Neoliberalism for the Common Good? Public Value Governance and the Downsizing of Democracy

A commissioned background paper about Democracy as it relates to the creation of public value.

Adam Dahl
University of Minnesota
and
Professor Joe Soss
Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

June, 2012
In 2007 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) transformed its Royal Charter to reflect the changing imperatives of corporate governance in a rapidly shifting political and economic environment. Three years earlier, BBC Chairman Michal Grade released a report, “Building Public Value,” that outlined a new philosophy of corporate governance to guide the BBC’s re-chartering. The centerpiece of this new governance philosophy was an ascendant concept referred to as “public value.” Markets, the report argued, are often ineffective at handling public resources, and at times work to undermine broadly shared societal values. On the other hand, traditional administrative practices also prove disappointing, in many cases, as approaches to enriching collective life. A new philosophy of governance was needed to promote the more effective and efficient use of public resources for clearly delineated public purposes.

The revision of the Royal Charter charges the BBC Trust, the primary governing board of the corporation, with the responsibility to act as “guardians… of the public interest” (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2006: 7). With this new governing philosophy, the BBC pledges to serve not just markets but also the larger society by supporting civic vitality and enriching cultural life (BBC 2004: 7-8).

But what is new about this Charter is not simply the explicit stipulation that public corporations serve the public interest. Both the United States and Britain have a long history of requiring particular public organizations and corporations to operate in the public interest. Indeed, in American corporate law, the Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) was born as a legal arrangement that shielded corporations from certain kinds of liability in exchange for their pursuit of specifically delineated public purposes. In the early nineteenth century, such charters
“were usually granted only to projects deemed to be in the public interest” (Lamoreaux 1998: 66). The more novel feature of the new BBC Charter is its restructuring of a vast bureaucratic apparatus around the creation and pursuit of objective measures of public value. The Agreement with the Secretary of State, the BBC’s primary governing document along with the Charter itself, outlined the extensive use of “public value tests and assessments” to measure the performance of the BBC in attaining outcomes that are broadly valuable to the public (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2006).

The BBC’s public-value Charter reflects a significant new development in bureaucratic language and discourse. Public value has emerged in recent years as a way to re-specify the common good and use it as a guiding principle for theoretical and practical innovations in governance. Charging that older notions of the “common good” and “public interest” are too vague and utopian to guide practice (Bozeman 2002), scholars have turned to the concept as a way of “improving public sector performance” and defending a positive role for government against free-market critics (Moore 1995: 3; Benington and Moore 2011). Such scholars make a break with traditional Wilsonian models of public administration as well as the market-centered frameworks of the New Public Management (Stoker 2006, Moore 1995, Cole and Parston 2006). By developing an alternative model, they seek to harnesses the creativity and entrepreneurship of public managers as forces that aim to create value in the public interest. Thus at the outset of the charter renewal process, BBC Director-General Mark Thompson described public value as a philosophy that would ensure that the BBC’s “astonishing creative power” is “put to work for the sole benefit of the public” (Deans 2004).

The public value concept has emerged as part of a longer historical shift in focus from “government” to “governance.” Many issues that were once considered exclusive realms of
government action are now addressed as challenges that cut across societal domains and can only be surmounted through cross-sector collaboration (Pierre 2000, 3-4). The public value framework has been advanced as a way to organize and orient this collaborative mode of governance so that it becomes less likely to advance private interest at the expense of the common good. Seeking to challenge the primacy of economic models and neoliberal rationality in contemporary governance, scholars have advanced the public value framework as an alternative model grounded in collective goods and public purposes. Combining recent innovations in theories of public management with themes from deliberative and communitarian democratic theories, the public value framework has emerged as an important and influential new discourse for understanding and organizing governance.

Against this backdrop, we take up the task of clarifying how public value should be understood in relation to neoliberalism and democracy. Proponents of the new framework advance it as a direct challenge to the economistic logic of neoliberal modes of governance (Benington 2011; Smith 2004). In so doing, they foreground their framework’s reliance on democratic processes to produce public value (Jorgensen and Bozeman 2007, Stoker 2006), and argue that public-value governance has the potential to “deepen democracy” (Moore and Benington 2011: 263; Bozeman 2002). Yet the compatibility of public-value governance with democracy remains fuzzy, as does the relationship between this new discourse and neoliberalism.

In what follows, we attempt to clarify some of these confusions by exploring gaps between the claims that have been made for public value and the ways this framework has actually been elaborated. Our critique suggests that public value fails to offer a coherent and compelling alternative to neoliberalism. In fact, as our first section makes clear, it incorporates many features of neoliberal rationality. For this reason and others, we argue in our second
section that the public value concept is unlikely to fill “the democratic deficit” in contemporary governance and, in key respects, can be seen as a threat to democracy. In our conclusion, we offer some reflections on how to re-envision the concept of the common good in a manner commensurate with a more robust understanding of democratic politics.

I. Public Value and Neoliberal Rationality

To clarify the concept of public value, it is helpful to start with its proponents’ intentions. To what extent does the public value concept succeed according to the goals and standards advanced by its creators? What problems do these scholars hope to solve, and how do their interventions measure up to the task? In this section, we use these questions as a starting point to develop a critique of the concept. Scholarship on public-value governance, we argue, does not accomplish what it sets out to do. Leading formulations lack coherence and rarely introduce distinctive conceptual or political resources for governance. Justifications for the public-value framework are often built on scattershot appeals to principles that, on reflection, cannot be easily reconciled. Indeed, elaborations of the framework often incorporate – and in the process, abet – the neoliberal logic of governance its advocates decry.

Proponents of public value advance it as a conceptual language and framework that can be used to reconfigure public governance, raise its level of functioning, and reorient it toward the task of serving the public. They direct their reform agenda toward several recent developments that have subverted governance for the common good. First, market actors (especially, corporations) have gained the upper hand in governance and increasingly use it to promote private over public interests. Second, economic models, concepts, and values have become the guiding rationality for governance and operate today as a default, commonsense rubric for policy debate and action. Third, government itself has become increasingly dysfunctional as the pursuit
of narrow partisan interests and victories has eclipsed the ethos of compromise and collaboration needed for governance to be responsive to broader public needs, interests, and values (Bennington and Moore 2011: 7-11; Horner and Hutton 2011)

Throughout the literature, one finds a repeated emphasis on the need to counter ascendant neoliberal approaches to governance that privilege markets and treat the public good as nothing more than an aggregation of private interests. Public value scholars do not reject models of cross-sector collaboration that identify market actors as vital co-participants in governance. Rather, they seek to overturn the neoliberal emphasis on promoting markets, restraining government actions, and measuring the quality of governance against market-based standards (Moore 1995, Stoker 2005). The problem in this regard, public value scholars argue, is that older concepts such as “the common good” and “the public interest” lack the precision and elaboration needed to effectively challenge dominant market models of public governance (Bozeman 2007, Alford and O’Flynn 2009: 175). Proponents thus promote public value as a novel and more thoroughly specified conceptual foundation for governance that places at its center creative efforts to enhance public life and promote the common good.

