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# Dialogues on Voluntary Action and New Commons

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Dialogues  
On Voluntary Action  
and New Commons

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ROGER A. LOHMANN



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# Atheneus and Us

## **Dramatis Personae**

**Author,** a professor of social theory and practice accustomed to doing an annual presentation at the conference of a research society to which he belongs.

**Director,** the principal administrative officer of the association.

**Member,** a friend of the Author who is also a member of the association.

**Chorus,** a small group of other members of the association committee who congregate in the hallway outside the principal meeting room.

**LED:** An animatronic panel of Light Emitting Diodes (LED) positioned above the proscenium arch.

*The time is Fall, last year. Or maybe a decade from now. An association committee meeting has just broken up. A group of members are standing around talking with the director of the association.*

**Author:** You know that resource form you sent out? I know its late, but I was wondering if it would be possible for you to arrange a different venue for my presentation at the Spring conference.

**Director:** [*Somewhat skeptical.*] I don't know. The program is pretty well finished. What do you have in mind?

**Author:** I'd like to do my presentation this year in the form of a Greek symposium. I got the idea from Daniel Bell, who did his dissertation on communitarianism a few years back. It was written in the form of a Socratic dialogue. I thought I would do a "symposium" involving more characters, and call it an Athenium. You know, in memory of Atheneus, who wrote a number of literary works set as symposium discussions.

**Director:** [*Now openly incredulous.*] What? Aren't you aware that to the Greeks, a symposium was a full-scale banquet given by a host for 'his' (and I use the term advisedly) aristocratic friends at which ideas were discussed, but also copious quantities of food and drink were consumed? [Laughing] We've already got all the meals for the conference planned, and besides, even with our grants, the budget wouldn't allow us to do a private banquet for one member and his guests. *Pauses.*

[*Smiling wickedly*] Unless, of course, you were planning to arrange funding for the food and drink yourself?

**Author:** [*Oblivious.*] No, actually, the meal wouldn't interest me all that much. I've been aware since my community organizing days of the importance of eating together for the development of any real sense of community. Having at least one meal together each day has been one of the things I've always liked about our conferences. But that communal lunch ought to suffice for that purpose.

**Director:** *Icily.* As I recall, Greek symposia were male-only gatherings. I hope you aren't suggesting that we could hold a session at our conference which would exclude women, are you?

**Author:** *Aside.* This is going to be harder than I thought! Exclusion of women had never even occurred to me, but she's right – that would have been standard practice for the Athenian Greeks. Does that kind of difference in social custom make this whole idea of developing ideas in a Greek literary format suspect? If so, democratic participation, giving behavior, and a whole lot of other ideas derived from the Greeks might just be equally suspect.

*(Sighs and walks back upstage)*

I'd better make a special point that this Atheneum – like community – must be open to everyone if it is going to be meaningful. Maybe I can avoid laying out the entire argument if I just mention that Charles Taylor – in part because of his experience in Francophone Quebec during the succession controversy – is a communitarian who is particularly convincing on that point. Citations are always a good way to try to end an argument!

**Director:** Maybe we need a little more background before we decide.

**Author:** My paper this year is to be a review of recent literature on communitarianism. You may remember that more than a year ago, our dear friend Peter asked me to do a review essay for the journal of books by Etzioni and Phillips. I thought Etzioni wrote a fluffy little manifesto mostly useful as a tract to promote his communitarian movement. But I couldn't grasp what Phillips was trying to get at. He mentioned and discarded *Habits of the Heart*, which didn't bother me much, but something about his send-ups of Alastair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel roused my curiosity. So what started out as a simple two-book review turned into a major reading program. Now I'd like to find something worthwhile to do with all that ill-gotten gain. In the current neo-liberal political climate in the U.S., communitarianism has about as much chance of success as a snowball in hell.

**Director:** [*impatiently*] What does all this have to do with your symposium idea? And Atheneus for that matter? I thought the Atheneum was a building in Athens.

**Member:** Actually, so did I. New England is just full of town libraries and community buildings named "Atheneums." There's practically one in every town. Most of them are located in mid-19th century Greek-revival buildings to match the name, but since the industrial revolution, the whole idea doesn't mean much. They did get the name from the Greeks, I'm sure, but somewhere along the way Atheneus seems to have gotten lost, or at least transformed and melted into the background.

**Author:** Yes, but not for a Greek place or building. It was from a person – Atheneus. Atheneum means something like "a place to honor Atheneus" and of

course to remember the group discussions he composed. Atheneums – town libraries – in towns like Salem and Concord have included public lecture rooms that have been important community resources at least since the time of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many of them are still used that way today.

**Director:** (*somewhat impatiently*) I still don't see what any of this has to do with our annual conference.

**Member:** This is modern social science, and this is our creed.

**Member and Chorus:** (*chanting, in unison*):

We are devoted to discovering the laws of voluntary acts,  
The true structures of nonprofit organizations,  
And the real nature of the third sector.  
Social science is a purely modern pursuit.  
It sets us apart from the dark and ignorant past,  
And from history and the liberal arts,  
As every research methods text  
Will tell you unequivocally – the structured essay  
With subheadings is the accepted form  
(*each syllable pronounced emphatically*)  
Of da-ta bas-ed sci-en-ti-fic pre-sen-ta-tion

**Member:** (*laughing*) It must be those readings on communitarianism. They've parched his brain!

**Author:** (*earnestly*) It must be those readings on communitarianism. That's the tie. In the last year, I've read several theoretical treatises on communitarianism, but the one I liked best was Daniel Bell's *Communitarianism and Its Critics*. It's written in the form of a dialogue between two old friends (who sound and act curiously young to be really "old" friends).

By the way, this isn't that Daniel Bell; the New York intellectual and Columbia sociologist, although I thought it might have been. It actually parallels some of the liberal arts portions of that Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. I ordered the book originally thinking they were by that Bell, but this guy is a young professor of philosophy who had been teaching in Singapore and then did his degree

somewhere in England. [*Aside*] Can you imagine an American doctoral committee in the social sciences approving a dialogue as a dissertation? The resident methodologist would freak out at least two standard deviations!

Well, I spent most of last summer trying to think of some way to present my conference paper on communitarianism in the form of a dialogue. Some of the people who read my comment on poetic language in *The Commons* (1992) already think I've gone over the edge with my mentions of the poetry of language, and I wanted to provoke them a bit more. [*Laughs to himself.*] I guess that's rather foolish.

I finally gave up that idea and wrote my paper in the usual discursive essay form and sent it off to the reviewers. Then, I ran into one of those quirky, idiosyncratic experiences that social scientists mostly ignore but that historians, belle lettrists and psycho-therapists have a field day with.

Since I'm currently reflecting on Alasdair MacIntyre's and Michael Walzer's focus on the importance of the local and the particular, it also opened up for me this symposium idea.

