in Philadelphia, which created a flourishing, integrated intellectual space in that city beginning in 1841. The *Iowa Bystander*, an historic African American weekly paper, shows a thriving local Lyceum among black Iowans, constituting a part of a large, national network where black communities shared poetry, music, philosophy, and literature.⁵³ Black churches, furthermore, organized Lyceums to encourage development of their members intellectually and morally.⁵⁴

⁵² Foner, Philip Sheridan *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900* University of Alabama Press 1997 Pp. 4

⁵³ See, for instance, *Iowa State Bystander*, June 26, 1908, Image 1 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025186/1908-06-26/ed-1/seq-1/> and *Iowa State Bystander*, October 14, 1910, Image 1 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025186/1910-10-14/ed-1/seq-1/> for examples of weekly updates on the Des Moines Negro Lyceum Association

⁵⁴ Isaac, E. Paulette (2014) "Lyceum Guild: A Ministry on a Mission," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 1, Article 4. Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol1/iss1/4>

The relationship between African American communities and the Lyceum is a complex one, in part because Lyceums were locally organized and particular to place. It is not within the scope of this paper to deal with the subject at length, but suffice it to say for now that the Lyceum idea appealed, and had salutary effects, on the intellectual life of Americans across lines of racial and ethnic difference. Furthermore, through becoming the platform for the likes of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Lloyd Garrison, it became a vehicle for a broad cultural reassessment of the ethics of slavery. Indeed, some contemporary observers credited the Lyceum as the origin point for America's turn against the slave system.⁵⁵

B. The Public Forum and Contemporary Research

So much for the Lyceum's impact on the culture of public conversation and common intellectual life. Before considering the downfall of Citizen Learning, let us consider the impact of the short-lived, but still meaningful Public Forum era. The Public Forum professed to have a moderating influence on society. It came up in a period where communism and fascism were live options on the world stage, and proponents of both ideologies were to be found demonstrating, and sometimes fighting in American streets. The editor of the *Des Moines Register*, for his part, took the Public Forum to have immunized the city against such things. An open forum for the city to discuss ideas, he thought, kept fringe ideas from being expressed in the form of angry demonstrations or riots. "Free speech," he

⁵⁵ See for example *Supra* 40

wrote, “thanks to the forums, is taken a little more for granted; is made a little less terrifying; our conservative shiverers shiver less, and our half baked agitators have been a little deflated. There appears to have been a slight degree of immunizing against quack social programs.”⁵⁶ An editorial in the same paper concurred, “The plain implication, to us, is that free discussion has promoted orderliness here, and that the practice of suppressive tactics by the authorities in some other cities has been provocative of disorder and disturbance.”⁵⁷

The organization of the public forum under the federal government, however, had some negative effects. While the Public Forum in Des Moines was a grassroots, privately funded initiative, by the time it had reached other cities, it was funded by state and federal dollars. While this obviously allowed the movement to spread, it also created suspicion among more conservative communities. Especially as subjects took on a more political character, as in Minneapolis, the public forum actually encouraged political antagonism in quarters where the concept of “free exchange” with the Roosevelt administration behind it was already suspect.⁵⁸ To combat this, Studebaker encouraged local, rather than federal control of the forums, and, in spite of this obstacle, the vast majority of attendees reported that the public forums were good for the city and that they ought to continue; in a house to house

⁵⁶ As quoted in *Supra*

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ Reed, Carroll R. and Kohler, Katherine M. Minneapolis Public Forum Minneapolis Minnesota Report 1936-37 United States Office of Education Department of the Interior and Minneapolis Board of Education June 30 1937 pp. 23

survey conducted across diverse neighborhoods in Minneapolis, a staggering 93% of respondents agreed that the forums were beneficial.⁵⁹

In more recent decades, as scholarly interest in questions of bridging polarized societies has increased, a body of research supporting the kind of methods embodied in the Lyceum, Chautauqua, and Forums has emerged. Notable in this milieu is the work of James Fishkin, but a substantial undertaking from Stanford Civic Health Project has given further support.

