

Don Michael Randel

The public good: knowledge as the foundation for a democratic society

While we have much to celebrate, our democracy needs continuing attention.¹ We might well take the view that it needs more attention now than it has in some time. Consider the terms “the public good,” “knowledge,” and “a democratic society,” for example. Who could possibly be opposed, in principle, to these concepts? But they are incomplete as we have assembled them and require a deeper foundation worthy of serious discussion.

Let’s start with knowledge. A professor of philosophy in my undergraduate years once said that in answering an examination question on topic X it is never wrong to begin by saying, “That depends on what you mean by X.” Indeed, any discussion of knowledge *does* depend on

what you mean by *knowledge*. Even without plunging into a deep discussion of epistemology and post-epistemological views of what the term might mean, we would almost certainly wish to question the role in a democratic society of what a good many people would insist on calling knowledge. What, for example, about divine revelation? Our democracy protects the right of people to believe in divine revelation and to regard that revelation as knowledge. But some of the most contentious issues before this country today are rooted in clashes over whether what some regard as divinely revealed knowledge can be the foundation for laws that must be obeyed by everyone in a democracy. And no one viewing the history of Christianity should feel entitled to single out Islam or any other religion for criticism in this context.

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Perhaps what we mean by *knowledge*, as a foundation for a democratic society, is instead the product of something like the scientific method, the set of propositions that we regard as accurately describing the world outside of ourselves – the “real world,” in short. Here again let us avoid a deeper discussion of philosophy that might wish to explode this whole notion. Let us instead settle for common sense. We probably mean something more like the phrase used by the American Philosophical Society, namely, “useful knowledge”: the set of propositions that work for going about the world, making things, causing certain things to happen.

This then raises the question, useful for what purposes? Today, and perhaps even in Benjamin Franklin’s day, the answer to this question is most likely, in one way or another, “To keep the American economy stronger than any other.” A close corollary is “To keep the national defense strong so as to keep our democracy strong so as to keep our economy strong.” Advancing efforts toward this end, the National Academies recently published *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. The report argues powerfully for increased investments in education and research in science and technology:

The United States takes deserved pride in the vitality of its economy, which forms the foundation of our high quality of life, our national security, and our hope that our children and grandchildren will inherit ever-greater opportunities. That vitality is derived in large part from the productivity of well-trained people and the steady stream of scientific and technical innovations they produce. Without high-quality, knowledge-intensive jobs and the innovative enterprises that lead to discovery and

new technology, our economy will suffer and our people will face a lower standard of living.²

Economic strength, which is to say global competitiveness, and national security are the twin motives for enhancing the production of knowledge, and this will enable us to remain free and democratic. (Medical knowledge, which is not entirely unrelated to economic strength and competitiveness, is the only other kind of useful knowledge that has anything like so strong a claim on the national attention.) If you doubt that these are the principal motives for the production of knowledge – or at least the motives most likely to gain traction in this country – consider some of the kinds of useful knowledge in which we do not invest. Everyone knows that the design of acoustically superior concert halls is far from being an established science. I have long feared that this is principally because the design of acoustically superior concert halls has never been seen as essential to the national defense. Perhaps if we can relate concert halls to the national defense we can make the case to the American people that perfecting acoustics in those halls is a matter of national concern.

This instrumental view of knowledge is surely not sufficient, however, and we ought to want to make that clear. Even if we were content with this as our operating definition, it would be insufficient as the foundation of a democratic society. This has to do with our beliefs about the uses to which any kind of useful knowl-

2 National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine, *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007), 1.

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edge can be put. The production of useful knowledge reached extraordinary heights in Germany in the second quarter of the twentieth century and in the former Soviet Union in the third; in neither case did it provide a sufficient foundation for a democratic society. In short, useful knowledge can be employed in the commission of the most heinous crimes and in the maintenance of the most repressive governments.

There, too, are some kinds of knowledge that we believe should not be accumulated in the first place because they are nobody's business. The right to privacy is fundamental, and yet the invasion of that privacy is sometimes thought to be justified on grounds of the protection of our democratic society – as we know only too well these days.

Another implication of the term *knowledge*, in relation to the foundation of a democratic society, is that knowledge and truth are somehow linked – that is, it cannot be knowledge in at least the instrumental sense if it is not true and subject to some reasonable verification. Thus, one should not lie. Democracy fails if the citizenry is not told the truth. We have too many cases readily at hand in which the citizenry simply has been lied to or in which powerful pressure has been placed on science to dilute or suppress altogether its public-policy findings. In a democratic society we must insist on living by “prodigious honesties,” in the words of the poet Richard Wilbur.

