

have been patient, insightful, and extremely helpful. Olivia Eliasoph Lichterman said "Beep," and "roar," and asked really tough questions like, "Why do regular trees lose their leaves in winter and pine trees don't?"

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The mysterious shrinking circle of concern

A puzzle: "close to home"

Lisa, a volunteer with an anti-drugs group, circled over and over again to the topic of the local nuclear battleships base¹ during an interview with me:

There's probably at least four battleships over there at all times. You can *see* them ... they're black, and there's scaffolding on them and stuff ... They're dangerous ... scary ... I mean, half those shipyard workers are on dope all the time. It makes me nervous. There's a park on the top of the hill. They come up and smoke dope at lunch and go back to work on the battleship. They have spills quite often. I mean, we don't know about it, but my husband was on a battleship working, so I know.

Another interviewee, Carolyn, lived closer to the base. A chemical plant just upstream from her had had a huge spill a few months earlier; oil lapped up onto her house, which jutted out on stilts over the bay. "The beach was *covered* with oil. You could see it on the rocks and in the water. It was sad," she told me as we sat at her kitchen table with her eighteen-year-old son, in front of a picture window with an eye-level view of the nuclear battleship base and the glimmering bay, under a big sky of rainclouds streaked with sunlight. Every twenty minutes or so a battleship slipped by.

When I asked Lisa and Carolyn whether they would get involved in doing something about the battleships or the oil spill problems, they both said, in separate interviews, that those issues were "not close to home," and did not really "touch" them personally. And they both said, in almost identical words, "and anyway, what would I do, bomb the place?" referring to the chemical plant and the battleship base. Carolyn said it twice (another interviewee said, "What am I gonna do – burn it down?").

Instead, they were both involved in an anti-drugs group, in which I had been participating along with them for several months. Why were they involved in this group? What would they think of some of the other groups

I studied – one that worked on nuclear issues and another that dealt with environmental issues? I asked the anti-drugs volunteers these questions, in a group interview. Six members sat in a shabby, linoleum-floored public room on the spindly fold-up kind of chairs that help make public meetings so uncomfortable. All agreed about their motives: “It’s close to home,” and “do-able.” One said that compared to nuclear issues, “this [the drug] issue’s a lot closer to home.” There was a chorus of agreeable murmurs from the others. He described the time his house was robbed, which he assumed had “something to do with drugs. So, it’s a lot more immediate than nuclear war. You know, that’s an important issue, too, but – ” and here, Lisa filled in, weaving together themes of “close to home” and power: “that just seems sort of distant. I can’t quite get to those people, to deal with – or even nuclear power. Shoot, with where we live, we can’t be too allergic to nuclear power. There’s six or seven plants on battleships here.”

Another member soon summed up: “It has to do with something that’s close to you. See, the nuclear stuff is all around us but it’s not in our backyard, or across the street, whereas *this is*,” referring to the drug problem.

Would they consider getting involved in doing something about a foreign policy issue? Carolyn said, “I would much rather look for something close to home, close to me.” But, she chuckled, she was very concerned about three whales that had been in the news that week, trapped in Arctic ice with an international rescue force trying to dig them out. “Now, whales, they were far away, but they’re *animals*,” she laughed, noticing that the habitual phrase “close to home” did not exactly fit. Lisa added, “You know, there’s only three of them, there are not thousands of them.” So, it was “do-able”: there were only three. Carolyn agreed, continuing, “But they’re defenseless and, I don’t know, I would rather help closer to home, I don’t know, that’s just – and then the other is just so large, political, and – ” and she trailed off.

Was this group unusual, in implying that whales on the North Pole “impact our lives” more than nuclear subs in our front yards? that down the street or on our front deck is not “close to home”? No. One interviewee explicitly translated “close to home,” showing how it worked to prevent discouragement, by making difficult structural problems invisible. George, a member of a country-western dance club I studied, lived in the same town as the volunteers. One cold rainy weekday when he was out of work, I interviewed him with his housemate, at home – about two miles from the proposed site of a toxic incinerator, four miles from the nuclear sub base, and a few blocks from a toxic landfill.

George also said he would work on something if it was “personal, close by, in my neighborhood.” On the proposed incinerator and the nuclear issue, he said he would get involved if it were “close to home.” “I wouldn’t want

a nuclear base in Amargo,” he said. His housemate Jolene laughed; George paused, and said there probably already was one. Jolene lit into him, saying “Think about it!” and “Do something about it – it’s *in* your backyard!” but then she felt sorry for him, and explained, “the point is, OK, I know what you’re saying.” I asked, “So, what’s he saying?”

“Well, it’s like: what do you think about nuclear – *all* the junk going on. They’re gonna, they’re gonna push a button while we could all just go up in – you know, what are you gonna – ?” She shrugged, completing the sentence.

Why did the volunteers say the nuclear battleships and environmental problems were not close to home? All were within a twenty-minute drive that could pass through a nuclear battleship base containing a thirty-acre toxic pit that the Environmental Protection Agency called “dangerous”; an Air Force site that shipped arms supplies all over the world, was rumored to contain nuclear waste materials and weapons, and was slated for a Superfund cleanup; two other toxic military cleanup sites; six chemical plants – there were four major fires or spills in the two and a half years of my fieldwork; a planned toxic waste incinerator; and two other big plants eight miles upstream that emitted carcinogenic and ozone-depleting chemicals. During my fieldwork stint, various environmental and disarmament groups held demonstrations at several of these plants. As one volunteer pointed out, nearly all the fish had died, and all the fishing clubs had died, too. The area was about eight miles downstream from two other factories that, along with several other plants, emitted cancer-causing or ozone-depleting chemicals. It would be hard to convince anyone that this area did not have some political, military, and environmental issues worth at least discussing, even if the conclusion of the discussion was that nothing should change. Certainly, these issues were not literally “distant,” or “removed.” Literally, these problems were in their backyards.