**Director:** And? I still don't quite understand.

**Author:** It was my birthday a couple of weeks ago...

**Friend:** Didn't you present your *Lettuce* paper on your birthday?

**LED:** R.L. Lohmann. "And Lettuce Is Nonanimal..." AVAS. October 14, 1987.

**Author:** That's right. It was my first major stab at commons theory. I presented it at the ARNOVA meeting. In Kansas City. On my 45th birthday. But that was eons ago. It took me six years, in fact, to work out the details of the argument of that paper before it grew into *The Commons* book.

This year another something truly strange happened. A few days before my birthday, a copy of the Merriam-Webster *Encyclopedia of Literature* arrived from one of our book clubs. Nancy said she hadn't ordered it and I knew that I hadn't. She was going to send it back, but I said, in passing 'Let's keep it. Give it to me as a birthday present.'

As I looked at it, the first entry I happened on was about “Atheneus” and it discussed his method of constructing group discussions. It was clear immediately how I wanted to reshape my treatment of communitarianism.

**Friend:** [*laughing*] I shudder to think what our colleagues the therapists would make of all this!

**Author:** I know. Time, and the press of mortality and all that. But, birthdays are also very important expressions of community, aren’t they?

[*Turning to the director.*] Actually, the more I think about it, the more it seems clear that I don’t need a banquet hall and I don’t want to serve a meal or anything of the sort. I’ll just structure the arguments of the paper in the form of conversations between a group of characters based on members I know and who I hope won’t be too offended by such presumption. The idea is a strange one in contemporary American social science – to use a dramatic form to discuss ideas and not to exposé character or plot.

But as I said, Daniel Bell did it. Around that time, Bruce Ackerman also used the dialogical form, and Benjamin Barber then turned the tables on Ackerman. He borrowed - some might say hijacked - Ackerman’s characters, including a fictional Bruce himself, to critique Ackerman. So, its not as if I’m breaking any new ground here.

**Director:** [*Resigned.*] As long as the program committee approves and it doesn’t involve arranging another meal, I really don’t care!

**Author:** Well, in that case, [*holding up an ebook manuscript*] take a look at these.



# Agora

## Or, The Public Space

### **Dramatis Personae**

A philosophical positivist

Director, Theatrical, not executive

A Rational Individual (*Homo economicus*)

Jason, a store manager

Madison, a nonprofit manager

Kaitlin, a government department head

Brandon, a foundation executive

Alan, a shopkeeper

Nixon, a waiter

A Police gang

### **Prologue**

*The curtain is down. In front of it, a slightly disheveled man walks in from one wing.*

**Positivist:** Ladies and gentleman. Thank you for interrupting your reading to join us this morning. It is morning, isn't it? I've been trapped in the print on these pages with these actors so long I just don't know what's what anymore. They're liars all of them. You've seen it from the very start. Take that bunch behind the cur-

tain that you are going to see in a moment. [*Pointing.*] They aren't really a group of friends sitting in a public square, but they'll try to convince you they are. They're just actors sitting on this very stage right behind me. And friends? Certainly not; They go their separate ways and barely speak to one another when the curtain is down! Most likely, they can't stand the sight of one another. They've never even met the author who put every word into their weak little mouths. This isn't what real social science is about!

**Director:** Wait a minute! Wait a minute! What's going on here? [*To the positivist.*] What are you doing? Why are you bothering these good people? They've come to see our play. Not to listen to your rants about 'objective reality and truth'.

**Positivist:** I was just warning them about you and this pack of imposters you've hired.

[*Aside.*] It's all a charade, you know. Theater, like theory, isn't real. I'm not sure even people are real. Only facts are real.

[*Pauses briefly, then continues.*] Willful suspension of disbelief! That's what actors call it when they're talking among themselves and their tricks. That just means they're engaged in an elaborate hoax. The author is just trying to trick you and these actors are his willing stooges. And, the worst part is, they know you're so gullible you'll go along with this little charade. Don't believe any of it! Or, better yet, run for the exits while you can. Get away. Quick. Get back to reality any way you can!

**Director:** [*Sighs. Then sadly to the audience.*] Every time someone reads this it's the same thing. He just can't seem to understand that if we aren't real, then he isn't either.

[*To the positivist.*] You've got to stop doing this! Now come along so the production can start.

[*To the audience.*] On behalf of this theater, please accept my apologies. He is really one of us, as I'm sure you realize. An actor's part written in a script like the rest of us, but he simply can't deal with that. *Grabs the Positivist by the arm.*

**Positivist:** *[Pulling away.]* Statistics! Now there's something real. Something I can count on! Facts! Data! Give me a good old survey anytime! None of these metaphors and symbols, fourth walls and objective correlatives and all this artifice. They're false! They're just words!

Never trust a word! That's what I say!

**Director:** *[Frustrated.]* But you're speaking in words!

*The Positivist makes a few futile gestures toward the audience, trying unsuccessfully to communicate some further message, and walks off-stage, looking dejected. The curtain rises.*

## Scene I – The Dancer

*Early afternoon in a Public Piazza. A lone figure of indeterminate gender is standing far downstage left. He/she begins to move about in a manner inscrutable to the audience. Gradually the lights come up on a table outside a café in the center of the stage where four people are engaged in animated conversation.*

**Positivist:** *[From backstage.]* I warned you! Didn't I warn you? They aren't real!

*In the background is the entrance to a shopping mall. Next door is a university campus gate. Upstage left and beyond it is the entrance to an imposing government complex next to a religious building. For those unable to read architecture or symbols, signs over the doors of the various buildings read "Church", "State", "University" and "Market" in different, graphically-appropriate typestyles.*

**Jason:** *Directly to the audience.* See that person over there? We call him, or her, or whatever that is, The Rational Individual. He thinks he's all by himself in the world and the only one out here in public.

**Kaitlin:** *Speaking to Jason.* That's a woman. Her name is Bella Solipsist. She's definitely a woman. They say she came here from Vienna, after being imagined somewhere in Central Europe, with a stop over in London. She teaches at the uni-

versity. Philosophy, I think. Or was it Economics? Politics? Psychology maybe? One of those disciplines, anyway, where they place great stock in the individual. She must have finished her classes for the day.

*Nixon the waiter approaches the table from the café door.*

**Nixon:** It's a shame someone –anyone- thinks they have a right to prance around like that out here in our beautiful public square...

**Madison:** [*Irritably.*] They do! They do have that right. Everyone has that right! Everyone. Why can't you understand that? Now please put down those dim sum and leave us alone.