Measured against these goals and claims, the public-value concept does not hold up very well under critical scrutiny. At its best, it fails to offer the precise and robust alternative to market models that its advocates promise. At its worst, it produces a new variant of neoliberal rationality, extending and strengthening the very project its champions seek to overturn.

Among advocates of the new framework, precision is often held up as a chief virtue of the public value concept. Predecessors such as the “common good” and “public interest” are described as being too mushy to compete with the clarity of well-specified economic models.
Thus, the detailed elaboration of public-value goals, criteria, and practices is seen as an essential resource for shifting governance off its present neoliberal track.

[Too] many public-decision analyses [today are] framed almost entirely in the parlance, theory, and tools of economics. Economists’ criteria have flourished largely because alternatives have little analytic precision and, generally, offer few practical guidelines for public policy analysis and policy decision making. The moral and intuitive appeal of public-interest exhortations has not been buttressed… with practical decision guidelines (Bozeman 2002: 157).

Yet a close reading of the public-value literature reveals a highly ambiguous concept that accommodates a remarkable diversity of meanings and justifications. As scholars have sought to incorporate what neoliberalism pushes to the margins, they have stretched the concept of public value in ways that appeal to diverse constituencies but fail to satisfy the test of conceptual clarity. As Rhodes and Wanna (2007: 408) rightly observe, “the ambiguous nature of public value and its various applications fuels its popularity – it is all things to all people.” As claims and justifications have proliferated in the literature, the public-value label has become harder to pin down – and less capable of competing with the precision of economic models of governance.

In its most basic form, public value is understood as an end goal of governance. Throughout the literature, scholars call for governance to produce greater public value and specify the achievement of public values as the core objective of the paradigm (Moore 1995; Stoker 2005; Bozeman 2007). Yet many of these same scholars define public values in ways that invest the concept with no inherent normative valence (Bozeman 2007; Meynhardt 2009). Status as a public value, they suggest, implies nothing about normative desirability. In some times and places, for example, eugenics or racial caste might qualify as broadly consensual public values in
a society. Yet if this is the case, how can we sustain the repeated calls to reorient governance toward the pursuit of public values? The claim that the quality of governance should be measured by its production of public values is rendered incoherent (or else quite troubling) if public values can include broad societal agreements that support oppression and exploitation. The economic concept of “market failure” is specified in a way that makes its undesirability clear. By contrast, definitions of public value make it hard to say whether “public-value failures” (Bozeman 2002) should be avoided or celebrated.

The ambiguity of the concept grows deeper when one asks how to determine the public values that should be pursued. In economic models, the meaning and basis of private value is easily specified: it is exchange value and it is decided through market relations. By contrast, writings on public value gather a multitude of values under its umbrella and derive them from a dizzying array of sources. Public values, we are told, encompass not only market-based values but also social and cultural values, political values, and ecological values (Benington 2011). They incorporate ideals for diverse aspects of human relations such as democracy, social cohesion, human dignity, responsiveness, accountability, participation, fairness, equity, equality,

1 The two examples are taken from Barry Bozeman. At the conference for foundation-paper authors in Minneapolis, Bozeman cited each as an historical example of a normatively troubling form of societal consensus that would fall within his definition of public values.

2 Bozeman (2002: 151) adds to this ambiguity by arguing that public value failure occurs when political and policy outcomes “do not represent the core public values of a society” and are determined by “people who hold values outside the mainstream.” How should we reconcile this standard with the many historical cases where “people who hold values outside the mainstream” have advanced emancipation, democracy, and the overall quality of public life? Consider, for example, Brown v. Board of Education and the imposition of civil and political rights on the Jim Crow South. Or what about elite actions that, in defiance of public majorities, have advanced LGBTQ rights over the past few decades? Or what about unpopular decisions to raise taxes so that sufficient revenues are available to pursue public purposes? Are such decisions instances of “public-value failure”? If so, why should we organize ourselves to avoid public-value failure?
cultural creativity, and global justice (Jorgenson and Bozeman 2007; Parston and Cole 2006; BBC 2004; Meynhardt 2009).

In enumerating such lists, scholars often suggest that a crucial benefit of public value is that it can incorporate a lot more than the narrow economic understanding of private value embraced by neoliberalism. Little or nothing is said about the different logics underlying these conceptions of value or the difficulties of reconciling them within a single concept. We are left with a concept that piles together instrumental and intrinsic values based on appeals to dissimilar economic, political, ethical, and moral systems of valuation.

Within each system of valuation, the ambiguities multiply. As students of politics, we are particularly struck by the tensions that have emerged as scholars have sought to locate suitable political foundations for public value. At times, we find appeals to majoritarian preferences revealed by public opinion polls (Bozeman 2002: 151). At others, we are told that “public value is more than a summation of… preferences…. [It must be] collectively built through deliberation” (Stoker 2005, 42). In still other instances, aggregative and deliberative procedures centered on the public give way claims that public values can be derived from research on what elites and administrators value, essentialist political philosophies, theories of basic needs, the U.S. Constitution, and many other sources (e.g., Bozeman 2002). To say the least, simultaneous appeals to these different sources are unlikely to yield a single, coherent agenda for governance.

Beneath these scattershot appeals to political foundations, the public-value project is bedeviled by a more fundamental political ambiguity: Does the pursuit of public value direct us to give the people what they want (i.e., the public’s values as revealed through aggregative or deliberative procedures) or to give the public what will be good for them even if they do not want it? Public value is typically defined as both “what the public values” and what is of “value
for the public” (Meynhardt 2009: 205, 212). In elaborating public value, scholars typically vacillate between the two conceptions, noting but then eliding the tensions between them.