A second puzzle: “speak for yourself” in public

In every meeting of another local group, which had organized to oppose a toxic incinerator, someone raised the question of where toxic waste *should* go, saying explicitly that members were not just involved for their own families’ safety. Every one of the six core members of the group raised the question this way, some quite often. Typical was Maryellen, a mother of two, speaking at the very first meeting I attended: “If it’s not our kids, it’ll be someone else’s kids. People always ask, ‘Well, yeah, but what are you gonna do with all that toxic waste?’ That’s something we should talk about, since it’s not just a local issue. We shouldn’t just fight off the thing to have some other community that’s less organized get stuck with it!”

In these meetings, and in casual conversations, broad political questions were foremost – the activists talked about where waste should go, why so much waste is produced (especially by the US military), what governmental policies could prevent corporations from producing more waste, why not to believe corporation or government statements about the proposed plant's safety, why to be in principle against incineration-for-profit.

In front of the press, though, group members spoke completely differently. Suddenly, the activists presented themselves as panicked "moms," and self-interested property owners. The discourse would often shift the very moment the reporters turned on the cameras and microphones, and shift back again the moment the cameras and microphones went off. One activist said to every reporter she met, "She's a new mom and I'm an old mom. That's why we're in it. We're worried." She had been an activist since the civil rights movement, but she always presented herself as a "Mom" in more formal settings.

In fact, activists were not simply "defending themselves," as reporters and officials assumed; many believed that citizen participation was important, and found this issue to be a good one for illustrating a general principle to the rest of the community: that grassroots political participation is a better way of running the government than behind-the-scenes corporate control. Of course, they may *also* have been worried about their families or property values, but in casual conversations amongst themselves, these were not salient.

Introducing a petition drive to a bank of reporters, another member, Eleanor, repeated the pattern of privately voicing broad concern and publicly silencing her broad concerns. Publicly, she presented her motives like this:

I care about the people living here, and I especially care about the children that are growing up in this unique and wonderful place.

I'm also a concerned property owner. The only thing I own of any substantial economic value is the home I own in downtown Evergreen City. And what's gonna happen to this investment when I have to sell it to support myself for my older years, older than I am even now? Nobody's gonna come banging on my door to buy a lovely home, with a lovely view, with some lovely toxic pollutants in town.

But the very moment the cameras and mikes went off, she turned to me and a fellow activist to say, "This is getting to be more than a concern to me; it's getting to be a matter of the lives of the future generations here." Suddenly, instead of speaking only for herself, she could speak for "future generations"; instead of speaking only of self-interest, she could speak of her usual broad concerns.

Later, Eleanor told me, "My mind goes blank when I get in front of an audience like that. I just sit there and forget what to say." What exactly

"blanked out" of her mind? In the context of speaking to the press, she "forgot" what she said about "the future generations." In front of the press, she could not say that she had been involved in successful grassroots campaigns for decades, but listen to the stories she told me while we were driving through town one day. She had an inspiring story about every spot on the landscape: "See that creek? We organized and saved that from being covered over in the '60s when the country thought that creeks were bad. We worked hard on that one." And, as we wheeled around the corner,

Over there, on the other side of the river, that's where there used to be some industry that left mercury in the land and water. And our kids [she herself did not have children, but talked of all children as if they were her own] go fishing off the pier there and you could sometimes see the mercury in the fish. And years after the industry left, horses started mysteriously dying over across the river. Then they sold off the horses and now they're building new tract houses there, on top of the stuff [George, from the Buffalo, lived in one of them]. Up river from that is the old ChemFill dump, of course. At least we finally got rid of them!

In the context of speaking to the press, she "forgot" what she said about "the future generations." She also forgot what she and others had been saying in meetings for over a year, that the government and corporations should invest in research to prevent the production of toxic waste. She forgot that the local group was part of a loose national network whose project was to change industrial policies. One day, an organizer from a national environmental group came to give a short presentation about his group's lobbying effort, to pass laws that would make corporations minimize production of toxic waste. Eleanor gratefully exclaimed,

I applaud your coming here. It really solves a lot of problems for me. When people ask where should it go, I'm hard pressed for an answer . . . It would make us fragmented, it would be community against community, one saying "Put it there," and the other saying "Put it there." This gives us an answer: "It shouldn't go anywhere."

And she enthusiastically nodded and agreed when another member said, "You [national lobbyists] are saying that it's not incumbent on us to come up with a national level solution. We just have to work locally, and know that you're working on the national level." After a discussion about the connection between local activism and national policy, the lobbying group representative summed up: "We're helping make your short-term goals have long-term consequences. While you're here, defending yourselves, we're over there, lobbying, saying, 'Look, no towns want these incinerators, they're dangerous, and we have to have a better solution.'" Eleanor enthusiastically nodded, and said afterwards that she would start being more involved, now that she had an answer to the problem she described.

Behind the scenes, Eleanor was eloquent about her broad political commitment, so the group often begged her to make public speeches, but since she worried about "blanking out" in public, she usually said no. All the activists who spoke at demonstrations and to the press made similar speeches, emphasizing their seemingly natural, "unpolitical" motives, and silencing their public-spirited motives and policy suggestions. They assumed that the public forum was a place for plaintive individuals to expose their side of the story, to "speak for themselves."

Political evaporation

The puzzle in both of these cases is that citizens' circles of concern shrank when they spoke in public contexts. In both cases, broad political concerns surfaced and then mysteriously vanished behind very personal-sounding concerns: "my house," "my children," "close to home." People implicitly know that some face-to-face contexts invite public-spirited debate and conversation, and others do not; in contemporary US society, most do not. Examining where and how citizens can comfortably talk about politics might help us understand how so many Americans manage to make the realm of politics seem irrelevant to so many everyday enterprises.

We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs. But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it; to curtail feelings of empathy as to extend them; to feel powerless and out of control as to exert an influence; to stop thinking as to think. There is no exit from the political world, no possibility of disengagement; human, political decisions permeate human life, whether we like it or not. Few Americans vote, many tell survey interviewers that they have little faith in the government,² many are astonishingly ignorant about the most basic political issues:³ yet all are touched by this untrusted, ignored government. If there is no exit from the political world, then political silence must be as active and colorful as a bright summer shadow.