Now we come closer to what is missing when we say that knowledge is the foundation of a democratic society. The narrow, instrumental view of *knowledge* that often dominates our thinking needs at a minimum to be expanded or supported by *ideas* and *values* about which we may also reason, and which may even

be thought useful, but which are ultimately taken as axiomatic. Ultimately, the foundation of a democratic society is a shared *commitment* to a democratic society and all that it entails about the rights and duties of individuals. This commitment to the rights of individuals arises not out of the application of instrumental reason to the production of knowledge; it is more nearly a matter of faith or belief, often in the face of cruel reality. Above all, this commitment is of a piece with love, the manifest power of which I would decline to attribute to its mere usefulness.

This commitment leads us to the matter of the common good and its relationship to a democratic society. Unfortunately, that relationship is not unproblematic. To the extent that democracy values, indeed celebrates the rights of individuals to their own difference, it makes more difficult widespread agreement about the commitment to any particular definition of the common good – at least any definition that would be the basis for collective action. This difficulty is very much before us today, and Tocqueville warned of it long ago. The citizenry lapses into a complacency about the collectivity on the one hand and a preoccupation with individually defined spheres of identity on the other. Low voter turnout is evidence of the former; the inability of public institutions to take forceful action on pressing social problems is often evidence of the latter.

In the face of this, a strong economy and the national defense are simply the lowest common denominators to which a broad appeal can be made, never mind the great many devils in the details even here. The danger for people who care about the life of the mind is that in making the argument for knowledge as the foundation of a democratic society in instrumental terms, we adopt the modes

of thought of the enemy, as it were. A strong economy is of course a good thing – if we can figure out how to distribute the wealth humanely – and a strong national defense is of course essential – if we can figure out who our enemies really are and how to deal with them by means that need not always include the force of arms. But we ought to produce knowledge in our society simply because as human beings we cannot help but do so. The ultimate foundation of any society ought to be the human imagination, honed to the greatest degree and in the company of its faithful companion, curiosity.

Our failure to maintain the national investment in the physical sciences has, without a doubt, been myopic for all kinds of highly practical reasons. But every bit as tragic has been to hear people in high places sometimes contemplate the possibility of merely ceding U.S. leadership in high-energy physics to the Europeans, for example. This is as contrary to the spirit of this nation and to the foundation of its democracy as anything could possibly be. We ought to want to build the International Linear Collider in this country simply because we are desperate to know what it would enable us to learn; job creation in Illinois and elsewhere should be strictly secondary. Let us all remember American physicist Robert Wilson's remarks to Congress when asked about the contribution of the Fermilab accelerator to the national defense. He said it would be among the things that made the country worth defending. If we were in fact the most imaginative nation on the face of the globe, much else that we worry about today would be far along the way toward solution.

What to do about this? By all means let us strengthen the teaching of, and re-

search in, science and mathematics at all levels. But the study of what makes these undertakings truly worthwhile; the study of the values that support the production of knowledge and its proper application in society; the study of, contemplation of, and exploration of what it means to be a human being and why and how we should want to organize our lives in relation to one another around the globe: these are the domains of the humanities and the arts. And talk about underinvestment!

This is not even principally about money, because the amounts in question are so utterly pathetic. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts together made grants of just over \$200 million in 2007. There are defense contractors who have grave difficulty keeping track of amounts so small. We should spend more at the national level certainly, but also locally in K – 12 education, where the decline in arts programs has been precipitous. Above all we need to talk and act as if we truly believe that the humanities and the arts matter and underlie the deepest foundations of a democratic society. Thinking about such things does not really cost much money; it requires making the space for them in our national life and then trying to live by what we find there, no matter the method or the size of our contribution to the gross domestic product. William Carlos Williams, in one of his longer poems, helps make clear what is at stake:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

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Later in the same poem he writes,

Only the imagination is real!
I have declared it
time without end.

If a man die
it is because death
has first
possessed his imagination.
But if he refuse death –
no greater evil
can befall him unless it be the death of love
meet him
in full career.

Then indeed
for him
the light has gone out.
But love and the imagination
are of a piece,
swift as the light
to avoid destruction.³

Let us strive to find the common good among our differences. Let us lay and maintain the foundation of a democratic society. Let knowledge grow. But may knowledge be amply and generously imagined, useful at times to be sure, but grounded always in a compassionate and restless human spirit.

³ William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* (London: Agenda, 1963).