Such problems have proliferated in the literature because of a widespread failure to put empirical pressure on the concept of public value. Indeed, the absence of rigorous applications to demanding empirical cases is striking. Examples are almost always deployed to illustrate the benefits of a public value approach, not as opportunities to sharpen the concept by confronting its weaknesses and working through its ambiguities and tensions. As Rhodes and Wanna (2007: 410) rightly complain, the easy cases selected are almost always characterized by high levels of societal consensus and agreement between public and expert-managerial views. Taking Mark Moore’s (1995) influential work as their primary example, they note (2007: 410):

[The illustrative cases steer clear of] large ‘P’ politics, moral dilemmas, or major value conflicts… Who can object to latchkey kids being cared for by a sympathetic librarian or a sanitation commissioner devising new ways to help citizens keep cities clean? We do not find adherents of the public value approach making cases for widening the net of tax collection, hospital managers selling human organs, [or] quicker and more available abortions whenever the woman desires…

The result of this forgiving approach is that, at the end of the day, it is often unclear what the concept of public value adds, conceptually or politically. For example, Stoker (2005) hails public value as a new paradigm for public management that incorporates deliberative models of democracy, but it is difficult to see what his public-value approach accomplishes that one could not derive from deliberative and collaborative administrative frameworks that make no use of the concept (Richardson 2003; Cooper et al. 2006; Fung 2006, Fischer 2009). Bozeman (2002) uses the concept of public-value failure to identify cases that should be flagged as suspect because it appears that relevant publics are not getting what they need or want. In most cases, though, it is hard to find any daylight between Bozeman’s approach and a standard responsiveness model of democratic representation. To ask the pragmatist’s question: what is added by layering the
public-value concept on top of existing arguments that do not require it and do not seem altered by it in any meaningful way?

The answer, for many public value scholars, seems to be that it is important to assemble such arguments under the banner of public value in order to advance an identifiable and powerful alternative to neoliberal market rationality. Here, we arrive at a second reason (beyond problems of ambiguity) why public value fails to offer a coherent alternative to neoliberal models of governance. While its proponents envision it as a means of overcoming the narrow, market-centered character of neoliberalism, public value in fact relies on its own form of market rationality that is consonant with – indeed, that advances core components of – neoliberalism. To bring this problem into focus, one must first clarify some confusion about neoliberalism itself.

Scholars of public value almost universally equate neoliberalism with laissez faire efforts to limit state power (so that markets can flourish independently of state intervention) and with market-based models of governance such as the New Public Management. As such, they contrast public value with “neo-liberal agendas to roll back the state” (Smith 2004: 69). Proponents tout public value as a sharp historic departure from “the dominance of neo-liberal ideology which emphasized models based on individual consumers within a private competitive market (where the state is seen as an encroachment upon, and potential threat to, individual liberty)” (Benington 2011: 31). Indeed, Benington and Moore (2011) clarify that the public-value project was born out of an explicit desire to counter neoliberal frameworks that posited the primacy of markets over politics during the Reagan and Thatcher eras.

To be sure, the project has succeeded in this regard on some fronts. Public-value theorists part ways with neoliberalism on a great many questions and clearly reject key tenets of this market-centered mentality of rule. They counter the “diminution of the collective as an idea” and
the privileging of individuals as the “most important arbiters of value” with a strong emphasis on collective agency, deliberation, and shared values (Bennington and Moore 2011: 7-8). They attempt to carve out a positive role for citizen engagement by stressing the enlistment of “networks of citizens to co-create public value” (Moore and Benington 2011: 273). They reject neoliberalism’s narrow focus on exchange value (Meynardt 2009) and challenge the neoliberal assumption that competitive market (or quasi-market) mechanisms are always to be preferred (O’Flynn 2007). Against neoliberal discourses that disparage the public sector, “public value management [emphasizes] public innovation and the worth of public managers” (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 417). Opposing the project of “shrinking the size and scope of government, so that more choices about how to use resources would be guided by individuals acting through markets,” public value scholars stress the positive contributions of government and seek a vital role for the state (Benington and Moore 2011: 7-8).

On reflection, however, many of these apparent differences turn out to be premised on a highly partial and historically dated understanding of neoliberalism itself. Most public-value scholars equate neoliberalism with a laissez faire agenda of rolling back the state. In so doing, they fail to understand that neoliberalism is a political rationality, not an attempt to drive politically controlled institutions out of the market.³ Over the past several decades, neoliberalism has developed in a manner that embraces strong state institutions in many forms and encourages extensive state involvement in market relations (Peck and Tickell 2002; Wolin 2008).

Contemporary neoliberalism does not pit market against state, or public against private, in a

---

³ We use the term “political rationality” in its Foucaultian sense. Rose and Miller (1992:178), for example, note several key features First, political rationalities specify different forms of authority, the proper distribution of tasks across authorities, and the goals and principles that organize governmental action. Second, they assume (and/or make desirable) particular kinds of subjectivities and take forms that are consonant with the ways in which objects of governance (systems, populations) are conceived. Third, they are marked by distinctive uses of language that translate reality into terms of understanding and debate and provide an idiom for the elaboration of governmental agendas and policies.
zero-sum relationship, and it does not entail a simple retrenchment of the activist state in favor of market provision. Rather, it blurs the boundaries between state and market operations, assembles them in a common project of governance, and organizes this common project around market-based logics and rationalities (Brown 2003; Wolin 2008; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Under neoliberalism, states play a key role in creating and cultivating market systems of governance, while market forms supply blueprints for institutional reconfigurations of the state. Thus, the competitive quasi-market systems that proliferate in the state (and in governance more generally) develop in tandem with an increasingly collaborative ordering of state, market, and civil-society actors as governing authorities sharing power. Neoliberalism is marked by a fusion of economic and political powers in the marketized state, by an interpenetration of state and market systems, and by a cross-sector collaboration of institutional actors organized by market rationalities (Brown 2003).

When one considers the fuller account detailed in most leading works on neoliberalism today, points of congruence with the public-value project come quickly into view. As public-value scholars have emphasized points of divergence, sometimes quite rightly, they have also incorporated and advanced key elements of neoliberal political rationality.

From its inception, the concept of public value has been designed to mirror market conceptions of private value and to leverage the market logics that surround them. New public-spirited terms are substituted for the old private-interest counterparts, creating an appearance of opposition, but the underlying rationality is imported almost whole cloth. In his influential early book, for example, Mark Moore (1995) argues that the aim of public management should be to produce public value, just as the aim of corporate management is to produce private value. Public value, he argues, can be understood as a categorical stand-in for private value or
shareholder value in the corporate sector of the economy. The best way to produce public value, he continues, is to cultivate in various public officials a managerial imagination that mimics the mentalities of corporate entrepreneurs and executives.

Key works in the genre, whatever their other differences, tend to be equally explicit about this mimicry. Cole and Parston (2006), for example, conceptualize public value as the summative value of all “public goods” (rather than private goods) and suggest it should serve as the measure of public-service performance just as the “bottom line” serves as the measure of private sector performance (2006). Public value, of course, cannot be captured by a single monetized measure of “true price,” as shareholder value can. Thus, to fill out the imported model the authors work to outline various modes of objective measurement that can be deployed as supplements and substitutes. Government “is in the business of delivering various public goods whose actual value to stakeholders cannot be easily expressed in monetary terms” (2006: 45). The model, though, is basically the same, and its integrity can be maintained by developing measures of public value deliverables along a broader array of dimensions.