Apathy takes work to produce. This book shows how some Americans produced it in the course of conversations that engage, or push away engagement, with the wider world; many of the people portrayed here spoke, in intimate whispers, of a vague concern for homeless people, the environment, and even faraway victims of distant wars. Many had their own private analyses of the problems; many said in interviews that they had never voiced these ideas before. Empathy for foreign victims of war; worries about the environment; horror over injustice: only by speaking do people give these meaning and form, providing socially recognizable tools for thinking and acting.

The people I met did sound as if they cared about politics, but only in some contexts and not others. They did not just think everything was fine as it was, but there were too few contexts in which they could openly discuss their discontent. Most of the time, intimate, late night, moonlit conversations were the only places other than interviews where that kind of discussion could happen. In group contexts, such discussion was almost always considered inappropriate and out of place; informal etiquette made some political intuitions speakable, and others beyond the pale of reasonable, polite discussion.

Following sociologist Erving Goffman, I call the main group interactions "frontstage," while peripheral interactions that participants do not count as part of "what is going on," that are deemed beside the point, whispered, out of the spotlight, or hidden are "backstage." Goffman says that we often carve out a "backstage" space for ourselves, in which we can relax and stop paying so much attention to the impression we are making on an audience. Waiters in the kitchen of a fancy restaurant, for example, can shed their smooth aristocratic demeanors and yell at the cook; salespeople off the floor can make fun of their product and customers; teachers in the lounge can cuss and smoke:

The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks . . . use of dialect or sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and "kidding," inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence . . . [B]ackstage behavior has what psychologists might call a "regressive" character.

(1959: 128)

Surprisingly, I found the opposite pattern. People sounded *better* backstage than frontstage; at each step in the broadening of the audience, the ideas shrank. In a strange process of political evaporation, every group fell into this strictly patterned shift in discourse: what was announced aloud was less open to debate, less aimed at expressing connection to the wider world, less public-spirited, more insistently selfish, than what was whispered. Focusing on the remarkably consistent pattern will tell us what Americans consider "public" to be, and why "public" speech is so often less generously open-minded than private.

When good manners prevent publicly minded speech in the potential contexts of the public sphere, the public sphere has a problem. In families, workplaces, and schools, we assume that open, forthright, active communication matters, as a good in itself; why do we value everyday political conversation so much less? Theorists since Aristotle have argued that regular political

conversation is a defining feature of a healthy democracy; that in a democracy, the substance of political life is public discussion; that the ways we can talk about our concerns go far in shaping them; that the ability to discuss politics allows citizens to generate power together. So, how did public-spirited, open political conversation come to seem "out of place" in so many places in Amargo? Paying attention to the dramatic shifts in discourse from frontstage to backstage made it clear that citizens were not just lacking in public spirit, but lacked it only in some contexts. Most people did not usually talk about their concerns to an audience larger than one, in a voice louder than a whisper – how did their publicly minded ideas evaporate out of public circulation? Listening to citizens conversing about politics in everyday life can reveal how some cultivate concern for the wider world, and how so many manage to convince themselves and each other not to care.

In search of the American public

To observe how political ideas circulate in everyday life, I participated in a wide range of civic groups – volunteer, recreational, and activist groups, spending about two and a half years with the groups.

Volunteer groups included two anti-drugs groups, a high school parents' group, a recycling center, and a few meetings of the League of Women Voters. I went to the anti-drugs groups' meetings, and parties, and helped with their petition drives. I helped work the high school Parent League's concession stand at track meets, sell raffle tickets (at events like a Halloween Festival, a Farmers' Market, and other spots around town on weekends), folded envelopes, and otherwise did what members did. I also attended city meetings and other meetings intended to publicize officials' and volunteers' efforts – several Just Say No rallies, an anti-drugs parade, some family events that the volunteers announced in their meetings. I also informally interviewed people who were trying to set up a homeless shelter in a suburban mall. Volunteers' meetings are portrayed in the first half of chapter 2.

Recreational groups included a country-western dance club that alternated between meeting at a bar that I will call the "Silverado Club" and a fraternal organization (like the Moose, Eagles, or Redmen) that I will call the "Buffalo Club"; and another country-western dance class. I went to rodeos, fairs, horse competitions, barbecues, theme parks, and other events with groups of country-western class members. I describe two different subgroups at the country-western clubs: one group's conversations are portrayed in the first half of chapter 4 – I call this group "the Buffaloes," or "the private people"; the other subgroup, which I will call "the cynics," is very briefly sketched in the short chapter 6.

Activist groups included a group that was trying to prevent a toxic incinerator from being built in town, and a permanent peace vigil intending to block US arms shipments to other countries. The activist group on which I most focus, the anti-toxics group, changed so much during the time I studied it, it offered in itself a good range of activist approaches to public life. I went to their rallies, hearings, press conferences, meetings, informal gatherings like poster-making sessions and subcommittee meetings, and parties. These groups are the topic of the first half of chapter 7.

To trace the connections between these groups and the wider world, I listened to the anti-drugs groups', schools group's and anti-toxic group's encounters with social service and regulatory agencies. I observed how powerful institutions influenced members' understandings of the role of citizen involvement, and vice versa – how citizens sometimes challenged the official definitions of citizen involvement: On what grounds did social service agencies, the media, police, schools, elected office-holders, and other institutions and cultural authorities surrounding the groups ask for citizens' political discussion? Where did they invite expressions of public spirit, and where did they shut it out? How did groups interpret these invitations?⁴ The story of each group's interactions with larger institutions is told in the second halves of chapters 2, 4, and 7.