James Fishkin and his fellow researcher, Jeremy Diamond, have developed a method for studying democratic opinion called deliberative polling. This method grew out of a dissatisfaction with traditional polling as “cognitively threadbare.”⁶⁰ In other words, answers to traditional polls constitute an “off the top of the head” response, or a “phantom opinion” where a respondent has simply checked a box rather than leave the question blank.⁶¹ Deliberative polling was conceived to put more substance behind the polling process by bringing random, representative members of the public from diverse viewpoints together to deliberate at length over a common set of questions. Fishkin has been researching this method since the ‘90s, and has found consistently across over a hundred trials that facilitated, deliberative discussion across difference moderates the opinions of participants across the

⁵⁹ *Ibid* pp. 200

⁶⁰ Fishkin, James, and Luskin, Robert “Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion” *Acta Politica* 2005 40 <https://www.uvm.edu/~dguber/POLS234/articles/fishkin.pdf> pp/ 287

⁶¹ Fishkin, James “Consulting the Public through Deliberative Polling” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* , Winter, 2003, Vol. 22, No. 1 Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3325851> pp.129

political spectrum, significantly changing opinions of participants on the left and the right. We bring this research in here, because what Fishkin has studied is, consciously or not, a replication of the natural forms of the Citizen Learning movements, wherein, in each iteration, neighbors engaged, across lines of difference, in dialogue and deliberation on commonly received information. The conclusions of his research then, lends serious support to the historical claims made for the Lyceum, the forums, and so on.

In Fishkin's well-controlled studies, it was observed that, not only did facilitated, in-person group dialogue significantly change the opinions of participants across the political and socio-economic spectrum, but perhaps even more significantly it meant that "Respondents may not agree on a single answer but they agree about what they are agreeing - or disagreeing - about. Deliberation creates a shared public space for public opinion."⁶² These facilitated dialogues are not designed to produce consensus, but they *do* create a shared space in which further deliberation is possible because respondents actually occupy a shared conceptual space, rather than talking past one another in fruitless non-communication. Deliberation, further, tends not to produce homogenization or polarization among participants, but does produce a more balanced information set among all involved.⁶³

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ *Supra* 57 pp. 40

Summarizing his research, Fishkin says “Left to our own devices, most people either don’t pay much attention [to public affairs] or if they do, they tune into their favorite news sources or their social media feeds and they only hear one side of the argument that is most congenial to them. That’s part of what’s been driving us apart...Most citizens don’t take the time to become anything like ideal citizens or informed citizens. So in a way, this is a way of asking, ‘What if they did? How would democracy be different?’ It turns out it would be very different.”⁶⁴ Fishkin’s co-investigator, Larry Diamond adds “People began to see one another as human beings...They got to know one another and they began to develop something that is so rare in our hyper-polarized society: empathy.”⁶⁵

If this kind of deliberative democracy is so effective, one might wonder if Fishkin and co have tried to scale the practice, and they have. Scholars at Stanford are developing an AI chatbot that can help moderate online deliberations. This, however, should give us pause. Fishkin et al. have studied deliberative polling through extended physical co-presence with a human moderator. Digitizing and automating this process is no minor adjustment, but may in fact change the very nature of the process itself. Arguably, it is the element of shared human endeavor, and not only the sharing of information, that produces the moderation and understanding found in the deliberative polls.

⁶⁴ De Witte, Melissa “Could Deliberative Democracy Depolarize America? Stanford Scholars Think So” <https://news.stanford.edu/2021/02/04/deliberative-democracy-depolarize-america/>

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

While the automated, online dialogue may fail to really replicate Fishkin's findings, something like Fishkin's practices really *did* exist and at a significant scale in American history, namely, in the Lyceum and the Public Forum. While these platforms were concerned with subjects wider than policy alone, it is reasonable to conclude, given their likeness to the structure of deliberative polling, that the testimony of people like Thomas Greene and the editor of the *Des Moines Register* are accurate: bringing people together across difference for sustained conversation on important topics has a moderating effect on all involved, it promotes the increased sharing of knowledge, and builds better understanding.