**Kaitlin:** [*To Jason.*] In Chinese, dim sum means "to touch the heart".

**Nixon:** [*Sneering.*] Yes madam. Would you like me to touch your heart?  
[*Reaching toward Kaitlin in an exaggerated manner. Kaitlin ignores him, as she watches Bella.*]

**Madison:** Back off, Turkey! Or we'll dim your sum!

*Nixon slinks back toward the café.*

**Nixon:** [*Sotto voce.*] Terrorist!

**Madison:** [*Laughing.*] Fascist!

**Brandon:** [*Aside.*] She really enjoys calling Nixon a fascist. I think he enjoys labeling her too. Does it all the time. [*Hesitates, then.*] I'm not certain she actually knows what it means. Ideological labeling never was her strong suit.

**Kaitlin:** [*Oblivious, still watching Bella.*] Sort of makes you want to get up and dance with her, doesn't it?

**Jason:** [*Sarcastically.*] Yeah. Right. Anyone care to do The Madwoman's Waltz?

**Brandon:** That's gotta be a guy! They say he started doing this during his first year at university. Supposedly, he read Mill the father, and Bentham and Mill the son, Adam Smith, and followed that with Mises, Hayek, and finally *Atlas Shrugged* all in one long winter break. It must have fried his brain. Then, the very next semester, he took a course in microeconomics and another in logical positivism. He's never been quite right since.

**Kaitlin:** [*Turning to Brandon.*] Don't be so cerebral! She obviously has a broken heart. [*Sighs. Then shakes her head.*] Several bricks short of a load, that one. They probably ought to just put her away.

**Jason:** [*Slightly agitated.*] Next, you're going to tell us that he and Nixon and his pal J. Edgar caused all our problems?

**Brandon:** [*Defensively.*] I don't mean to be political. I'm just saying...

**Madison:** [*To Kaitlin.*] She's not crazy. She just reached too deeply into anarchist philosophy or something at an impressionable age, and hasn't yet found her own way out. That's enough to mess with anybody's head. I'll bet she convinced herself she was a solipsist; now she can't find anybody real enough to disagree with her and talk her out of her own thoughts.

**Brandon:** No, it can't be that. She must be doing drugs. Or it's a mental illness. It has to be a disease of some sort. He's sick. He needs help. Probably take a lot of therapy, too. There is help for people like him. *Pauses.* Or, there should be.

**Kaitlin:** [*To Madison.*] Yeah, we all went through a phase like that, but most of us got over it! Look at her. She must think everything in the Agora are just figments of her imagination. Is? Are? [*Pause*]. Whatever.

**Jason:** I heard she's never like that in class. Ever. It's only here out in the public square she gets like that. In private, they say she's just as normal as you or me.

**Madison:** That's not saying much! Perhaps you may need a different comparison group? [*Laughter.*]

**Alan:** It's performance art. That's what it is. It has to be. Like Stephen Colbert and his various adventures.

*Suddenly, a squad of police in full riot gear moves quickly in formation out of the Statehouse. They grab the individual and move back in exaggerated coordinated movements toward the entrance and back inside.*

**Brandon:** That's not exactly the kind of help I had in mind.

**Madison:** That must be Nixon's doing! He's such a control freak. He must've called Homeland Security. [*Pauses.*] She wasn't hurting anyone. [*Another pause.*] Do you think she'll be okay?

**Kaitlin:** It's really too bad. She's such a colorful character. And she moves so beautifully. It's all really very poetic.

**Jason:** Colorful? You think she's colorful? Colorful characters are bad for business; always have been. 'Get your colorful poor and homeless and poetic mentally ill and retarded off our streets and away from my store.' That pretty much sums up 500 years of urban social policy.

**Brandon:** Speaking of business, I need to get back to work. Same time tomorrow? [*Murmurs of assent.*]

*Alan exits into the storefront.*

**Kaitlin:** It's always so pleasant out here in the public square. But I should get back too.

*They all get up and move slowly away from the table. Jason goes into the Mall, Kaitlin goes into The Statehouse as Brandon and Madison walk together, talking softly, toward the exit stage right. As they walk, The Individual emerges from the Statehouse carrying a large stack of paper.*

**Madison:** [*Looking back.*] Look at that stack of forms they gave her! Her lawyer is going to be busy for weeks! Nixon always hates government paper work except in this kind of case. [*Pause.*] I hope she has a good lawyer.

*The Individual is left alone onstage as Madison and Brandon exit. As s/he turns and exits, The Individual looks at the stack of paper, and with a shake of the head tosses the stack into the air and goes back to the silent dance seen earlier.*



# Knowledge, Politics And Sovereignty

## Dramatis Personae

**Phil** - A political philosopher; A mythical creature devoted to telling others the truth of how they ought to behave freely.

**LED** - A light emitting diode panel above the proscenium arch displaying supplementary information. A true *deus ex machina*.

**Director** - Theatrical, not administrative. Looks like everyone's cliché of a person of the theater.

**Sociologist** - Another mythical creature whose days are filled with scrutinizing the conduct of others in the most nonjudgmental manner possible.

**Thespian** - A rather affected and pretentious amateur actor and community theater buff.

**Classicist** - A mythical speaker of Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Aramaic.

**Social Biologist** - A real scientist, entirely data driven when studying insects, and highly fanciful and indifferent to evidence in speculating about his fellow humans.

**Author** - A completely fictional dramatic character whose resemblance to any natural person, living or dead, is purely accidental.

**Activist** - A young, earnest volunteer rather incongruously wearing her heart on her sleeve.

*The lights come up on a bare stage with the curtain closed. Phil steps from the wings to center stage. As he walks, the curtain behind him opens part-way, revealing a small Fauvist-influenced grandstand, with a sign at the top saying "Academic Heights". In the left corner of the*

*grandstand is a banner with a printed sign labeled “Inquiry” and in the right corner is another marked “Acceptance”.*

*Phil ascends to the top row, steps behind a podium in the center marked “Politics” and turns to address the audience.*

**Phil:** (*solemnly*) Good morning, or afternoon, or evening, as the case may be in your time zone. Welcome to the Global Reality Theater. In the last year of the previous millennium, Jane Mansbridge argued that American society was currently in what she characterized as a “holding pattern” in regard to democracy.

**LED:** Jane Mansbridge. (1999) The Holding Pattern. *Political Theory*. 27(5). 706-715.

The author of the *Voluntary Action and the New Commons* has borrowed, appropriated and stolen a broad range of ideas from several traditions to produce an electronic book. Some are footnoted; many are not. He has done so with little regard for formal academic disciplines or traditional theoretical or disciplinary boundaries.

Regardless of how few, or how many, others may share his, or some other, deep concern for democracy at any given moment, the question of how people in a state or condition of self-governing community interact with, and relate to, one another as they begin to move toward greater democracy is an important one.

*Phil pauses and looks out at the audience for reactions. Clears his throat and continues*

Yes. Well then, in the last decade of the old millennium Jean Cohen and Anthony Arato, began their massive study of *Civil Society* with the observation that, and I quote ““We are on the threshold of another great transformation of the self-understanding of modern societies. There have been many attempts from various vantage points to label this process: the ambiguous terms 'post- industrial' and 'post-modern' reflect the vantage points of economic and cultural concerns.”