I also spent time with members of all three sorts of group outside of the group contexts – on the phone, and at movies, watching TV with them, going for walks, or doing whatever they did in their spare time. I taped semi-structured interviews with at least ten members of each category, and gave interviewees a questionnaire asking demographic questions and some political opinion questions taken from national surveys; and I taped their efforts at deciphering the questions. I also conducted group interviews in each category. In interviews, activists' speech was similar to their speech in informal group settings. But interviews with volunteers and Buffaloes often revealed ideas and feelings that went unspoken in group contexts. Interviews with volunteers is the topic of chapter 3; interviews with Buffaloes is the topic of chapter 5.

To address the question of how groups are connected to the wider world, I also followed reporters around, as they covered local citizens' involvement and local issues in general; interviewed the local newspaper reporters; and analyzed their stories to examine how they talked about grassroots citizen involvement. This is the topic of chapter 8.

Most Americans live in suburbs, and the region I portray is no exception. The region surrounding the cities I will call Amargo and Evergreen City was typical of a new kind of "post-suburb" that is growing especially rapidly, and is very different from the stereotypical small, homogeneous, white,

middle-class bedroom town facing a vibrant central city.⁵ These new, ethnically and class-diverse dwelling places are criss-crossed by giant 6-, 8- or even 10-lane highways, going through malls and business parks, instead of having one downtown with a main street, as earlier suburbs did. Orange County, near Los Angeles, is the prototype of this kind of suburb. Amargo and Evergreen County fit the mold perfectly. They had tiny downtowns with no grocery stores, no clothes stores in which people normally shopped, no movie theaters, no home supply stores, no hardware stores, no variety stores for practical kitchen items; everyone drove to giant regional malls for food, clothes, entertainment, and the rest (while I was doing fieldwork, though, activists colonized the back room of a pizza place in Evergreen City, and made it into an informal meeting ground – the presence of the activists transformed the setting).⁶ In all of the volunteer and activist groups combined, only three regular members had gone to high school where they now lived. Over half had lived in the county less than eight years. Recreation group participants drove from a two-hour radius to get to the clubs.

I listened to political conversation and silence in a wide range of contexts, to find out how people manage so often to keep politics at arm's length in so many situations, and whether there were any contexts in which political conversation was possible. I do not make a causal argument here, but do hope to help society reflect upon itself in new ways, to refresh the usual ways of thinking about political disconnection, to offer a new question – a mental peppermint clearing out stale thoughts, a “sensitizing concept . . . an idea that suggests directions along which to look” (Blumer 1986 [1954]). My question is: *how do citizens create contexts for political conversation in everyday life?*

The concept of the public sphere

To examine this question, we have to fine-tune our ears to the unsaid, the taken-for-granted, and listen carefully to citizens creating “the public sphere” in practice. Many scholars have called for studies of the public sphere⁷ or have argued for its theoretical importance, in very abstract terms.⁸ Some have studied interaction in the public sphere historically.⁹ No studies systematically ask, “How do – or don’t – people create everyday life contexts for political conversation? How do civic groups create and enforce manners for political conversation?”¹⁰

Discussion, debate, disagreement: public life is hard work, not something for which every society or individual naturally comes equipped. As John Dewey put it, in *The Public and Its Problems*, “Faculties of effectual observation, reflection, and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the

culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers” (1927: 158). Theorists of public life say that face-to-face organizations are the basic schools for learning democratic principles and social responsibility. Unspoken ideas about *where and how* citizens can talk politics are at the center of any society’s notion of citizenship. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States from France and marveled over the enthusiasm with which Americans involved themselves in groups. Unlike passive subjects ruled by a king and involuntarily bonded together by a sturdy hierarchy of kings, lords, and peasants, active citizens ruling themselves in a democracy need the voluntary bonds of such groups: “Feeling and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another . . . in democratic societies . . . only associations can do that” (1969 [1831]: 515–516).

These “associations” form “the public sphere.”¹¹ The public sphere is, theoretically, defined as the realm of institutions in which private citizens can carry on free and egalitarian conversation, often about issues of common concern, possibly welding themselves into a cohesive body and a potent political force.¹² It is not just a closed, hierarchical workplace and not just family but is a third setting for conversation, with three main characteristics: participation is optional, potentially open to all, and potentially egalitarian.¹³ The settings I studied could have represented America’s public sphere, made of thousands of local citizen gatherings like the ones I studied.

For theorists of the public sphere, moral and political understanding are not inert objects that people can carry around inside their own heads and implant in the heads of others. Rather, these theorists assume that people must learn how to understand the larger world by interacting and talking about social issues, in groups. In contemporary society, political life is, more and more, administered by forms, numbers, technicians, or the invisible hand of the market, which silently gives and takes away with no explicit considerations of morality or cultural integrity. Only plain talk, between citizens, can knit the bonds necessary for a more humane society, and can reveal the often morally unsavory assumptions hidden in the market and the bureaucracies (Habermas 1985). Without a vibrant public sphere, democratic citizenship is impossible; there are no contexts to generate the kinds of selfhood, friendship, power, and relations to the wider world that democracy demands. The point is dual: participation in the public sphere helps cultivate a sense of community, so that people care more, and think more, about the wider world; and second, participation becomes a source of meaning-making power. Let us examine these one at a time.

First, participation generates a sense of attachment to a wider world. In theory, the public sphere includes not only formal groups like political par-

ties, and social-improvement-minded associations like the volunteer groups and activist groups described here. It also includes the free-form, sociable, playful, esthetic public life that happens in cafés, informal gatherings, bars, coffeehouses, theaters, salons, dances, poetry readings, even soccer teams: the country-western clubs portrayed in this book could fit here.¹⁴ In seventeenth-century Britain, coffeehouses were centers for informal public discussion (Eagleton 1985). In one nineteenth-century Massachusetts town, working-class ethnic men regularly argued politics in neighborhood bars (Rosenzweig 1983). In seventeenth-century Paris, part of the fun of public life was the costume: women fitted singing birds in cages, pears, and flowers into elaborate "poufs" of hair on their heads (Sennett 1977). Singing birds, beer, pears, coffee: these physically vigorous gatherings embroiled members in each other's lives not just as brains engaged in calm, rational debate, such as some theorists describe,¹⁵ but also as laughing bodies with tastes, passions, manners.