A grand undertaking from Stanford's Civic Health Project in recent years has reached similar conclusions. They categorize effective interventions into polarized, fractional environments into a four part process: 1) exposure, 2) engagement, 3) education, and 4) elevation. Exposure and engagement have to do with interaction across ideational differences. Education is self-explanatory, and elevation has to do with a call to some future collaboration. Each of these elements is present in the traditional Citizen Learning models. Further supporting the idea of personal contact's salutary benefits, they conclude that interpersonal engagement across lines of difference furthers this depolarizing effect. Consonant findings were identified in Stanford's *Megastudy identifying successful interventions to strengthen Americans' democratic attitudes*.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ See Voelkel, Jan G. Et al. 1

"Megastudy identifying effective interventions to strengthen Americans' democratic attitudes" Stanford University <https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/paper>

Indeed, what these studies work to show through sociological data is in harmony with an existing tradition of sociology including the work of Robert Putnam, Robert Bellah, and others. These scholars have argued that the communal engagement of which the Lyceum and Citizen Learning writ large are a classic type, has a whole host of benefits for social capital and social trust. We will have reason to turn to these authors shortly in considering why organizations like the Lyceum, which seem to deliver certain goods per se, like community bonding and education, disappeared. Going back further still, to Alexis de Tocqueville, perhaps the first major figure in the sociology of American life, we can find a consistent theme of praise for voluntary association as the proper antidote to the ills of individualism and excessive concern with private matters. This voluntary association, when applied to the life of the mind, as I have argued, counters the parallel ills of individualism in thought.

So much, then, for the social impact of Citizen Learning on public dialogue, civic trust, and mutual understanding. We will turn to social dynamics surrounding the disappearance of Citizen Learning and the role that Citizen Learning had in maintaining strong American communities.

What Happened?

I. The American Mind Stays Home

We have dealt thus far with the historical conditions of the rise of Citizen Learning movements and have argued for their positive impact on American public conversation. We turn now to the causes and impact of their disappearance. Those causes are a part of a larger story of the decline of American community life since the 1950s. Contextualizing the loss of Citizen Learning in this broader story, this section will work to show the effects of the trend toward individualism on the life of the mind in particular, arguing that while modern media has ousted Citizen Learning, it has not adequately replaced it.

After the 1940s, we see no successor to the Lyceum, to the Chautauqua, or to the Public Forum. America's common intellectual life, so to speak, goes inside. That is, the life of the mind is individualized and lifted out of community in a new way. In searching for the culprit for the demise of Citizen Learning, the framework set up by Robert Putnam to explain the decline of community engagement more generally is helpful. For Putnam, the chief causes of this decline are media technology, suburban sprawl, and generational change. These are the factors that track most directly with the loss of community engagement, while other proposed factors, like increasing mobility over a

lifetime, lack of home ownership, increased working hours, and so on, simply have not seen a significant change in the period we are looking at, from the 1950s to now.⁶⁷

The Lyceum, as we have suggested, finally petered out alongside the Chautauqua in the late 1920s. Although the Lyceum and Chautauqua faded out as formal institutions in the early 30s, the forums, their successor in many respects, were strong and influential up through the 1940s. Literature on these movements, as far as I can tell, never delves deeply into why these movements disappear, but almost universally agrees on the simple explanation: technological change.

In the mid 1930s, Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, who had been staple forum leaders, took the concept to radio, with *America's Town Meeting of the Air*. All of the major broadcasters sought to provide similarly intellectually stimulating public service programs.⁶⁸ While these offerings might seem high intellectual material compared with what has become most available on cable news and social media today, they nonetheless played a part in displacing the in-person forum for a more passive and more individual experience. William Kieth and Paula Cossart wrote that the forums eventually died “peaceful deaths from lack of interest.”⁶⁹ Communications scholar Tim Shaffer puts it well: with the advent of widespread radio use and the introduction of television, “American life had shifted from

⁶⁷ See *Supra* 15

⁶⁸ *Supra* 1 pp. 237

⁶⁹ Quoted in Shaffer, Tim p p.206

public—and civic—spaces in neighborhoods and communities to newly constructed homes in suburbs and beyond.”⁷⁰

It might be thought that the substance of the Citizen Learning movement persisted on television or through the wonders of social media, but, I will argue, these are categorically different things than the movements we have discussed here, and different in very important ways.