Similarly, consider Barry Bozeman’s (2002) influential effort to develop a model of “public-value failure.” Bozeman (2002: 150) writes: “I suggest several criteria for identifying market failure. Where do these particular criteria come from? To some extent, they mirror the thinking of market failure.” Indeed, the two concepts are so parallel that Bozeman is able to produce a table illustrating how each public-value term can be substituted for its market-failure counterpart. Emphasizing the need to place public value and market value on “commensurate levels of theory and application,” Bozeman (2002: 146) summarizes his project by stating: “My
goal is to develop a model that is analogous in many respects to market failure, but that eschews concerns for price efficiency and traditional utilitarianism in favor of a public value focus.⁴

Reflecting on scholarship over the past two decades, Benington and Moore (2011) conclude that the public value concept has been designed with “particular attention to corporate strategy” – especially the notion that public managers must focus on questions of efficiency and effectiveness as well as strategic positions and trade-offs: “Just as the private sector executive had to keep an eye focused on changing market conditions, so the public sector executive had to keep their eye on changing political, economic and social conditions that might create new or different political demands.” In place of a “market environment” that must be navigated by corporate decision makers striving to create private value, we find an “authorizing environment” that must be navigated by public managers striving to produce public value (Benington and Moore 2011, 9-10; Moore 1995).

Thus, far from opposing market logics, public-value theorists mimic and reproduce them in forms designed to promote alternative ends (i.e., a positive vision of the public sector’s role in governance and society). As a metaphor for this intervention, consider how the substitution of new numerical terms in an algebraic equation will lead to new results without disturbing the underlying relations of the equation at all. In a similar manner, public-value theorists have inserted new terms into market models and, hailing their different results, have failed to note that the underlying rationality, neoliberal rationality, has changed very little.

As they have inserted new terms into inherited market models, public-value scholars have also echoed neoliberalism in rejecting the state as a “countervailing power” whose role is to contest and constrain powers that derive from market positions and resources (Galbraith 1952; Polanyi 1957). Public-value scholarship consistently positions state and market actors, pace

---

⁴ As an aside, we note that is unclear to us how Bozeman’s approach is inconsistent with ultilitarianism.
neoliberalism, as collaborators in a common project. Indeed, it intentionally blurs the boundaries between the two as public-value frameworks move seamlessly back and forth between corporate and state realms of governance (Meynhardt 2009; Porter and Kramer 2011; Schwab 2008).

Thus, alongside the application of corporate models to public management, we find public-value scholars pushing for complementary changes in corporate governance. In place of shareholder value, they promote modes of corporate governance based on “shared value” that can more easily be aligned and placed in collaboration with public-value-based governance. Porter and Kramer, for example, call for a “new conception of capitalism” based on cooperative relationships among organizations in the market, state, and civil society. Corporate performance, they argue, should be assessed with an eye toward “expanding the total pool of economic and social value.” Tensions between economic and social values can be eased by new ways of thinking, such as recognizing “disadvantaged communities and developing countries… as viable markets” (2011: 64-65, 68).

In this maneuver, we see how easily the concept of shared value slips over into the imposition of profit motives onto questions of the public interest and the common good. Other scholars in this area blur the boundaries between market and polity in different ways. Schwab, for example, seeks to move beyond the limits of “corporate social responsibility” models that merely substitute “stakeholders” for “shareholders” in corporate decision making. In their place, Schwab articulates a notion of “global corporate citizenship” that extends corporate responsibility beyond specific nations: “Global corporate citizenship is an extension of the stakeholder concept and involves the corporation acting as a stakeholder in global society, together with government and civil society” (2008). The reframing of the corporation as a citizen complements its opposite in public value scholarship: the claim that we should “think of citizens
as shareholders in how their tax is spent” (Horner and Hazel 2005: 34). At the intersection of these paired maneuvers, the boundary between market status (the corporation, the shareholder) and political status (the citizen) collapses. Predictably, Schwab’s concept of corporate citizenship, like Porter and Kramer’s “shared value,” works to smooth the “transformation of socially responsible principles and ideas into commercial value” (Schwab 2008: 108, 116).

In these and other ways, public value can be understood as a public-spirited variation on the neoliberal theme of a marketized state, or what Sheldon Wolin calls an “economic polity” (1989). The public value concept imposes logics of market relations and languages of corporate governance on a wide array of political processes. Leading works imagine society as a “political marketplace” in which “we the citizens” function as a “collective consumer” (Moore 1995: 29). The emphasis on collectivities in this statement, like other features of the literature, can be seen as a departure from standard conceptions of neoliberalism. Ultimately, however, public-value scholarship shares a great deal with the neoliberal project it aims to contest. Indeed, the congruence of the two suggests that the public-value concept is poised to expand the power of neoliberal rationality in prevailing conceptions of governance and public life by employing it in the justification of progressive state power.

II. Public Value and the Downsizing of Democracy

The concept of public value emerged as a response to political developments – the marketization of governance, the elevation of private over public interests, and so on (Benington and Moore 2011: 7-11) – that are central to the contemporary crisis of democratic rule. In contesting neoliberalism, public-value scholarship positions itself against one of the great democratizing forces of contemporary politics. And as a model of governance that seeks to direct the exercise of authority, public-value is deeply entwined with questions of political power and
popular rule. A number of scholars have sought to align public-value governance with participatory and deliberative models of democracy (e.g., Stoker 2005; Benington 2011). Yet the framework’s relationship to democracy, conceptually and empirically, remains murky at best.

In this section, we seek to clarify this relationship and suggest that it is far more problematic than public-value scholars have acknowledged. Despite proclamations to the contrary, public-value governance does not deliver on its promises of “deepening democracy” and “tackling the democratic deficit” (Moore and Benington 2011: 263; Horner and Hutton 2011: 116). Such aspirations sit uncomfortably alongside elements of the public value framework that are hard to square with democratic principles. Indeed, the logic of public-value governance reinforces some of the key de-democratizing tendencies of neoliberal rationality.

To specify a working definition, we can locate democracy through its classical etymology, which combines demos (common people) with kratos (power). The term denotes the rule of the people, defining self-government as a question of power in the first instance. Power, in all its complexities and even in its coercive forms, is essential for the functioning of democracy; the terms of power relations stand at the heart of democratic criteria for evaluating practices of governance (Piven 2006; Hayward 2000; Mansbridge 1996; Dahl 1961). Margaret Canovan (2005) draws a useful distinction in this regard between processes of “popular authorization” and “popular rule.” In the former, political legitimacy and authority are drawn from the people in ways that do not depend on the people’s exercise of power. In the latter, legitimate, authoritative governance is grounded in the people’s experiences with power and capacities to exercise power over their conditions and relations.