Such sociable gatherings can be fertile ground for political life. While not exclusively or even primarily politically motivated, these gatherings offer the familiarity that is a necessary precondition for some kinds of public life. Sociable familiar gatherings can create an infinitely nuanced stock of common sense and feeling, common knowledge and myths, common style, rhythm, and manners; background knowledge for how to act and how to be. Every day, people go to work, get stuck in traffic jams, pay bills, become involuntarily entangled with anonymous strangers; in the sociable public sphere, in contrast, people affirm voluntary connections to particular people. Whether for reading poetry aloud, debating playfully, playing music, joking, putting on plays, dancing, bowling, playing soccer, these usually unpolitical grounds for common life and meaning-making often make political life possible.

For this reason, theorists (Mansbridge 1991; Held 1989, for example) emphasize the importance of friendship in nurturing good citizenship. Good friends are not just nice to each other; they also help make each other become good people. Aristotle says that the opposite of a friend is not an enemy, but a flatterer (see Bellah et al. 1985): someone who tells you that you are being good when in fact you are being selfish or vain or stupid. Friends like these mutually raise each other to be good members of society. Such informal groups might easily grow into more explicitly community-minded groups of the more formal public sphere, such as activist or volunteer groups.

Ideally, this sense of connection helps people learn to think about the wider world. But Lisa and Carolyn, like nearly all of the people I met, *wanted* to be good, caring members of a community, they wanted to cultivate a sense of belonging and companionship. They wanted to care about *people*, but did

not want to care about *politics*. Trying to care about people but not politics meant trying to limit their concerns to issues about which they felt they could "realistically" make a difference in people's lives – issues that they defined as small, local, and unpolitical. Volunteers worked hard to keep that circle of concern small – in cultivating a sense of connection to each other, they curtailed their ability to learn about the wider world.

To help each other and themselves to be really caring people, volunteers would have had to think about the large political forces that keep producing the problems on which they worked: the homelessness, the problems with schools and drugs, and the wars. How can people develop what C. Wright Mills (1959) called "a sociological imagination," a "quality of mind" necessary to grasp the constant interplay between our personal lives and the political world? Mills says that humanity desperately needs to cultivate this ability, in order to keep from feeling powerless and lost in a complex, overwhelmingly large global polity. Why are so many Americans unable to answer the most elementary factual questions about politics?¹⁶ Mills would say that this is not because they are too dumb to memorize some list of facts that good citizens need to know, but because they lack this kind of imagination that could help them understand why facts matter. A sociological imagination comes from talking, reading – interacting in various ways; but for many, this sociological imagination is stunted, partly because the contexts in which people could stretch their minds and expand their sense of selfhood have evaporated.

A second way that participation in voluntary associations is supposed to help citizens create democracy is by generating a kind of civic power. The public sphere is very different from the kind of citizenship advocated by some politicians, who treat voluntary associations as the panacea for all social ills – former President Bush's "thousand points of light" and its British equivalent (Speaker's Commission on Citizenship 1990) are two examples. These officials ask apolitical citizen-volunteers to fill in for underfunded charity and welfare agencies, saying that such "citizenship" is more necessary now, in times of cutbacks. But the politicians do not ask the citizens to discuss the political decisions that made the cutbacks. Such citizens are asked to act like Lisa and Carolyn, to convince themselves that regular citizens "really can make a difference," without addressing issues that they would consider "political."

In contrast, the public sphere in theory, and at times in history, has been a doorway to political power. Unlike solitary "points of light," participants in the public sphere *generate* political power for common citizens: "power springs up between men¹⁷ when they act together, and vanishes the moment they disperse. Because of this peculiarity . . . power is to an astonishing

degree independent of material factors, either of number or means" (Arendt 1958: 200).

The "thousand points of light"-style volunteer, in contrast, simply tries to fix predefined social problems, and coolly avoids seizing the power to define political issues. The potential power generated in the friction of the public sphere is absent from a "thousand points of light" volunteer-style involvement. This is a cultural kind of power, the power to open up public contexts for citizens to question, challenge, debate; the power to become a different kind of person, to create new meanings and ask new questions; to inspire.

What is public-spirited political conversation?

What kind of conversation is supposed to work this magic? Political conversation, of course. But what is that? It is not simply "conversation that refers to some group of objects out there in the world, called 'political' objects." Why not? Any object is potentially political – or not.

For example, race and sex are potentially "political topics," but Buffalo Club women believed that the men brought them up to get attention – a playful slap or squeal – not to spark debate or to affirm a sense of connection to the wider world. The men's implicit referent was always the speaker, not the polity. When a Buffalo Club woman complained that her "ex" is "a slime" and "a jerk" and she wished that she had more money for her kids, she talked about it as a personal problem, unconnected to broader questions of who should pay for children's upkeep. Similarly, when I gave people questionnaires asking whether they had engaged in political activity or conversation, the varieties of methods of defining "political" and "activity" were much more interesting than the yes/no answers I eventually recorded on the questionnaire. For example, an activist in the anti-toxics groups answered a question about whether she had "been to any political meetings in the last few years" by saying "no," and then backtracking: "Well, I don't know, I guess you could call Communities for Environmental Safety Everywhere 'political.' What do you think?" I shrugged and made an "I don't know" face.

The problem, as feminist scholars point out, is that "politics" can be hidden in almost any topic (Fraser 1987; Young 1987, for example). Recreation group members took racist and sexist jokes as purely personal statements, but an observer could say, "Oh, but they really are talking about politics and just don't know it." There must be a way to write about the public origins and consequences of problems that fall outside of members' definitions of "political." Is saying "they are talking about politics and just don't know it," just like saying "they have a toothache and just don't know

it" as some philosophers (Winch 1958: 79) argue? If so, then observers should do what some early anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard, e.g. 1976: 245) tried to do: simply leave their own theoretical and cultural baggage at the door, in order to explain the "natives'" own cultural definitions only from the inside. But the people I met *changed* their ideas of what counts as "political" from one context to the next – this context-switching would be invisible if the researcher tried to take the "natives'" perspective on everything! That approach cannot be right. The person writing the story has to come down on one side or another eventually.