II. The Boob Tube and Beyond: The Media of Individualism

To leave it at that—that Americans found a new, better way to get news, education, and entertainment—would be premature. Citizen learning institutions were not mere vehicles of information or news. Papers and libraries could satisfy that need.⁷¹ Nor were they *simply* lectures; they were always dialogical and always social, something decisively lost in video and audio lectures and debates. In every Citizen Learning event, there was not just a reception of information, but an exchange among participants, whether this was the boisterous interchange of ideas that followed in the crowd after every Lyceum lecture, or the highly structured facilitated discourse of the public forums. If this difference really is so significant and definite, then a sort of substitution of goods is too simple an explanation. Technological change does play a key role in this story, however, to the degree that it does constitute a partial

⁷⁰ Shaffer, Tim “Institutions Supporting Democratic Communication Among Citizens” *National Civic Review* 2017 pp 39

⁷¹ *Supra* 15 pp. 805

replacement, but also to the extent that it shapes cultural behaviors *away* from community intellectual engagement.

Robert Putnam identifies this as perhaps the major positive causal factor in the decline of civic engagement over the past sixty years. Prior to the advent of audiovisual recording devices, he points out, cultural enjoyment was almost always a communal activity. If one wanted to hear a piece of classical music, one had to gather together, in person, with other enthusiasts, to hear amateurs or professionals perform it. If one wanted a lecture, one needed to rub shoulders in an auditorium. If one wanted sports, one had to bundle up and go outside. These technologies, then, have an ineluctably individualizing effect, allowing the consumer (note that this word sounds appropriate in this context, but not in the context of communal culture) to appreciate culture in total isolation. Putnam quotes T.S. Eliot, describing an age in which “millions of people hear the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”⁷²

It was in the decade following the Second World War that TV came to the fore, with television ownership growing from 10 to 90% of households in just the 50s.⁷³ Decade over decade, the amount of time that Americans spent in front of these devices grew, such that viewership had steadily risen 50 percent from the middle of the century to the end.⁷⁴ As TV viewership goes up, Putnam found,

⁷² *Ibid* pp. 217

⁷³ *Ibid* pp. 221

⁷⁴ *Ibid* pp. 222

Church membership, club membership, staying in touch with friends, volunteering, and overall comity go down.⁷⁵ For Putnam, TV, and technologies like it, if they are not the culprit that killed civic engagement, they are a “ringleader” in the process.⁷⁶ This is in part because they give viewers a low friction experience of pseudo-relationship or pseudo-community, where the TV is satisfying enough to keep us from participating in real community, but not an adequate replacement in creating the goods that community participation brings about. This is true if we are watching mere entertainment, but it is perhaps doubly true when it comes to the effects of television on public thinking, which, as Neil Postman argued, is apt to be replaced by the show-business version of public thinking that can be found on cable news. This kind of engagement with ideas is more accessible and has a lower barrier to entry, but it loses the aspect of community, relationships, and exchange, and it bends toward the bias of the medium for spectacle over substance.

One might think that the rise of the internet might produce an adequate replacement for community life. After all, it is not as passive as television. Users can truly participate, converse, and dialogue with others, and it is a medium that lends itself to text, and not only to image. But Putnam, writing in the 90s, already identified the patterns that by now have become familiar as the internet has matured.

⁷⁵ *Ibid* pp. 231-233

⁷⁶ *Ibid* pp. 246

Putnam writes, relying on early internet research, that “because of the paucity of social cues and social communication, participants in computer based groups find it hard to reach consensus and feel less solidarity...they develop a sense of “depersonalization.””⁷⁷ Furthermore, users are more likely to be less inhibited from incivility, because they will not have to encounter those they insult in real life.”⁷⁸ This phenomenon has become so prevalent that the “online disinhibition effect” became a term of art in psychology.⁷⁹

One might think that online video-meeting technology might be the answer, but here, Putnam was likely right to be skeptical. Depersonalization, social distance, and lack of social cues, he noted, were still present even with high quality video.⁸⁰ Studies conducted during the pandemic seem to have supported these early findings cited by Putnam. One such study, published in *Nature*, summarized its findings this way “We found that increased use of digital media-based activities and online social e-meetings correlated with higher feelings of depersonalisation. We also found that the participants reporting higher experiences of depersonalisation, also reported enhanced vividness of negative emotions (as opposed to positive emotions).”⁸¹ Research regarding “learning loss” during the Covid-19

⁷⁷ *Ibid* pp. 176

⁷⁸ *Ibid* pp. 177

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Suler, John (2005) “The Online Disinhibition Effect” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 2(2):184-188 <https://pep-web.org/browse/document/IJAPS.002.0184A?page=P0184>