**LED:** Cohen, J. L., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

**Phil:** An important question for all of us to consider here is what organized form the dynamics of such a transformation in self-understanding might take. Since it concerns a condition in the future, of course, none of us may know the answer with certainty. However, for anyone concerned with moving in that direction, the issue is one of “What can I do to help?”

A very common answer to that question, particularly among those of us in the philosophy trade, is to try to find and answer the key questions. The author of *New Commons* is not concerned with the details of a logically coherent political philosophy, but rather with the practical ways in which those who are interested might, in a coordinated manner, move in new directions. . .

*Before Phil can continue, the director comes rushing in from the wings.*

**Director:** *(Shouting while running)* Wait a minute! Wait a minute! What do you think you’re doing? Are you crazy? You can’t treat a serious theoretical book like this! Have you lost all sense of perspective? A dramatization? And... and..., with..., with footnotes projected on an LED panel? You call that social science? What are we supposed to do with footnotes on a stage set?

*Phil points up to the LED board above the proscenium.*

**Phil:** They call it mixed media. It’s all the rage today. I was going to do Powerpoint slides. Instead, the Author decided to publish this in an electronic book (e-book) edition, saving me the trouble. But then he decided to pull it out and publish it separately.

*Clears his throat; turns back toward the audience and resumes lecturing.*

In a similar vein, Benjamin Barber told us a few years earlier that, and I quote, “Strong democracy is a distinctively modern form of participatory democracy. It rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogeneous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purposes and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions rather than their altruism or good nature.” New commons are, in the author’s view, examples of such. . .

**LED:** Barber, Benjamin. (1984). *Strong Democracy*. p. 117.

**Phil:** Ever since the much-overlooked Mary Parker Follett, we have understood that such views are in sharp contrast to models of minimally representative democracy government, in which the act of voting for our representatives is one rather weak form of such self-governance.

**LED:** Mary Parker Follett. (1920). *The New State*. London: Longmans, Green.

**Phil:** But, this raises a number of questions. How, for example, are self-governing communities of citizens supposed to recognize and define their homogeneous interests, to deliver their civic education and to pursue their common purposes and mutual actions? If they receive too much guidance and direction from philosophers and others, can they be truly be self-governing? Or, are they merely following scripts prepared for them?

*Pauses and smiles at the audience, obviously pleased with what he considers a brilliant insight.*

**Director:** This just will not do! This is completely unacceptable! (*Fumbling in his pockets*) Where's my cell phone? (*Shouting to the wings*) Megan! Judy! I need to speak to the producer at once. Get her on the phone! (*Walks off stage while speaking into the phone*).

*A sociologist walks on stage and addresses the philosopher:*

**Sociologist:** Man, I've been listening to this rap of yours. You know, you may think this is really original stuff, but its not. Decades ago, Erving Goffman said we could understand society - and, I suppose, that would include civil society - through the metaphor of drama. And, even before him there was that economist Kenneth Burke with his pentad of Actor, Scene, Act, Agency and Purpose. . .

**Phil:** Yes, I know. Actually, Kenneth Burke was a professor of literature. The economist was Kenneth Boulding. But I don't want to get into a disciplinary pissing contest with you. I'm making an argument for intellectual modesty.

They are joined onstage by a rather precocious thespian in black beret and scarf and a classicist in flowing academic robes.

**Thesbian:** Goffman and Burke were plagiarists! Mere cartoon figures mouthing the immortal thoughts of William Shakespeare, who said (assuming a pretentious posture and even more pretentious tone):

*Faces the audience, moves downstage center and projects in an exaggerated manner.*

‘All the world's a stage. And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts. His acts being seven ages.’

**Classicist:** Yes, but it was Plato who invented the written dialogue, putting words in the mouth of his fictional Socrates.

**Sociologist:** [*continues*] . . . And whatever Burke's ten ratios were. I always forget.

**Entomologist:** [*Joining the growing melee.*] All this socializing is mere genetics. Ants are the original social beings.

**Director:** *Back on stage, solicitously, takes the dramatist, the sociologist, the entomologist, and the classicist in hand and begins steering them all offstage.*

That's all right, darlings. No one in this audience reads Burke anymore, much less Edmund Burke, Shakespeare, Plato or, for that matter, Edward O. Wilson. They may have read Hamlet or Julius Caesar once when they were forced to. Now, you really must get on with your faculty meeting. [*brightens*] Campus parking is on the agenda today!

**Sociologist:** Don't forget what Sartre, and Phil Reiff and what's-his-name said about therapy and social control . . . .

**Director:** Yes, yes. Very wise men, all of them.... *They all exit together.*

**Phil:** [*resuming his lecture stance*] The beginnings of a new political understanding of democracy, of course, are all to be addressed in the principles laid out in my next seven lectures. . . .

**Author:** *Rushing onstage.* Phil, you gotta stop this! Stop it! Stop talking and look at your audience. Not another word! Just look! Those are real people you are talking to. They're your compatriots; your fellow citizens! Don't lecture them like

they were freshmen hoping for you to give them an A so they can get into law school. These people are citizens; they came in here of their own accord as an act of civil society. Don't make it an act of charity for them! They are all - well, most of them, anyway - democrats with a small d *and* republicans with a small r.

[*Hesitates briefly*] There may be the odd fascist, I suppose, and a few old socialists. Perhaps even a smattering of monarchists and 'conservatives', whatever the hell those labels mean today. Most profess complete support for some form of personal liberty, democracy, economic markets and an open society.

[*Continues.*] They understand, Phil, even when you sometimes don't, that when it comes to civil society academic elites - philosophers, economists, social researchers, and all the rest of you - are just actors in the same theaters of public life as them, often on the very same stages. They're watching - well, actually, reading - right now, but they know even if you don't that they can close this book at any time, make this stage disappear completely, and just get up and walk out to do other things any time they like, and all the most definitive philosophical principles can't do anything to prevent them.

You only think you can fool them with your show of erudition, Phil. Even when you're up there on your grandstand, claiming to offer an objective view of them and all that's real, they know that when it comes to the kind of democratic society they want to live in, you don't really have any special brand of civic truth. Yours is just one more point of view. [*Then, emphatically, and slowly*] It's just your opinion. Your doxa; isn't that your fancy Greek word for it?