Indeed, sometimes an anthropologist must diverge from the natives' account of what they are doing, in order not to deceive his readers, because of the commitment in his act of speaking or writing. Suppose the natives engage in certain procedures that they tell him are "making rain." How will he truthfully report what they are doing? If he says simply "They are making rain," he is implying that their magic really can causally produce precipitation; such is the nature of our language. If he says "They are engaged in a magic ritual designed to make rain," he is at least strongly suggesting that their actions cannot produce rain; in that case, he is true to knowledge but in a significant way false to their world, their way of perceiving and acting ... there may be nothing completely neutral for the anthropologist to say. (Pitkin 1972: 258)

If I were either to accept *speakers'* explicit definition of "political" and ignore what didn't fit, or apply my *own* definition and ignore what didn't fit, I would *miss the whole point*: what is interesting is precisely how citizens come to define some issues, and some contexts, as "political" and some as "not political," in interaction. In the gaps between their various definitions – or between their definitions and mine – is an interesting and important potential dialogue.

Like the anthropologist who presumes that waving a stick does not cause rain, I also come with certain presuppositions. I presume connections between the people I met and the wider world, even when the people themselves did not overtly acknowledge any attachment. My question is whether or not *speakers ever draw out* a topic's public implications, whether speakers ever assume that what they say matters for someone other than themselves, ever assume that they are speaking in front of a wider backdrop. I am interested in a process of giving voice to a wide circle of concern – a public-spirited *way of talking*, not a topic ("politics").¹⁸ Political theorist Hanna Pitkin says that public-spirited conversation happens when citizens speak in terms of "justice," which, as she eloquently puts it,

forces us to transform "I want" into "I am entitled to," a claim that becomes negotiable by public standards. In the process [of making such claims] we learn to think about the standards themselves, about our stake in the existence of standards, of

justice, of our community, even of our opponents and enemies in the community; so that afterwards we are changed. (1981: 347)

This does not mean that people will always come to the *right* decisions when speaking in a public-spirited way, but that such discussion forces a discussion of who “we” are and why “we” care, and what “we” can do about it. Appealing to common ground would have forced speakers to *create* common ground, “making the path by walking it.” In other words, public-spirited talk is first, open to debate, and second, devoted to questions about the common, public good, without blindly excluding questions of oppression and differences of opinion. Without such a forum, people have no place for actively, collectively forming a will, a community, or a vision of the wider world.

So, a group could have a topic that I might consider “political” but not treat it with public-spirited conversation, and vice versa. During the Gulf War, I heard a conversation in the recreation groups about how the war might impinge on members’ travel plans. That was not a publicly minded conversation. On the other hand, a conversation in the same group about who would cook the food for a potluck, with jokes about whether the men could do anything other than bring Kentucky Fried, boiled water, and microwaved burritos, came closer to being a publicly minded conversation, since it referred to systematic gender differences, with a slight twinge of righteous indignation. Usually, I heard public-spirited conversation only backstage, in hushed tones.

In making these constant, implicit distinctions between public and private, participants simultaneously create a context for interaction and a relationship to the wider world. People create the realm of politics in practice, when they create, and recreate, and recreate again, this kind of “grammar” for citizenship, constantly drawing and redrawing the map that separates “public” from “private.”¹⁹ The public sphere is something that exists *only between* people, and comes into being when people speak public-spiritedly. Speaking public-spiritedly creates the public sphere.

Objective self-interest?

This search for “publicly minded” speech might seem ridiculous to someone who assumes that self-interest is the essence of politics. But even self-interest must be cultivated socially: is it in Amargo nuclear battleship workers’ interest to have a healthy workplace? a healthy home? a future planet? a job? good schools and day-care for their children? low taxes? a strong American military? In the long run, poisoning the environment is not in anyone’s interest, so even corporate polluters have to engage in some twisted emotional

gymnastics to define their own “interests”; even for them, there is no single “bottom line” that trumps all other interests. Nuclear battleships, toxic incinerators, and oil spills come to be understood as being in some people’s interest, against other people’s interest, and not of concern to others.

More importantly, self-interest is not always the only thing that matters to people, anyway. Citizens forfeit their own power when *any* preconceived definition of public life systematically filters some valuable kinds of speech out of the public forum – in Amargo, the prevalent definition of public life called upon citizens to speak in terms of self-interest in public, to speak only for themselves. The assumption was that “politics” is for getting what you want. But as Hannah Arendt says, this infinitely pliable “in-between” of public life (1958: 183) is not just an instrumental means to some other kind of power. It is also an end in itself. Arendt grandly states that “to be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality” (1958: 199). Powerlessness comes from being inattentively caught in the “web” of human relationships” (Arendt 1958: 183); power works, in part, by robbing the powerless of the inclination or ability to develop their own interpretations of political issues. With active, mindful political participation, we weave reality and a place for ourselves within it. A crucial dimension of power is the power to create the contexts of public life itself. This is the power to create the public itself.

Theorists like Arendt consider this meaning-making, public-making power an end in itself – being able to participate in decision-making, to learn democracy, is one of the great joys of life. But this power can *also* be a means to more instrumental kinds of power,²⁰ since it opens up some aspects of life for public questioning and closes off others, allowing some aspects to seem humanly created and changeable, and others to seem natural and unmovable. If Amargo residents accepted the seemingly natural connection between environmental regulation and unemployment, and entered the public arena solely for the purpose of promoting their predefined “self-interest,” they might advocate keeping local jobs at the expense of the environment. Their lack of political imagination could be fatal.