⁸⁰ *Supra* 15 pp. 177

⁸¹ Ciaunica, A., McEllin, L., Kiverstein, J. *et al.* Zoomed out: digital media use and depersonalization experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Sci Rep* **12**, 3888 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-07657-8>

pandemic further reveals to us the inadequacy of video interaction as a replacement for in-person learning.⁸²

The psychological and sociological data on social media and its effects are complex and the study is relatively young. Nonetheless, it is clear that social media's effects on psychological health for individual users, on community life, and on civic engagement are mixed at best. Not only does digital media interaction miss out on crucial elements of in-person interaction, depersonalizing and disinhibiting users, it also leads to a process of balkanization which leads, not so much to a tolerant diversity but to a homogenous tribalism and radicalism. Online political engagement leads to some bonding social capital but low bridging capital in the context of siloed information ecosystems.⁸³ In other words, it leads people to develop a homogenous online environment in terms of relationships and information, where liberals and conservatives increasingly live in separate worlds of information and sociality.

More significant, perhaps, than any of the particular debates in social science, the fact remains that the social trends observed by Putnam at the end of the Millennium have continued. Cross party comity, feelings of warmth across party, ticket splitting, and lack of trust in government are on a consistent

⁸² Turner, Cory "6 things we've learned about how the pandemic disrupted learning" National Public Radio June 22, 2022

⁸³Hawdon, J., Ranganathan, S., Leman, S., Bookhultz, S., Mitra, T. (2020). Social Media Use, Political Polarization, and Social Capital: Is Social Media Tearing the U.S. Apart?. In: Meiselwitz, G. (eds) Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Ethics, User Behavior, and Social Network Analysis. HCII 2020. Lecture Notes in Computer Science(), vol 12194. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49570-1_17

downward trend, and about as low as they have been in a century.⁸⁴ Social trust,⁸⁵ club membership,⁸⁶ marriages,⁸⁷ church membership,⁸⁸ and social solidarity continues to plummet.⁸⁹ In other words, since the advent of the internet, we have grown more fractured, lonely, and distrustful, not less.

While engagement through social media may be better than total isolation, it does not constitute a replacement for in-person community. Robert Putnam, in his 2020 book with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, the *Upswing*, notes that, while the internet is good at organizing mass demonstrations, it is less clear whether it engages people in the long-term, committed work of community life. To the degree that social media *is* useful, however, in bringing back the kind of social capital that matters, it will be in facilitating local and in-person communities. While the internet has countless uses in the exchange of information, it cannot replace the elements that define local community: physical encounter, shared place, and shared life.

Without this orientation beyond itself, social media risks becoming the perfect technology for the intellectual world that Tocqueville feared for America. If our cultural proclivities mean that we are apt to look for authority in the dominant popular mood of our peers, then the mobocratic pile-ons of social media are the perfect temptation for us. If we are apt to become too individual in our thinking,

⁸⁴ Putnam, Robert, with Garrety Romney, Shaylyn *The Upswing* Simon and Schuster pp. 88-98

⁸⁵ *Ibid* pp. 160

⁸⁶ *Ibid* pp. 125

⁸⁷ *Ibid* pp. 149

⁸⁸ *Ibid* pp. 135

⁸⁹ *Ibid* pp. 162

then a social and intellectual world algorithmically tailored to suit our existing biases, interests, and vices, is apt to make us truly unbalanced. If social media is to be a tool for bringing us outside of ourselves, rather than another means of shutting us inside, it must be in virtue of bringing us into real-world, sustained, communal commitments with those who are different from us. On its own, social media lacks the resources to build the bridging and bonding capital we need.

Citizen learning went the way of the rest of civic life in the 20th century, which is to say, it saw a sudden and sharp decline. Although there are still places in America where you can find communal intellectual investigation—local reading groups, book clubs, and institutions like the Chautauqua in New York or various local cultural centers—there has never been a replacement for Citizen Learning on a scale meaningfully comparable to what preceded the mid 20th century. Due to the nature of these institutions, which depend on verbal exchange, audio visual recording technology and the platforms of the internet have played an especially definite role in their decline.

This, I contend, is why the forums saw a more immediate disappearance than other forms of community life once TV became ubiquitous. The forum was *about* the exchange of ideas in a way that local sports leagues, service organizations, churches, and so on were more about activities, and ideas are more easily lifted on to other media than other activities. Thus radio and television could be seen as replacements for Lyceums and Forums so long as those institutions were thought of as places where an

individual could receive information. What was lost, however, was what was unconsciously, perhaps, the heart and soul of these movements, which was precisely the *exchange* of ideas with one's *neighbors*.