*Phil looks shocked, and then dejected. His feelings are obviously hurt.*

**Phil:** Now you've done it! Thanks a lot. You've completely ruined my closing! You think just because you wrote me, you can mess with me any way you want? It's not fair. I was going to say pretty much what you just said, but it needs to be in the form of a statement of epistemology. At least let me show them this quote by Benjamin Barber

**LED:** *Phil finishes and stands silently as silent music plays and the following quote flashes, line by line, across the LED screen.*

"To speak of the autonomy of the political is in fact to speak of the sovereignty of the political. For by sovereignty is meant not merely the dominion of the state over other forms of association, but the dominion of politically adjudicated knowledge, under conditions of epistemological uncertainty, over other forms of knowledge. To be sure, this sovereignty over knowledge is wholly residual: It comes into play only with the breakdown of ordinary cognitive consensus, and only where such public judgment is required by the need for common action. Where knowledge can prove itself certain, or at least where consensus is for the time being undisputed (as in the case of mainstream science, for example), or where the absence of consensus has no impact on public action (as in matters of private taste, for example), the political domain claims no sovereignty. But where scientists disagree on the public outcomes of experimental technologies (genetic engineering, for example), or where matters of taste are seen to have public consequences (the design of a national flag, for example), or where theoretical inquiry raises issues of common import (the dividing line between a fetus and a legal person, for example), the political realm necessarily becomes sovereign over the contested realms of science and taste and inquiry in which such disputes are ordinarily conducted. For at this point science, taste and theoretical inquiry are reduced to opinion (*doxa*), and it is over opinion that sovereignty, defined by public judgment, necessarily holds sway, albeit only by default." (Barber, 1988, 14-15)

*When the quotation finishes, Phil joins the Director on the stage floor and both walk off as the Author enters.*

**Author:** I'm glad he did that. He's really all right. I love that quotation he put up there on the jumbotron. What can I say? It sure looks like a jumbotron, to me. Must have cost the theater a bundle. Anyway, that quote may be the most obtuse and brilliant single piece of political theory published since John Dewey quit writing. Which is too bad, because it's also one of the more profound and appropriate comments in liberal political philosophy.

*Shouting toward backstage.* Bernie? Run that one by us again, would you, Bernie!

*As the quote reappears on the LED screen, he continues. Pensively.*

I've tried many times to paraphrase that statement to make it a bit less obtuse, but that isn't easy. What results is, like this book, usually very lengthy. It's funny too. Usually, Barber writes very clearly. I'm sure he must have struggled with the same problem in writing it as we have in reading it.

What I think he is saying combines the previous insights of many people in an entirely new formulation. We can see shades of Mary Follett, and the political writings of John Dewey, and a bit of the even more obscure community theory of C.S. Peirce, which popped up again after a century of obscurity in social constructionism and paradigm shifting. And to top it all off, I can see "satisficing" and "incrementalism" in there, not to mention Freddie Hayek's emergent orders.

**Phil:** [*Sarcastically from backstage.*] Are you taking up philosophy now?

**Author:** [*Ignoring Phil.*] As you might expect, that whole quote has a delightfully ironic, self-referential quality. Of course it's Barber's *doxa*, or opinion, that politics is the realm of opinion, bounded by a larger sphere of uncertainty. I think he's right, so that makes us a coalition of two, but only if at least some of those of you in the audience agree with us will what follows make much sense to you, and even then, it isn't clear it has much chance of impacting public judgment anytime soon.

*(Looking directly at the audience through the fourth wall)* And no. This isn't a Tinkerbell moment. I'm not going to ask you to clap or anything.

In the case of both the doctrinaire Marxists and the economic monists on the right who believe markets are the only 'real' social institution, I don't hold out much hope.

*(Pauses. Gathers his thoughts and continues.)* That 'great transformation' Cohen and Arato talked about isn't for some far-off future day. It starts any time there is 'voluntary association, I guess. Anytime there are some of us who agree, we can organize. But, in any community issue where there is the expectation of only one outcome, we can't expect to prevail unless we can convince more of us than there are

in the full spectrum of ‘certainty parties’ who know for sure what is, and whose doxas come complete with assurances of truth, certainty and objectivity.

[*Pauses again*]. And even then, the Cartesians and positivists and all those religionists of all faiths who think that God speaks exclusively in their words and to them will be afforded equal opportunity to organize and express their views.

**Activist:** [*Addressing the author as she enters.*] You’re getting pretty heavy handed for a non-philosopher, you know!

[*Steps downstage and addresses the audience directly.*]

He goes on a lot about ‘commons’ and now its all about ‘new commons’! I’ve noticed that word also pops up in many other places today. There’s a couple of things you need to know about his use of that word that you should always keep in mind. When Elinor Ostrom and many of the other folks who worked with her at Indiana said ‘the commons’ they were speaking largely in Cartesian rationality: A commons is a rational mechanism with rules for collective choices about what to do with common resource pools made by the old familiar disembodied collective minds who conform to philosophically, even mathematically, rational principles.

I’ve listened to this guy since the early 1970s, and when he talks about ‘the commons’ he doesn’t mean that. He’s interested in action rather than choice: what happens when real people are confronted with actual pools of resources they must share under circumstances involving neither established authority nor price mechanisms.

He’s a pragmatist, you know, and that doesn’t mean everything is expediency. When he says ‘the commons’ he’s talking about a pattern of communicative interaction and communicative rationality that goes on between a group of actual people. And by ‘rational’ he just means recognizable and consistent. It’s a matter of worldview.

[*Turning to the author.*] Listen dude, what you mean is this: In a pluralistic, multicultural community, anyone with democratic aspirations, whether political philosophers, theorists and practitioners of democracy or anyone else can’t legitimately claim to hold privileged positions about or authority over, or any kind of

unique access to, truth and still claim to be legitimately democratic or even genuinely political.

**Author:** But there can be exceptions to that. . . .

**Activist:** Quiet! Please let me finish. Are you trying to squelch my free speech or what? What Barber calls the priority of opinion over knowledge isn't a universal condition. It only applies in matters of genuine, agreed-upon public importance, when there isn't a boat-load of agreed upon or accepted scientific evidence and nobody can convincingly claim authority based on tradition or the private voices in their heads.

**Phil:** [*Re-entering.*] How about that? A practitioner who really gets it!

**Activist:** We're really not that rare, you know, especially in democratic societies. Lots of other people in autocratic states may get it also. It may just be dangerous for them to say so.

**Phil:** [*Resuming his lecturing posture.*] To fully understand this, you must begin with Descartes' radically subjective consciousness as it is treated in modern economics and decision-science. This view was rejected by the American pragmatists, beginning with Pierce, although it has gotten more attention when repeated decades later with a dash of European panache by Wittgenstein, Schutz, Habermas, and others. No matter. Then, you append considerations of language, experience, identity and intersubjectivity - the perspective of the other . . .

**Activist:** Whoa there, big fella! That kind of philosophical name dropping makes my teeth itch. Can't we just agree that under real democratic conditions, there is an important place for the philosophers in articulating the conditions for action within their associations and among their readers, but when it comes time to act, they have already shown us, and all the social scientists and professionals and others with knowledge-based claims that they don't get to call the shots except when, by consensus the evidence is on their side?