The only way to discover what the choices are, or whether “self-interest” is the most important motive in play, is through public discussion. Once we drop the idea that promotion of self-interest is the sole essence of politics, the question becomes: how do people create contexts for talking about politics in a variety of ways, including conversation about “interests” but also including other ways as well? While we might rightly cheer when “the little people” rise up to defend their own, very local interests,²¹ my point is that without this power to create the etiquette for political participation, citizens are powerless. Without this power to determine what sorts of questions are worth discussing in public, citizens are deprived of an important power, the power to define

what is worthy of public debate, what is important, what is good and right, what is changeable and what is just natural – even if they successfully promote projects that are in their “interest” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These kinds of power – to make meaning and to formulate and promote one’s interests – are inextricable.²²

The point is not that once we figure out our real interests, and act on them, then we can stop talking and go home. The point is that being able to talk can be a good in itself, and a source of power in itself; people are always creating selves and communities and interests and power, one way or another, actively or inadvertently, in interaction.

Subjective beliefs?

So, despite one brand of common sense, “objective bottom-line interests” do not exhaust all there is to know about citizenship. Another typical common-sense understanding of politics points to “subjective inner beliefs and values.” Research on inner beliefs, ideologies, and values is usually based on surveys, which ask people questions about which they may never have thought, and most likely have never discussed. Questionnaires provide a political vocabulary, a set of cultural “tools” (Swidler 1986), assuming that the respondent shares the ways of thinking and speaking about politics necessary to formulate the survey questions (Bourdieu 1984: 460). The researcher analyzing survey responses must then read political motives and understandings back into the responses, trying to reconstruct the private mental processes the interviewee “must have” undergone to reach a response. That type of research would more aptly be called private opinion research, since it attempts to bypass the social nature of opinions, and tries to wrench the personally embodied, sociable display of opinions away from the opinions themselves.²³ But in everyday life, opinions always come in a form: flippant, ironic, anxious, determined, abstractly distant, earnest, engaged, effortful. And they always come in a context – a bar, a charity group, a family, a picket – that implicitly invites or discourages debate. The survey is itself a context, that helps create the kind of person who will cooperatively answer a stranger’s questions and not demand dialogue. When I had a job in college as a door-to-door survey interviewer, I encountered some interviewees who valiantly tried to convince me of their opinions, hoping to convert me; others who offered beer and outrageous opinions, hoping to date me; others who offered amusing debate, hoping to embroil me in an evening’s entertainment. Others were like the Russian émigrée who refused to state her opinions unless she knew what mine were. My job, however, was simply to

repeat the questions exactly as written in the question booklet until the respondent succumbed to the interview format.

Democracy, for this approach, rests on beliefs and values; add up all the private opinions to get one big “public” opinion; if all individuals carry inside themselves democratic psychological dispositions, like little ships in a bottle, then (presuming citizens have rights like freedom of speech and assembly) we will have democracy.²⁴ In this view, what is needed to repair democratic life are supreme acts of individual will; each individual should find the desire to become a good citizen and the rest will take care of itself. That idea is harmonious with individualistic American common sense, which tells us that what is inside is what counts: “they care because they believe in helping people,” or “they don’t care because they don’t have good values,” or “if parents taught their kids better values, there would be less crime” (so does a country like the United States, with the highest imprisonment rate in the world, just have too many bad parents?).

This approach misses the fact that public life happens *between* people, in relationships. What do these separate individuals do when they get together? What if they spend most of their days trying to ignore the fact that they work at jobs whose missions they do not particularly revere – manufacturing nerve gas, the 137th shade of pink lipstick for Revlon, personalized cat food bowls? Can people possess values, just as they possess other objects that may lie in the closet gathering dust? If institutions do not live up to values, then “values” are not directly in operation most days of the week. What is in operation is a practical sense of *where* to talk about “values”; of which “values” are supposed to be relevant where; and of where “values” are basically irrelevant.

Another way of trying to unearth inner beliefs and values uses one-on-one interviews, away from the respondents’ friends or usual associates, in situations modeled after the psychotherapeutic session. Political scientist Robert Lane, for example, invited interviewees for several long, intimate sessions in his comfortable office.²⁵ He even offered them cigars. The results of his respectful, sympathetic interviews offer striking insights into abstract political beliefs and reasoning, but such intimate, therapeutic relationships between interviewers and their subjects may encourage respondents to speak in uncharacteristically serious ways about issues that they usually treat flippantly, or ironically, or do not discuss at all, or discuss in some contexts only for the purpose of showing that they are smart, or discuss in other contexts only to reassure themselves that the world is all right after all.

A variant on this type of research says that apathetic citizens are often “in denial,” experiencing “psychic numbing” (Lifton 1968), trying not to care because they feel overwhelmed and want to protect themselves and their

loved ones from despair. Psychological resistance could account for part of the political silence I found; but the next question should be, what interactions made such "psychic numbing" seem so necessary? In a fascinating study, *No Reason to Talk about It: Families Confront the Nuclear Taboo*, two psychologists (Greenwald and Zeitlin 1987) found a paradox: parents and children in focus groups tried to hide their fears from each other, to protect each other, but family members all felt more secure and empowered if they actually talked about their fears.

I add that one of the most important beliefs is an unspoken belief about talk itself – about where talk matters and about what kind of talk is appropriate where. This "culture of talk" tells us when we need to hide our fears, and when talking will help us work through our fears. When I asked the standard survey question "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" many volunteers said something like what Carolyn said, "Most of the time. Well, at least I'd like to *think* it's most of the time. Of course, I'm not so sure it really *is*. But I hope it is. So, I'd say 'most of the time.' Yes, put 'Most of the time.'" Notice – neither yes nor no nor undecided was the most "real" belief here. Volunteers' beliefs *included* an effort at convincing themselves that they lived in a democracy, and an orientation toward talk itself. Being a good citizen meant being upbeat and encouraging; and volunteers assumed that that meant not talking too much about problems that one could not immediately fix. Compare that response to the typical activists' response to the survey question "Can a person like you make a difference?" Many said, "No," and then laughed on the side, exclaiming that it was amazing how active they were considering how little effect they thought they had. Typical volunteers said, "Yes," with an "at least I hope so" tagged on.