For a time, Americans could find this dialogical exchange in service clubs, fraternal organizations, and churches, which continued to gather Americans in great numbers to engage in consistent and sustained dialogue with their neighbors around common concerns and pressing questions of the day. Volunteer and service organizations would, in time, give way to the practice of simply donating to philanthropic or public interest groups at a distance, churches would lose membership to individualized spirituality, and participatory sports would lose out to more passive entertainments, but Citizen Learning was, so to speak, the canary in the mine.

The dialogue available on digital successor platforms whether in forums, on twitter, or through video meetings, are no replacement for the irreducible experience of physical reaction or the long term commitment to a heterogenous community rooted in a single place. None of this is to say that developments in communications technology have not been useful or added value. They create a high level of access to information of all kinds and prove to be a powerful educational tool in many respects. It is to say, however, that the elements of encounter, physical contact, and long-term community are both critical to healthy intellectual life and not replaceable through digital means.

III. Sprawling Out: Suburbanization and Privacy

The unprecedented change that came about in midcentury in the world of media technology, which Putnam and others have ably tied to the decline of community participation, was accompanied by a similarly impressive change in the structural organization of American community life. If digital media technology became the perfect tool for individualizing our consumption of information and entertainment, changes in urban design and development made Americans into the perfect audience for such technology.

Prior to the domination of urban life by the automobile, cities were generally designed with greater density and loose zoning regulations. In other words, the needs of daily life were generally within walking distance, and this meant that the people with whom one interacted civically were also those seen at the market, at church, at the park, or in the town square. Community had integrated quality that was sustained over long periods of time.

Robert Putnam points out that urban living itself is associated with lower rates of civic engagement⁹⁰, and it is undeniable that urbanization has been on the rise for the last 70 years. In the 1950s some 45 percent of Americans lived in non metro areas,⁹¹ and as of the 2020 census, that figure was at 14%.⁹²

Americans have long been urbanizing, but the decisively new factor of the latter half of the 20th

⁹⁰ *Ibid* pp. 205-206

⁹¹ *Ibid* pp. 208

⁹² *See* 2020 Census Results,

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html>

century was the rate at which they were *suburbanizing*.⁹³ Suburban counties now make up 55% of the population to Urban counties' 32% and rurals' 14%.⁹⁴ In the '40s, fewer than 20% of Americans were suburban, but the '60s, that number had bloomed to over 30%⁹⁵ on a trendline that would continue to the present.

Suburbanization became, as Lewis Mumford said, *a collective effort to live a private life*;⁹⁶ and indeed, suburban layouts are associated with weaker bonding and bridging forms of relationship. Picture the suburban street: silent during the day while workers endeavor in various other parts of the city, populated at night by people shut in their homes, in front of their screens, having been transported from places of work or leisure in private carriages with darkened windows. They eat and shop at impersonal chain restaurants and stores and worship at the church that suits their taste best, not the one in the neighborhood, if they worship at all, which is now more unlikely than not.⁹⁷

⁹³ *Supra* 15 pp. 209

⁹⁴ By [Kim Parker](#), [Juliana Menasce Horowitz](#), [Anna Brown](#), [Richard Fry](#), [D'Vera Cohn](#) and [Ruth Igielnik](#) "Demographic and economic trends in urban, suburban and rural communities" Pew Research May 22 2018 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/demographic-and-economic-trends-in-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>

⁹⁵ 26.2: The Rise of the Suburbs The American Yawp, Stanford University Press Last updated Jun 26, 2022

[https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/National_History/Book%3A_U.S._History_\(American_YAWP\)/26%3A_A_The_Affluent_Society/26.02%3A_The_Rise_of_the_Suburbs](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/National_History/Book%3A_U.S._History_(American_YAWP)/26%3A_A_The_Affluent_Society/26.02%3A_The_Rise_of_the_Suburbs)

⁹⁶ See *Supra* 15 pp. 209, quotes

⁹⁷ Jones, Jeffrey M. "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time" Gallup <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx> March 29, 2021

Robert Bellah and his coauthors documented the move away from local place-based heterogeneous community and toward lifestyle enclaves, toward communities tailor-made to suit individual self-expression,⁹⁸ rather than those simply given to us by family, history, and circumstance. The quality which has come to define patterns of online engagement, then, had already seen a precursor in the physical world. This was made possible in part by America's automobile driven mode of design, which allowed individuals a greater level of autonomy over how they engaged in community. Individuals could select enclaves of the like minded,⁹⁹ shop in one part of town, work in another, and enjoy themselves in yet another, thus making their pattern of life one of self-expression rather than integrated communal relationship.