**Phil:** The vaccination issue, for example. . . .

**Author:** I agree, but Phil is right. That perspective guides everything that is presented here. What is laid out in *Voluntary Action and the New Commons* is entirely

my own, and yet none of it is original with me. That's the paradox. In large part, it's already all embedded in the culture and the language we speak. And, my own voice here is cobbled together and melded from a lifetime of eclectic, multi-disciplinary reading and observation from many fields.

Most of all, I can't claim it to be science; or a truly objective representations of factual reality. I can only claim that this is my doxa: my considered opinion. It's the way I see things and I hope stated in a manner most readers are comfortable with. And, I can only ask that on both those points where readers agree and disagree, let's associate: I invite them to please join me in discussing this as fellow citizens and thoughtful humans. If that goes well, we can seek further agreement from still others; and where you disagree, please tell all of us how it looks to you.

*At this, the stage lights dim and the author, having gotten the last word, walks off into the wings. On the jumbotron, the instruction appears:*

**LED:** Here This Act Ends. Proceed to Chapter 4.



# The 2012 Republican Primary Alumni Association

*As the curtain rises, we see that the entire area stage left is blocked off with yellow police tape. At center stage is a single table with four actors seated around it. The entire area at stage right is framed by a giant television screen marked “2012” on which we can see reruns of eight dim figures constantly moving to their right.*

**Kaitlin:** What was that?

**Madison:** That is the entire cast of the 2011-2012 Republican primary debates. They get together regularly now to celebrate their collective defeat, rail against Obama, and sell commercials for the new public space they opened during their primary campaign. *Pauses.* And to try to figure out new ways to keep ‘liberals’ and ‘leftists’ out of public life.

**Jason:** That was some great political theater, really. More than a year of campaigning against one another. Twenty televised debates. Millions spent in advertising. Most of it devoted to the themes of ‘Beat Obama’ and ‘Eliminate the idiocy of government’. They must have set some kind of Republican record. Not a single mention of voluntary action, philanthropy, commons, or the independent sector in that entire time. The whole thing must have made Poppy Bush’s teeth itch. The Republican shade of Tocqueville was definitely clanking his chains!

**Brandon:** And this from the political party of Jane Addams, Herbert Hoover and all those early Rockefellers!

**Madison:** Actually, a lot of the later Rockefellers became Democrats, but no matter. I may remember this wrong, but weren’t John Gardner, Alan Pifer, Jay

Rockefeller's father, John D. Three, and the other movers and shakers behind the Filer Commission all Republicans?

**Nixon:** *Bringing a tray with another round of ice tea.* Don't forget about me and Revenue Sharing and Reagan's efforts to privatize service delivery to the voluntary sector. *Laughs.* That Gipper really believed that cuts in public spending would release an unprecedented tidal wave of private donations . . .

**Brandon:** . . . And we all know how that worked out! . . .

**Kaitlin:** . . . And what about G.W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism"?

**Madison:** Yeah, but, that was mostly Michael Gerson's idea.

**Brandon:** Yes, but Bush agreed to say it! And in the campaign. 2008, was it? Or 2004? We think he believed it too. But to get back to the point, once upon a time voluntary action and private philanthropy were part of a grand Republican party tradition.

**Director:** *Rushing in from the left wing, wiping his brow.* Wait! Stop! Hold it! You can't include this kind of partisan talk in a serious academic work! Even if it is in dialogue form. It violates all the canons of objectivity!

**Author:** *Coming right behind the director.* What do you expect me to do? I'm trying to make the case for an independent sector of voluntary action as a cornerstone of democratic society and culture in communities. But all this crap keeps coming up! The Democrats have not been very successful at resisting the charge that they're the party of big government, whatever that means. Actually, these are all good, liberal/conservative ideas embraced somewhat late in the game by assorted meritocrats in their various professional communities. That would seem to be the basis for the strongest possible bi-partisanship, and yet, in 2012 it wasn't even mentioned by either party. But most surprising was the silence of the party with the longest record of advocating institutional pluralism! Not that the Democrats had anything to say on that score either. They continue to treat JFK's Peace Corps and LBJ's Community Action like giant embarrassments. Not to mention the Civil Rights Movements and all the more recent human rights movements. Am I supposed to just ignore that?

*The lights go down on this scene at center stage, and come up far, far stage right. The giant TV screen increases in size to fill the full stage and the black scrim rises. As the lights come up, we can see all of the candidates for the Republican Presidential nomination moving farther and farther to the right. As a group, they make a variety of indistinct sounds much like the gobbling of turkeys, but periodically each is heard to cry out individually “We’re Gonna Beat Obama” and then “We’re gonna destroy him. Sooner or later.”*

*As they continue to drift to the right, they move in and out of three large circus rings, held aloft by a diverse cast of characters with no speaking parts. One ring is marked “Free Press” and “We Make Our Own Reality!” held aloft on long, aluminum poles by three characters: Roger Ailes, James and Rupert Murdoch in matching red, white and blue leotards and body paint. This ring is filled with an assorted cast of on-air personalities in full harlequin costumes, including a radio talk show host, several ‘best selling’ authors and a televangelist or two. Occasionally, they are heard to intone “And Now the News. You Won’t Believe What Obama did today!” and “Repeal Obamacare”.*

*Suddenly, a solo voice is heard above the din:*

**Voice:** Judicial activism is good. But only when the activists are on our side!

*The second ring, marked “Justice for All” with the word All crossed out and Those Who Can Pay written in in handwritten red letters, is held aloft by a protest march of five U.S. Supreme Court justices in flowing black robes. One periodically leaves and then rejoins the others. They carry a banner that has two legends engraved around its edges: One reads Money is speech, and the other says Corporations are people. Suddenly, they are passed by four other Supreme Court judges moving to the left carrying a banner that reads “Orwell was right; far right!” One of the justices holds a copy of George Orwell’s 1984 and another Orwell’s essay on language. Four of the justices moving right periodically chant “Liberalism is Wrong”.*

*The third ring is held aloft by Grover Norquist, Karl Rove, wearing a sweatshirt saying “I Politicized 501(c)4”. and an assorted cast of anonymous billionaires. They all wear sweatshirts with the slogan “Welfare Only For Corporations!” on the front and “Starve the Beast” on the back, while two of the anonymous billionaires wear sweatshirts marked “Face It Weaklings! I Deserve More Than You” .*

*As we watch, this entire ensemble continues to move further and further to the right, periodically shouting “Beat Obama”, “Down with government”, “Markets are the only reality” and “Maggie was right! Society is a myth”.*

*In the far left hand corner of the stage and continuing to recede to the left as the stage moves right, the Director and Author continue in animated conversation.*

**Author:** In 2013, the pundits all wrote of the death of conservatism. It’s hard to believe these are the death throes of a movement!