Ironic, detached, theatrical, hesitant, tight-lipped, resigned, clichéd, effortfully pious: the relations people have toward their own opinions, and the ways they explain those opinions, are part of what "holding an opinion" means. In other words, volunteers and activists shared skepticism about the government, but habitually expressed it and displayed it differently. It was not their "inner" beliefs that differed so much as their style, their willingness to voice some ideas and feelings and not others, in some contexts and not others.

In other words, the problem with psychological approaches is that what matters for democracy is not only what individuals privately hold inside their brains. What also matter are the ways that citizens mingle and interact. The "democratic norms" that really matter are unspoken norms for conversation, manners, civility, tact, that make citizens comfortable engaging in freewheeling political conversation in everyday life contexts. For democracy to survive,

there must be a range of contexts that citizens recognize as appropriate places for broad political debate. Valuing this neither exclusively subjective nor exclusively objective, but "intersubjective," nature of politics means taking interaction seriously, as a social fact that is patterned, real, and important.

Making the path by walking it: civility, feelings, and social structure

I will call the process of creating contexts for political conversation "civic practices," or, interchangeably, "political manners" or "etiquette."²⁶ This etiquette implicitly takes into account a relationship to the wider world; politeness, beliefs, and power intertwine, in practice, through this sense of civility. The concept, then, refers to citizens' companionable ways of creating and maintaining a comfortable context for talk in the public sphere.

Goffman called this constant, unspoken process of assessing the grounds for interaction "footing" (1979, 1981).²⁷ Are there stairs here? loose gravel? ice? To walk we have to assess the footing. Talking is the same: are we talking to make conversation? to accomplish a task? to show off? The footing draws on that "inexhaustible reservoir" of "common knowledge" on which participants rely for interpreting each other's conversations, which members intuitively understand to be giving meaning to the interaction.

Investigating the footing means asking what members assume "being a member" requires; what kinds of talk and silence members consider appropriate for that context; whether talk is considered important at all or whether there is another, more non-verbal way of establishing a sense of companionship. That is, what does the very act of speaking itself mean to them? Until I assessed the "footing" in the volunteer high school parents' groups, I could not figure out why they ignored the political problems that they inevitably encountered in the course of their work – the race riots, caved-in classroom ceilings and flooded classroom floors at the high school, for example. By tuning into their political manners, I realized that volunteers assumed that volunteer groups exist to show that regular citizens really can make a difference, and that talking about these problems would sink the buoyant feeling of empowerment.

In the tenuous American public sphere, how people make sense of each other's conversation is an open question. Many of the people I met reported initial trepidation at joining a group, saying that they had feared that they did not know what to do in a meeting, how to talk, how to act. Even more blatantly than in other settings, members' unspoken answers to the questions "What are we doing here, anyway? What is this group for? What is talk

itself for in this setting? What is the appropriate way of talking here?" were not ready-made, but were improvised, in practice.²⁸

This etiquette varies from one context to another, so one way of observing this process of creating contexts is to notice the dramatic changes in discourse from frontstage to backstage. This civic etiquette is always an active, culturally creative response to a particular context. Civic practices are the fundamentally sociable processes by which citizens create contexts for political conversation in civil society, by jointly creating a relationship to speech itself. In creating these contexts, citizens develop meaning-making powers together. These "practices" defy the logic of systematic thinking, but embody instead practical knowledge that participants share, that allows them to make sense of situations together. "Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician" but is a "practical coherence," on the order of "tact, skill, dexterity, delicacy, or *savoir-faire*: all names for the practical sense" (Bourdieu 1990: 80-86).²⁹

When I discovered that citizens' conversations in the public sphere were less wide-ranging than their conversations in intimate contexts were, my initial question – "How do Americans talk about politics in these contexts?" – quickly became "How do Americans avoid public-spirited political conversation in these contexts, and what are they doing instead, that makes such conversation so rare?" I realized that we need a new conceptual tool to help us ferret out the etiquette that undermines this freewheeling conversational ideal: we need *a way of listening* that makes us notice how people create contexts for public-spirited conversation – and how they neglect to seize that opportunity for free speech.

How did groups, and the institutions surrounding them, discourage or cultivate the expression and circulation of political ideas and concerns? And how did some groups manage to break out of this cycle of political evaporation? So many citizens wanted to be more than passive monads shuffling between work and sleep, so many were worried about the wider world, and yet so few were able to express their broader desires and concerns in public. A precious political, emotional, social good evaporated before reaching broad public circulation.

Volunteers trying to make sense of the world

The way to get a volunteer is to ask, "Who has a drill bit and can drill eight holes in this board next Saturday?" Someone will come who maybe never volunteered before, and then maybe they'll come again.

Geoffrey, volunteer, telling me how a volunteer group can grow

Part 1: *Trying to hide the public spirit*

Volunteers were poised to combat the specter of futility and to convince all newcomers that "You really can make a difference!" and that "Everyone has something to offer," as they often put it. They hoped to communicate that message through the very act of volunteering; and tried not to pay attention to problems that might undermine that message of hope. So, they tried hard not to care about issues that would require too much talking to solve, and tried to shrink their concerns into tasks that they could define as unpolitical, unconnected to the wider world. These citizens thought they could inspire feelings of empowerment within that small circle of concern; and they implicitly believed that helping people *feel* empowered was, in itself, doing something good for the community.

Advocates of democracy have long looked to groups that work on small, local issues as potential schools for wider political concern. Volunteers shared faith in this ideal of civic participation, but in practice, paradoxically, maintaining this hope and faith meant curtailing political discussion: members sounded less publicly minded and less politically creative in groups than they sounded individually. In the ideal image of the public sphere, citizens casually talk politics in voluntary associations, widening their horizons just by becoming members. In the ideal, such groups encourage "unrestricted communication" (Habermas 1974); usually, Americans imagine that any "restrictions" on public debate must come from outside of the groups themselves –