Democracy, as we will use this term, aligns with the latter meaning and entails three core components. First, it strives for inclusive and equal popular participation in determining the
direction of collective life. Citizens of a democracy share in collective decision making and have the capacity to direct the exercise of authority. Second, it requires that citizens have the capacities needed to check arbitrary uses of authority and hold power accountable. Third, democracy rests on the power of citizens to reflect on and reconfigure their relationships with other citizens and with the dominant institutions of society (e.g. state, market, family).

The three dimensions are united by a concern for the sharing of power among citizens and between citizens and political leaders. This sharing of power may occur through direct participation (Pateman 1970) or, in systems of representation, through a mutual relationship in which representatives and citizens shape, influence, and mobilize one another on an ongoing basis (Disch 2011). The sharing of power, however, should not be confused with the sharing of interests, values, or preferences. Democracy necessarily entails – as a foundational premise and a practical source of action and renewal – contestation, difference, and conflict in the context of power relations (Mansbridge 1996; Mouffe 2005; Piven 2006). In a democracy, citizens strive to fashion a common world out of conflict and differences.

Specified in this manner, we can see that the problems of governance targeted by public-value theorists are closely tied to the erosion of democracy. Yet scholars in this genre rarely focus their attention on the root causes of the “democratic deficit” they seek to overcome (Horner and Hutton 2011: 116). In the American context, students of politics and power have clarified these developments in some detail. To list just a few: the growing dominance of corporate interests in “organized political combat” amid the decline of labor unions and civic associations (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Levi 2003; Skocpol 2004); the emergence of an “unequal democracy” based on the rising political importance of money, growing disparities of wealth, class biases in citizen voice, and differential representation skewed toward the rich
(Bartels 2008; Soss and Jacobs 2009; Gilens, forthcoming); the ascendance of marketized, 
managerial, and technocratic modes of governance (Wolin 2008; Brown 2003; Fischer 2009); 
partisan polarization and deadlock that renders government ineffective and entrenches a pro-
corporate, high-inequality status quo (McCarty 2007, Wood 2009); the rising use of “crafted 
talk” and policy-design strategies to cultivate popular acceptance of actions sought by extreme 
activists and wealthy donors (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Hacker and Pierson 2005); the 
persistence and growth of constitutional and institutional features that subvert popular rule (Dahl 
2002; Mann and Ornstein 2008, 2012; Carpenter 2010); the rise of disciplinary modes of poverty 
governance that deepen marginalization for the most disadvantaged (Soss, Fording, and Schram 
2011; Lerman and Weaver, forthcoming); and new uses of electoral rules to sideline or neutralize 
groups that are ill-served by the prevailing social order (Piven, Minnite, and Groarke 2009; 
Manza and Uggen 2006; Bullock 2010).

These and related developments in the field of power stand at the center of the failure of 
democratic politics today. Yet they are almost always neatly sidestepped in the literature on 
public value. Avoiding the complications and barriers to reform posed by power relations, 
public-value theorists locate our problems in weak conceptions of the common good and suggest 
that better outcomes can be expected once we specify new “alternatives for facilitating dialogue 
about public values” (Bozeman 2002: 147). Rather than contesting the outsized power of 
corporate interests, they call for a deeper collaboration between states and corporations – 
reconfigured by new languages and guidelines to promote the public interest.

The crisis of contemporary democracy, however, has little to do with the absence of 
languages and frames for deliberating the common good (which are plentiful) and is not 
primarily about the balance between public and private interests. It is better understood as the
unmooring of political power from the public. *Kratos* (power) has shifted away from the *demos* (common people) toward individuals and corporations with dominant market positions, toward extreme and attentive organized interests, and toward insulated managerial elites. By failing to attend to these dynamics, public-value scholars have pursued an agenda that rarely offers direct engagement with the historically-specific problems of governance we confront. At its best, it provides an idealistic but ineffective response to the erosion of democratic governance in a neoliberal era. At its worst, it incorporates neoliberal and managerial biases that further the eclipse of democratic rule.

The institutional counterpart to neoliberal political rationality, the arrangements that make its subversion of democracy concrete, can be usefully understood as a new political form that democratic theorists have called “managed democracy.” Nominally democratic self-understandings and institutions (e.g., contested elections) are combined in this political form with managerial modes of governing the public from above. As Sheldon Wolin (2008: 47) explains, “Managed democracy is democracy systematized… The United States has become the showcase of how democracy can be managed without appearing to be suppressed.” Rather than grounding governance in the conflict and contest of democratic politics, managerial authorities work to tamp down and skirt conflict – typically in ways designed to shore up consensus, sustain democratic appearances, and advance their own goals. As “the political [is] managerialized,” Wolin (2008) explains, “politics and elections as well as… government departments and agencies [become seen as sites for the deployment of] a managerial rather than a political skill.” In the process, the people are reduced to a “byword for the tendencies that good governance should hold at bay” (Wolin 2008: 150).5

---

5 Managed democracy is, in this sense, closely related to what some have called “post-democracy.” The latter denotes a political form in which “political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands” to the
Reform agendas in the public-value literature often bear a striking resemblance to the anti-democratic modes of governance depicted by theorists of managed democracy (see e.g., Moore 1995; Cole and Parston 2006; Bozeman 2002; Stoker 2007; Benington and Moore 2011). Citizen engagement is reduced to an element of the “authorizing environment” that creative public managers must navigate to achieve their visions for producing public value. Moral dilemmas and political conflicts are transformed into technical challenges of measurement, design, and delivery. The public manager is equated with and instructed to emulate the entrepreneurial corporate manager in dispatching questions of policy and governance. Citizens are positioned as taxpaying shareholders in government and as consumers of public services who deserve to receive “value” in return for their investments. Incorporated as sources of what Margaret Canovan (2005) calls “popular authorization,” the people are serviced and sidelined in ways that are deeply at odds with “popular rule.”

But how can this be? A primary feature of the public-value project is its incorporation of deliberative and participatory procedures to make government more effectively serve the public (Bozeman 2002; Stoker 2005; Moore 1995; Moore and Benington 2011; Benington 2011). Public value theorists align themselves with reforms in public administration and public policy that prioritize “governance-driven democratization” (Warren 2009). Stoker (2005), for example, emphasizes that what counts as public value will be determined through networks of deliberation that bring together elected officials, public managers, and key stakeholders (including citizens and corporations). This emphasis on citizen engagement, Stoker argues, is a key marker that

---

point that the “rule of the people” becomes a hollow fiction (Ranciere 1999: ch. 5). In post-democracy, elections operate as “tightly controlled spectacles” where citizens play a passive role, “responding only to the signals given to them” (Crouch 2004: 3-4). Behind the spectacle of electoral politics lies a system of governance in which the people are managed through coordinated action by actors drawn from various sectors of the political economy (Crouch 2004: ch. 2).
distinguishes public-value governance from both Wilsonian models of public administration and the New Public Management.