**Director:** Yes, I see what you mean, but can’t you tone this whole piece down a bit? Can’t you make this a more cheerful upbeat and bi-partisan, civic message?

**Author:** I don’t know. I’ll try. I’ve already toned it down a lot. But it looks like this is what civic engagement has come down to.

**Director:** Have you seen the polls? Looks like a triumph for individualism in November, 2014.

*At stage right, a stage hand brings out a mat marked “2016” and positions it to the right of the one marked “2012”.*



# The Socialist Opera

## Dramatis Personae

**Choir**

**Director**

**Banker**

**The Composer**

**LED**

*Before the curtain rises, we hear chanting that sounds a great deal like Gregorian chants for a mixed-gender choir. As the curtain go up, we see on the stage a choir rehearsal room, with pictures of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Gramsci, Bertold Brecht, Diego Rivera, Stalin, Kruschev, Mao, a young Vladimir Putin and assorted other luminaries of international socialism hanging on the walls.*

*The chanting stops but the entire Alto Section stands and continues to speak, or rather intone, in the familiar monotone chanting voice of a group of monks.*

**Alto Section:** *[In unison].* How was that? What would Comrade Lenin say about our performance today?

*The entire baritone section stands and also speaks in unison.*

**Baritone Section:** This isn't an actual performance. This is only a rehearsal, but it sounded like true socialist realism. The authentic voice of the proletariat.

**Soprano Section:** *[In Unison]* We agree.

**Bass Section:** [*In Unison*]: Comrade Trotsky would have been proud.

*At this, a gasp arises from the other members of the choir and then the entire choir dissolves into chaos, with everyone speaking at once. One by one, they realize what has happened and fall silent, until only one speaker is heard.*

**Lone Alto:** Shame! Shame! Shame!

**Alto Section:** [*In Unison*] Basses! The people are truly shocked! Why choir comrades? This outbreak of individual voices is intolerable, but the mention of the Apostate Trotsky is far worse! We cannot accept such antisocial behavior or the revanchist attitude behind this unseemly demonstration. If it continues, we shall have to report this incident to the central committee. In Comrade Stalin's day this never would have been tolerated. We would have all been shot for your crime. Or sent to the Gulag. We've asked you before not to mention the name of that personification of the forces of counter-revolutionary error.

**Director:** [*rushing in from the wings*] Stop it! Stop it! This is absurd! Trying to dramatize this bogus view of collective behavior by talking only in groups is ridiculous! [*Looks around*] Where is that Author anyway? [*Pauses*] Although, come to think of it the analogy of Gregorian chant is sort of clever. [*Chuckles. Then looks serious again*] But, why doesn't this choir have a director? June? Harry? Somebody talk to me!

**Alto Section:** [*rising en masse*] Under the dictatorship of the Proletariat, the Socialist Choir is the official and authentic voice of the people, musically speaking and can only speak the people's truth collectively and in unison. [*The actors all break character and laugh nervously*]

**Director:** [*Shaking his head*] Okay. This is going nowhere. Let's call it a day. [*shouting to the wings*] That's a wrap! [*More quietly*] I still need to find the Author and try to figure out what this scene is about. Maybe we need to re-block it.

**Alto Section:** Socialist collectivism. We're here to sing about socialist collectivism; the only real. . . .

**Director:** . . . Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get all that. I studied Brecht when I was in college, and I've directed *Waiting for Lefty* five times over the years. My dad knew

Clifford Odets. But it just seems to me that the collectivism of the commons and particularly voluntary action may be about something other than the international class struggle.

*[In a louder voice to the company]* Okay now, this rehearsal is over. Get out of here, all of you. Same time tomorrow, okay?

Chorus: (all in unison) We must continue the class struggle.

*Chanting as they begin to file out single-file in Gregorian style.*

**Choir:** Strike! Protest! Revolution! Class Struggle!

*As the choir files out, the light slowly comes up on an upstairs office where a somewhat battered sign saying British Library leans against the wall, while a lone figure in a long white beard and disheveled white hair sits at the sole desk writing.*

*When the chorus are nearly out, a short, rotund man with a mustache, dressed in a black suit and tie, white shirt and top hat and looking altogether like the banker on the center of a Monopoly board, enters and addresses the Director.*

**Banker:** I say. Could you tell me if that composer fellow is about? He said he wanted to rent this theater for six months, but he's only paid me for two. I'm here to collect the remaining rent.

**Director:** *[Aside]* Wonderful! Now we've got a rent seeker! *[Chuckling at his own pun as he walks over to the foot of the stairs, he shouts up]* Marx! There's someone down here to see you. You're not going to believe this, but he says he needs some money.

**Composer:** *[Shouting back]* Tell him to go find Harpo or Groucho. *[Laughs]*

*[Talks to himself in a Texas midlands accent]* Oh, hell! *(Shouting down the stairs)* Tell him to piss off. *[Talking to himself again.]* That damned capitalist is worried about rent when we're trying to solve the riddle of civil society in post-revolutionary society.

**Choir:** *[Intoning from the wings]* Ferguson removed secular civil from sacred society. Hegel foisted his own faulty notions of spirit and civil society on the material world to the detriment of the unsuspecting masses. Long before that Hobbes warned us of the war of all against all arising from individualism, and Marx tells

us “civil society is the battlefield where everyone's individual private interest meets everyone else's in the struggle of [*pause and then with great gusto*] private interests opposing particular matters of common concern and [*pausing again*] of both of these together against the organization of the state with its higher outlook.

**LED:** Karl Marx. (1843) *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

**Composer:** [*reading aloud from a manuscript in the tones of the choir*] “At the same time the corporate mind, engendered when the particular spheres gain their title to rights, is now inwardly converted into the mind of the state, since it finds in the state the means of maintaining its particular ends. This is the secret of the patriotism of the citizens in the sense that they know the state as their substance, because it is the state that maintains their particular spheres of interest together with the title, authority, and welfare of these.”

**Director:** I thought they . . .

**Banker:** [*Shaking his head*] That Marx! He's in a class by himself. [*Then shaking his fist.*] The man is a menace to capitalist society. Socialism must be destroyed.

**Director:** Have you any idea what any of what he talks about means?

**Banker:** [*looking around*] It means trouble for me. The owners are really going to be angry with me if I don't collect the rent for this dump.

**Composer:** [*steps forward manuscript in hand, reading*] “In the corporate mind the rooting of the particular in the universal is directly entailed, and for this reason it is in that mind that the depth and strength which the state possesses in sentiment is seated.”

**Banker:** What the hell is he talking about?

**Director:** He says he's trying to come up with a general socialist solution to civil society. Claims the state won't cut it. . .