The symbiotic effect between suburban life and individualized media should be clear, namely, that as families and individuals become increasingly spatially cut off from integrated community life with their neighbors, they become more apt consumers of entertainment and information through digital technology, and indeed more likely to seek social fulfillment through those same devices. City life, too, can have deleterious effects on community engagement, inasmuch as renting is more common than home ownership, and renters are less likely to be engaged in community life, because they are generally more mobile and less likely to invest in long term community activity. Apartment complexes, likewise, are conducive to privacy, typically with a shortage of common space (unless they are a luxury enclave)

⁹⁸ See Bellah, Robert et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* Harper Collins 1986

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

and with a purpose-built privacy in separate cells. Americans in 2021 averaged about 4 hours a day in mobile phone use,¹⁰⁰ plus an additional 3 hours of TV time.¹⁰¹ Assuming that this use is likely outside of the 8 hour work day, we can conclude that *Americans generally are spending the majority of their daily free time in this situation, that is, inside closed doors, in front of a screen.*

The effects of the suburbanizing, privatizing trend on Citizen Learning institutions is of a piece with their general effect on community institutions. Gone are the days when a Lyceum hall occupied the central part of the town or neighborhood, where neighbors would naturally congregate at the end of the day. No such central places exist in most of our cities, no community watering hole, no town hall, no stump for stump speakers. As the exchange of ideas was lifted out of the local hall and into the air by technology, the very infrastructure that supported the physical hall disappeared.

IV. An Individualising Culture

In their landmark text *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, the sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues argued that Americans had, by and large, lost a moral language for articulating or understanding their lives beyond a conceptual framework of individual self-fulfillment. Through thousands of interviews, they found that the subjects of their study, even

¹⁰⁰ Avery, Dan Americans spent a third of waking hours on mobile devices in 2021, report finds *CNET*, <https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/americans-spent-a-third-of-waking-hours-on-mobile-devices-in-2021-report-finds/>

¹⁰¹ Average hours per day spent in selected leisure and sports activities by age, Charts related to the latest "[American Time Use Survey](https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/activity-leisure.htm)" news release <https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/activity-leisure.htm>

where they were community or other-oriented, lacked language to understand that orientation. They had become the embodiment of Tocqueville's atomic American—detached from religious tradition and a shared philosophical framework. But that did not stop them from establishing an authority and common parlance in the form of therapeutic language. Bellah and his colleagues argued that this lack of moral formation would lead to a kind of incoherence about the common good in American society, which would become a collection of individuals seeking out private fulfillment through self-expression.

What Bellah et al. found in their interviews is matched by the data compiled by Putnam and Romney in their recent book the *Upswing*. Not only have Americans been disengaging from community life, but they have been thinking of themselves more individually, less in terms of a “we” than of “I;”¹⁰² as the cultural salience of responsibility decreases, the salience of identity rises.¹⁰³ “In virtually every case, “ Putnam and Romney write, “the salience of ideas and themes that emphasize individualism has surged up to replace the ideas and themes that emphasize unity , agreement, association, cooperation, compromise.”¹⁰⁴ A major cause, for Putnam, of the general decline in community life has been “generational change.” That is, a civically active series of generations, from the Gilded Age until the Baby Boomers, were very active in community, had strong social ties, strong levels of trust and so on, and, with each successive generation, those qualities have decreased. Putnam charts how successive

¹⁰² *Supra* 83 pp. 198

¹⁰³ *Ibid* pp. 192-193

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* pp. 193

generations of college students have increasingly placed an emphasis on wealth and self-fulfillment over community based goals.¹⁰⁵

Putnam attributes this, in part, to the hardship of the early 20th century, when economic woes and World Wars bound Americans together in common cause, but he also attributes it to the grassroots efforts of moral reformers at the turn of the century. From the social gospel, to service clubs, to Catholic Social Teaching, to reformers like Jane Addams, Dorothy Day—even Theodore Roosevelt and Eugene V. Debs—there was an emphasis on communal life that was a backlash to the individualism and social darwinism of the gilded age, an effort to make moral the changes wrought by industrialisation. A relative comfort, economic success, and peace, then, might be thought to play some role in complacency about civic and communal life.