Indeed, some critics have been too quick to criticize public-value scholarship for relying on a static conception of the public that exists prior to and outside of dynamic democratic processes (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 416). Moore and Benington (2011: 273), for example, draw on John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* to rightly suggest that the “public does not naturally exist in society; it has to be created, to be called into existence.” They specify the challenge as one in which the public must constitute itself as a broad and inclusive community that is able to act on deliberatively established collective goals (2011: 273). The public interest, as Stoker (2006) affirms, should not be viewed as a fixed entity but rather as a shared understanding that emerges from deliberation over inputs, preferred outputs, and tradeoffs.

These and related arguments add a sorely-needed democratic component to the public-value model. The problem, however, is that deliberative and participatory procedures have been grafted onto a broader framework of governance adopted from corporate business culture that lies in tension with democratic politics and undermines citizens’ active exercise of power. Three features of the framework stand out in this regard.

First, consider the strong push in this literature to objectively define and measure public value so that the effectiveness and efficiency of public performance can adequately be judged. Even among scholars who emphasize that publics constitute and articulate themselves through a dynamic political process, one finds a consistent desire to root governance in clear and objective measures of “value for the public” (Bozeman 2002; Moore 1995; Parston and Cole 2006; Stoker 2006; Alford 2008; Horner and Hutton 2011). But how are we to reconcile the two? Once we affix a static measure of value to the public, we fix the public in place, rendering it static in a
manner that contradicts the promise of an evolving constitutive democratic process. The objective measure of the public interest moves forward in time, operating at cross purposes with subsequent deliberative processes that are supposed to allow new conceptions of public identities and interests to emerge. It is unclear how dynamic deliberative models, in which publics continually reconfigure themselves through ongoing political interactions, can be reconciled with a performance-centered approach to governance that establishes static measures of what is valuable for the public and then uses them to evaluate the production of public value over time.

Beneath this tension between fixed measures of public value and dynamic processes of public formation lurks a deeper problem. Public value theorists gravitate repeatedly toward a perspective that embraces the citizen’s role in governance for its instrumental value – that is, as a means toward the ultimate end of “producing public value.” Democracy, though, is defined in part by its open-endedness. It cannot guarantee policy outcomes that are more just or effective; it holds no claim to superior performance in the production of end goals. That is why instrumental uses of democratic forms typically place democracy in peril. Once democracy as an open-ended process is subordinated to the pursuit of particular ends, the valued ends underwrite new boundaries on popular rule. They guide and legitimate the policing and management of democracy itself. They reduce democracy to a tactic for producing outcomes (in this case, public values) that can often be achieved more efficiently and effectively through other means.

Indeed, it is this very dynamic that brings us to the second feature of public value that lies in tension with democratic aspirations: the framework’s elevation of politicians and public managers to the role of “guardians” of the common good (Dahl 1989: 52-79). Public-value governance exhibits many of the classic characteristics of what Deborah Stone (2002) calls “the rationality project.” As Rhodes and Wanna (2004: 410) point out, leading works in the field
presuppose “the virtues and desirability of the rational actor model of decision-making and corporate leadership.” Like earlier variants of the rationality project, which have taken many historical forms, public-value governance calls on managers to identify objectives that will advance the public interest and use their skills to formulate policy paths accordingly. Technocratic in orientation, the rationality project embraces a “mission of rescuing public policy from [conflict and] the indignities and irrationalities of politics” (Stone 1997: 7).

Public value scholars do not suggest that public managers can “banish” or transcend the political altogether (Moore 1995: 38; Alford 2008: 358). Politics is a major component of the “authorizing environment” and an essential process for creating and assessing public value. Repeatedly, though, proponents approach the messy process of politics – in which debate, contestation, difference, and disagreement rule the day – as a stumbling block standing in the way of public managers pursuing enlightened understandings of the common good. They charge public managers with the task of effectively navigating its traps and pitfalls, making sure that politics does not prevent the achievement of their creative visions of the public interest. As Rhodes and Wanna (2007: 413) aptly put it, “external politics should be ‘managed’,” and their transformative possibilities contained, so they do not corrupt the pursuit of public value.

Enacting the managerial subversion of democracy described by Sheldon Wolin, the public-value framework identifies open-ended political conflict and engagements with empowered publics as threatening “tendencies that good governance should hold at bay” (Wolin 2008: 150). Yet at the same time, this framework also calls on public managers to engage the public for a second purpose: to “fashion legitimacy and support for themselves, their policies, or their organizational strategies” (Moore 1995: 113). Moore and Benington (2011: 273) argue that

---

6 Stone refers to the rationality project as a “production model” of public policy (2002: 10), which neatly captures the language of “producing” public value found throughout the literature (Bozeman 2002: 155; Stoker 2007: 47; Moore 1995: 10, 30, 44).
public managers must construct the legitimacy needed to “mobilize networks of citizens to co-create public value;” they must enlist the “public to provide legitimacy and support for a [i.e., their] particular conception of public value.” Political participation, in this rendering, ceases to be a democratic process in which citizens exercise power and becomes instead an instrument for enhancing the legitimacy of governing managers (Benington 2011: 36).

In this aspect, public-value governance directs public managers to engage in a practice that Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) identify as deeply anti-democratic and call “simulated” or “instrumental” responsiveness. As governing actors pursue their own conceptions of the common good, they engage the public, not to respond to it in a substantive manner, but to bolster the legitimacy of their own positions and appear responsive to relevant constituencies. Thus, we find public-value theorists urging administrators to be creative in “managing public expectations” so as to increase citizen satisfaction with public services (Hutton and Horner 2001: 117). In their efforts to bring “what the public values” in line with their own agendas, public managers are cast as marketers and advertisers who, in the words Walter Lippmann, “manufacture consent” by producing a sellable portrayal of their vision of the common good (Wensley and Moore 2011).