Bellah and Putnam alike note the significant way in which the word “community” has changed its own valence since the 1960s. A word that once referred to your immediate neighbors, with whom you shared daily life, came to refer to interest groups or lifestyle groups. Thus we hear referred to the “star wars fan community,” “the medical community,” the “skiing community,” or broad identity groups like “the hispanic community,” or “elderly community.” What is striking about these groups, however, is their necessary homogeneity and their distance from actual, concrete connection. These are communities abstractly put together to advance a general set of interests or express a set of aesthetic

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* pp. 260,273

tastes, but they are not, as Bellah et al. put it, communities of moral calling, that is, actually local communities where members work together in relationships of moral development.¹⁰⁶

V. Conclusion

The Citizen Learning institutions were communities of moral calling. Within the context of the Citizen Learning groups, Americans came under the influence of communal norms, and by virtue of them, learned patience, generous and analytic listening, and the ability to handle ideas well. I have argued in this paper that Citizen Learning institutions provided an antidote to Tocqueville's fear that public conversation in a democracy is liable to become mob thinking. I have argued that these institutions elevated the tone of public conversation and were conducive to civic concord in a pluralized society. And I have argued that, in the wake of their loss and in the triumph of mental individualism that has ensued, we have seen an increase in individualism, partisanship, political mistrust, and superficiality of thinking.

In the individualizing world we have described as emerging since the 1960s, we can observe a growing risk of what the book of Genesis calls a confusion of tongues.¹⁰⁷ Without common communities for the exchange of ideas, we risk balkanizing ever more into a profusion of groups, each with its own set

¹⁰⁶ *Supra* pp. 97

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 10:1-11:25

of information, its own social world, its own language, its own radically different conception of the good life, and its own vision of the good. In such a context, communication, agreement, and compromise could become difficult or impossible, and so too would substantive progress toward the common good.

Putnam and Bellah identified the degree to which eroding social capital and the loss of a shared moral sense hampered the ability of Americans to work together for the good of their communities, and how it has made them lonelier, sadder, and more aimless. In addition to the loss of social capital, we have seen an erosion of common intellectual ground and a splintering, factionalizing, and polarization of interests. Americans are not only drifting apart, one from another, but drifting apart philosophically and ideologically in new and unprecedented ways. Like droplets of oil in water, we are racing away from one another in isolated bubbles.

This, I suggest, is the result of the individualizing of the life of the American mind. Due to technological and structural patterns coming to greatest prominence after the Second World War, I have argued, Americans have withdrawn from community life and common intellectual exploration. The result is not distant from what Tocqueville described as the consequence he feared for public thinking should democracy's individualizing tendency not be checked by intentional efforts at community: fractionalized conformity, with a smattering of radicalized niches on the fringes. When the mind goes inside, it doesn't withdraw from thinking, nor does it withdraw from seeking out an

authority to tell it what to think. As the old communal forms of authority, for better or for worse, have lost their power, the new community of authority is the online crowd. As a result we face the two-edged sword of conformity and fracture, where internet users become more and more like the geographically diffuse but ideologically similar groups to which they belong.

Local, in-person Citizen Learning institutions are no panacea, but they may constitute one thread in the fabric of the community that could weave together some of our present divides. In the context of common conversation on the important philosophical questions of how to live together, in the shared investigation of history, in the shared engagement with literature, Citizen Learning offers the opportunity to develop new habits of the heart, habits that can allow neighbors to disagree fruitfully, to moderate toward one another, to find places of agreement, and to check one another's imbalances and intellectual biases. It offers the opportunity to build friendships, build bridges, and strengthen bonds through the shared pursuit of knowledge. It does so precisely in the field of intellectual exchange, upon which neighbors have the opportunity to seek after the truth of things - to begin, at least, to develop shared understanding, shared language, and a shared frame of reference that will enable work for the common good. To imagine such institutions is not to imagine a fairy tale, but to remember something that actually existed in our own history and that might exist today.

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