What is especially troubling about this vision of public managers as “the new Platonic guardians and arbiters of the public interest” is that the category of public managers is extended by public-value theorists to include a wide array of elected and unelected officials (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 406, 408). Public managers include presidents, governors, mayors, and judges as well as lobbyists, political staff, civil servants, interest group leaders, administrators and even corporate managers (see Moore 1995: 2-3). Taking the logic of managed democracy down to the level of the subject, scholars such as Mark Moore (1995) reinterpret the relationship between citizens and elected officials (i.e., political representation) as a relationship between stakeholders
and public managers. Like all public managers, these officials are directed to ask “how best to develop a constituency that values what the manager wants or conceives” (Moore 2006; quoted in Rhodes and Wanna 2007, 406). In promoting this approach, public-value scholarship places itself squarely at odds with democratic theories of political representation – both those that prioritize substantive responsiveness to the public (Pitkin 1972; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) and those that emphasize a more dialogic relationship of co-construction between publics and their representatives (Disch 2011).

Third and finally, the public value framework provides an inhospitable host for democratic aspirations because it is erected on neoliberal conceptions of the citizen, state, and polity. At the heart of managed democracy, Wolin (2008) explains, we find a neoliberal merging of corporate and state rule that is organized by models, identities, and goals drawn from corporate culture. Core components of this anti-democratic political form permeate the academic literature on public value.

Mark Moore (1995: 29), for example, begins from a model of society as a “political marketplace” in which “we the citizens” are the “collective consumer”. The role of the collective is asserted here in a manner that challenges neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual. Yet the collective itself is neoliberalized through a redefinition of the citizenry as an aggregate consumer of public-value products. The political concept of popular sovereignty, with its emphasis on the conflicts and interchanges among empowered citizens, is replaced by the apolitical logic of consumer sovereignty. Alford (2011) and others offer up active images of “client co-production” and the “co-creation of public value.” Yet their underlying model reduces the active citizenry to a passive collective consumer of public values produced by public managers (Alford 2011; Wensley and Moore 2011, 131-133).
In privileging the “collective consumer,” public-value theorists echo neoliberal thinker Ludwig von Mises (2009: 23), who substitutes the “sovereignty of consumers in the market economy” for the sovereignty of citizens in the polity as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. The effect is to decenter and pacify citizens, treating them as consumers who await the value created by public organizations rather than as active agents determining the direction of collective life. As democratic theorist Carole Pateman (2012: 15) rightly emphasizes, the “conception of citizenship embodied in participatory democratic theory is that citizens are not at all like consumers.”

In the public-value framework, members of the public are also cast as more than mere consumers: as taxpayers, they have standing as shareholders. The governmental obligation to create public value is equated with and modeled after the corporate obligation to produce shareholder value (Meynhardt 2009, 209; Moore 1995). The “bottom line” of profitability in corporate governance serves as the guiding metaphor for public value as the ultimate aim of governance (Cole and Parston 2006).

By extending the neoliberal substitution of market roles for political citizenship in this manner, public-value models embrace a model that is roundly criticized by democratic theorists. Robert Dahl (1992), for example, warns against conceptions of “stockholder democracy” that cast the government as a corporation and citizens as its shareholders. Such conceptions, he argues (1992: 199), violate the fundamental principles of democratic equality. Sheldon Wolin (2008) advances a broader critique of “shareholder democracy,” emphasizing how shareholders in a corporation have little in the way of responsibility, obligation, or accountability to collective life. “Shareholder democracy” diminishes the active powers of the citizenry and gives the public a “sense of participation without demands or responsibilities” (Wolin 2008: 65).
Management in the name of shareholders is itself a “claim to rule,” distinct from democratic variants, that has its own logic of accountability modeled after the corporation’s duty to pursue profitability (Wolin 2008: 222). The shareholders of a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) are shielded from accountability for (and legally severed from liability for) the actions corporations pursue in fulfillment of this duty. They reap profits or losses without having to play an active role in the corporate firm itself, exercising their options to exit or express unhappiness when outcomes disappoint. In just this manner, the public-value framework suggests that taxpaying shareholders should expect “returns on their investments” in the form of actions and services provided through effective and efficient governance. Public accountability to taxpayers, like corporate accountability to shareholders, is secured by forcing public organizations to “report” on the value they have produced (Wensley and Moore 2011, 134).

As Wolin (2008) points out, this model bears little resemblance to a participatory democratic culture premised on value contestation, conflicting ideals and interests, and ongoing efforts to check arbitrary power. The claim to managerial rule, Wolin (2008: 22) writes, is “distinctive, for it concern[s] ruling in a context of intense competition, high risk, and big stakes… In that sense organizational power, with its emphasis upon expansion, dynamic leadership, and risk taking, contrast[s] with constitutional authority, with its emphasis upon restraint, settled ways, checks and balances.”

Public value proponents clearly embrace the former at the expense of the latter. To be effective, they argue that public managers (whether presidents or administrators) must operate according to rapidly shifting contexts, crafting forms of “strategic communication” (Moore 1995: 185) to pursue shifting objectives in the context of “competitive dynamics” (Cole and Parston 2006: 135). Like successful corporate managers, they must employ “dynamic leadership” and
“strategic planning” to quickly implement their agendas for the shareholding public (Moore 1995: 69). It should be readily evident why this top-down corporate model of governance conflicts with democratic politics – a political form well-known for its tendencies to move slowly. The democratic traversal of public deliberation, coalitional bargaining, ideological conflicts, and institutional checks resembles nothing so much as Max Weber’s image of politics as the “slow boring of hard boards.” Democracy embraces the often slow tempo of deliberation and countervailing powers that the dynamic orientation of corporate management rejects.

Taken together, these features of the public value framework place it at odds with democracy and empowered citizen governance. Public-value theorists emphasize the need for participatory mechanisms that draw citizens into the process of governance. But the capacity to participate should not be confused with the capacity to resist (Edelman 1977) or with shared abilities to set the direction of collective life (Bachrach and Baratz 1970). The meaning of a participatory institution depends on the broader framework in which it is embedded. Indeed, Carole Pateman recently used her 2012 APSA Presidential Address to stress precisely this point.

Taking aim at reforms exemplified by the rise of participatory budgeting, Pateman points out that participatory institutions can be integrated into public governance frameworks in a variety of ways that do not lead to the substantive democratization of political power. Even when they promote good and responsible governance, participatory institutions often fail to have democratizing effects because they are not conjoined with a broader agenda of political transformation. Institutional and administrative reforms that aim to expand citizen participation are easily assimilated into dominant institutions in ways that leave prevailing structures of power and authority intact. In such cases, public participation merely serves governing authorities (such as public managers) by providing a stronger foundation of knowledge and legitimacy for their
exercise of power. When citizen participation is assimilated into governance in this manner, it works to reinforce rather than transform structures of power and authority (Dussel 2008: 89).

Pateman’s point here is essential for making sense of models that graft participatory and deliberative processes onto a broader neoliberal framework of managed democracy. The deliberative reforms embraced by public-value governance facilitate public participation in a neoliberal project that actually diminishes their power as democratic citizens. Positioned as consumers and shareholders, they are enlisted as “co-creators” who participate in turning public managers’ visions of public value into a reality.

**Conclusion: Toward a Democratic Conception of the Common Good**

We have argued in this essay that the concept of public value ultimately fails to revitalize and specify notions of the common good in a manner that counters neoliberalism and promotes substantive democratic politics. In a number of respects, public value can be seen as a neoliberal translation of older conceptions of the common good. As such, it incorporates elements of a political rationality that has contributed greatly to the marketization of politics and consequently the eclipse of the public as a source of democratic power.

To clarify, we do not seek to do away with notions of the common good, which we view as indispensable for any form of politics that is premised on citizens exercising power in common. In an era marked by large and widening economic and political disparities (Bartels 2008), some idea of the common good is needed for any form of politics that can truly challenge the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of the few. We thus share many of the normative concerns expressed by public-value scholars, as well as their desire to formulate alternatives to neoliberal frameworks that can refocus governance on what we hold in common and what we should collectively strive to become. The idiom of “public value” fails to offer a
viable alternative in this regard and strikes us as unable to provide a compelling public language for challenging the widening gulf in political power that characterizes U.S. politics.

In closing, then, we hope to invite more work to revitalize conceptions of the common good, not less. Toward this end, we highlight four key ideas for efforts going forward: some basic principles we believe should be borne in mind by those who seek to develop a more democratic and politically potent conception of the common good. We hope these ideas will be productive for those who want align political practice with a more robust conception of democracy that is attentive to questions of power, exclusion, and inequality.

First, democratic conceptions of the common good will always be partial and provisional, never universal or static. We should not assume that there is a coherent, universal public that shares a common vision of the good society (or common interests), nor should we assume that the meaning of the common good can be settled once and for all. Democracy is ultimately an ongoing process of argumentation and conflict over contested visions of the common good – over what constitutes the common good in a particular time and place (Stone 2002). As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (47) has aptly put it, “The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict – handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion – is what makes democracy work, what makes for the mutual revision of opinions and interest.” Conceived of in a democratic manner, the common good can never be specified a priori as an input for the political system or as a static measure for the quality of governance. It cannot be imposed from an outside position as a way to bound or police governance. It must be advanced within and through the democratic process itself. Because democracy is always
incomplete – always producing fleeting, partial outcomes for future revision – it is weakened, not strengthened, by efforts to specify a settled, universal definition of the common good.

Second, *democratic conceptions of the common good will always entail exclusions and recognize counter-publics*. If our notion of the common good is not to be stable and universal, if rather it is to be constituted through democratic political relations, then it will inevitably entail exclusions (Young 1990). By this, we do not mean to endorse exclusions or throw up our hands and say this is just the “way of the world.” The point is to acknowledge that democracy *always* entails exclusions of some form and, thus, any democratic articulation of the common good will reflect the inclusion of some but not others. Commitments to democracy are commitments to an ongoing process of confronting these forms of exclusion. Thus, democracy is not only a process for constituting the common good, it is a commitment to interrogating notions of the common good for the ways they close off alternative visions and undermine the legitimacy and possibility of marginalized groups challenging their preeminence.

Conceptions of the common good are always rooted in some definition of the public. And wherever there is a public, there will also be a counter-public to claim a different vision of the public good. Vibrant democracies depend on the preservation and acknowledgement of spaces for counter-public resistance. Even in cases where deliberative processes produce a substantial amount of agreement on the common good, the pursuit of this common good must be tempered by the acknowledgment of exclusions and the need to coerce some to go along with the victorious vision of others (Mansbridge 1996). The pursuit of any notion of the common good, if it is to be democratic, must value and protect “enclaves of resistance” (or “subaltern counterpublics”) where those who are excluded can regroup without being subsumed into
dominant political discourses and debates – and return to make new arguments and claims on governance (Mansbridge 1996: 58; Fraser 1990).

Third, because democracy is fundamentally about power, democratic approaches to the common good must be as well. Democracy entails an ongoing process of defining and pursuing the common good, but it is far more than a mere instrument for achieving the common good. Democracy is about sharing power substantively and equally among citizens, and challenging power relations that result in political marginalization. In this sense, efforts to advance the common good must themselves be approached as power relations. They must be evaluated not just for the ends they promote but also for the political relations that attend and propel them. At the same time, democratic conceptions of the common good must confront power relations head on, embracing the need to disrupt societal arrangements that exclude some for the sake of others and prevent political power from being equally and broadly shared among citizens (Wolin 1996, Rancière 1999). Rather than treating “people who hold values outside the mainstream” as threats to the collective good (Bozeman 2002: 151), we must ask how values outside the mainstream are tied to positions of marginality in the power relations of social, economic, and political life. We should ask how these forms of marginalization can be countered in the process of deliberating the common good as well as how efforts to reduce marginalization should figure into the substance of the common good we promote.

Fourth, and finally, there is no “mutual benefit society.” Even in a highly diverse society, we hold many things in common. But it is a grievous mistake to image that we all have the same interests or that the good of some will not come at the expense of others. Democratic conceptions of the common good cannot privilege collaboration and mutual benefit while ignoring the fact that some of the collaborating actors are benefiting from the exploitation and marginalization of
others. Relations of inequality and expropriation exist along many societal dimensions (Tilly 1998). But in capitalist democracies, they are always present in market relations in forms that recommend a higher level scrutiny for projects that pursue the common good through collaborations with corporations and other market actors who hold dominant positions in the political economy.

As we strive to develop democratic conceptions of the common good, we must heed Charles Lindblom’s (1982) call for a critically-minded understanding of American democracy that challenges the assumption that the interests of the public and capital can be easily balanced in a “mutual-benefit society” (see also Young 1990). Political power is deeply entwined with economic power and its perennial uses to benefit some at the expense of others. Thus, efforts to ground the common good in a democratization of political power cannot be pursued in isolation from efforts to democratize economic power and make it more accountable to the public. Efforts to empower the public as participants in envisioning and pursuing the common good must address their role as participants in anti-democratic economic institutions such as the workplace (Pateman 1975). The concentration of power in corporate capital must be addressed as a fundamental barrier to empowering the public as self-governing citizens who engage one another in a democratic process of discovering and enacting the common good.
Bibliography


Fraser, Nancy. 1990. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text*, 25/26, 56-80.


Hacker, Jacob and Paul Pierson. 2010. “Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political
Organization, and the Precipitous Rise Top Incomes in the United States.” *Politics and Society*, 38, 2 (June), 152-204.


Soss, Joe, Sanford Schram and Richard Fording. 2011. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal
Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.