**Banker:** Yah, well. Of course he's right. Isn't he aware of Lenin? Of the entire history of the twentieth century?

**Director:** Claims that's a selective reading of history. The U.S.S.R. didn't work of course. Collapsed like a

**Banker:** Well, he would, wouldn't he? Why is this guy named Marx, anyway?

**Director:** I don't know. He thinks he's a great grandson of the original Karl Marx. Maybe he's from the sort of 'wrong side of the sheets' connection Popes used to call their nephews. Anyway, whatever he is, he's determined to restore the original Marx's legacy, and he's zeroed in on the problem of civil society and aesthetics. Claims he's working on a grand opera that can't help but restore socialism.  
...

**Banker:** That's nuts!

**Director:** You think you're telling me something I don't already know? But the crazy thing is, it's beginning to look like we might get a really good opera out of him. Drop by tomorrow when the chorus is rehearsing and you'll hear something like you've never heard before.

**Banker:** [*scoffing*] I'd like to, but I have to be in Kansas City tomorrow for a foreclosure. [*Looks at his watch*] Oh, hell. I've got to get out of here. [*Yells at the composer*] Marx! I'm going to be back tomorrow and I want the rest of that rent!

**Composer:** [*distractedly; paying no attention to the others*] "This task of ... subsuming the particular under the universal is comprised in the executive power, which also includes the powers of the judiciary and the police. The latter have a more immediate bearing on the particular concerns of civil society and they make the universal interest authoritative over its particular aims."

[*Looks up as the Banker walks away*] "Particular interests which are common to everyone fall within civil society and lie outside the absolutely universal interest of the state proper."

**Director:** Well, I guess he's still in the zone. No use trying to talk with him now. [*walks off stage*]

**Composer:** [*flips the page and continues reading*] "... civil society is the battlefield where everyone's individual private interest meets everyone else's." [*flips another page*] Yada, yada, yada.

Hmmm. “the 'Corporations', as the self-government of civil society, presuppose the bureaucracy. The sole determination arrived at is that the choice of the administrators and their officials, etc., is a mixed choice originating from the members of civil society and ratified by the proper authority (or as Hegel says, 'higher authority').” That gives me an idea for an aria!

*[The composer continues reading as he turns and begins to climb the stairs back to his office as the stage lights slowly dim.]*



# The Death of Ideology

*A public square. It is early evening and there are two coffins on stage. The one on the left has a French tri-color at one end and a Soviet (hammer and cycle) red flag with the single star at the other. The one on the far right has the confederate Stars and Bars at one end and the Stars and Stripes at the other. Groups of mourners are gathered around each coffin talking softly among themselves. Periodically, one of them looks across menacingly to the other group or makes a threatening gesture toward them, only to have someone in their own group restrain them and pull them back into the group.*

**Mourner #1:** *Reading aloud.* “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country.” Thus spoke Thomas Paine. *Continues to read softly.*

**LED:** Thomas Paine. *The Crisis* December 23, 1776.

*Jason and Kaitlin enter from opposite sides and meet downstage center.*

**Jason:** What a crowd! Who died? Was it The Individual? Did the police finally kill him?

**Kaitlin:** No, she’s fine. I just saw her dancing this afternoon. Police came and got her again. *Pauses and looks at the caskets.* What are we supposed to do? It’s bad enough when one ideology dies. But two? And at the same time?

*Brandon and Madison enter together and join Jason and Kaitlin downstage.*

**Brandon:** What happened? Who died?

**Jason:** Not who. What.

**Madison:** Ideologues are easy to replace as long as their ideas are alive, but when their ideologies die with them *Pauses*. Well, what can anyone do?

**Madison:** *Soliloquy*. For one hundred and fifty years our dear, demented socialists, have had an office over there on the left looking out with disdain onto the public square. They've always hoped to move into the Statehouse. In fact, they tried several times, but just couldn't quite make the move. Even so, throughout that entire century and a half, the official socialist office was always occupied by an ideologue who was in charge of the message. One after another, before every ideologue retired or died, someone new had to be anointed as his ...

**Kaitlin:** . . . or her.

Madison: *Continuing without noticing*. ... successor. The successor was always there to take up the reins of socialist succession. It was an unbroken line. Until now, that is. Now it appears socialism itself has died.

**Mourner #2:** *Shouting from stage left*. That's nonsense. One more old socialist died, but he will be replaced. Individuals are unimportant. Socialism is immortal. It will live forever.

*The other socialist mourners cheer and break into a variety of familiar socialist slogans.*

**Mourner #3:** *From stage right*. Look at that! Did you see that? Those socialist pigs are threatening us! They are obviously using this funeral to plan a revolution, I'm sure of it. This whole funeral thing is a sham. Has anybody told Nixon and J. Edgar what they're up to?

**Kaitlin:** *To Madison*. Wow. That was nasty! So what's the big deal?

**Brandon:** For true believers, it's all too much to bear. This time it was different. When the Berlin wall came down, the old socialist didn't just die; this time, it seems, socialism itself died. The old socialist took the future with him. They simply don't have the heart to try to appoint a successor.

**Madison:** *Continuing her soliloquy*. And once he realized that socialism was no more, the anti-socialist ideologue of the right, the chief conservative - the one in

charge of standing astride history and yelling halt - simply collapsed and died. His poor heart just gave out. With socialism gone, he had no further reason to live either, I guess.

**Brandon:** Some people say conservatism has transcended its old anti-socialism. Others argue that it has morphed into an ideological defense of corporations as the carriers of ‘true’ socialist individualism. Sort of “they became what they most feared.”

**Madison:** *Ignoring him, continues:*

Anyway, long ago, the conservative popular front realized the socialists had an office on the public square. So they decided they had to have one too, and found one as far to the right as they could get. But then the libertarians got all worked up; it couldn’t be in the public square. Some of them even said there was no such square. It didn’t exist!

They still deny vehemently there is such a place. I suppose they really don’t believe in anything except the almighty Market over there. They went so far as to locate the office windows so you can only see the storefronts. And, of course, the sign in front of the meeting hall that lists sales and rentals.

Once they got their office here on the public square, which they prefer to call the market square, they discovered there was no way to make a profit from it except by outright political hi-jinks - bribery, kickbacks, that sort of thing. And for a long time they were too uptight for that. But it got worse. Ever been to one of their meetings? Real free-for-alls. There are Burkean traditionalists, libertarians, anarchists, religious evangelicals, corporatists, Randians, and neo-con revolutionaries and lots more. It’s really quite a show!

**Jason:** *Not listening to her.* To have both extremists pass so close together. It’s really unheard of.

**Brandon:** They have an even bigger problem, now. The ones who are left, I mean.

**Kaitlin:** Just one? *Laughing.*

**Brandon:** I don't know. What do you mean? I'm just saying. They've always been known far more for what they are against than what they are for.

**Kaitlin:** *Stops laughing and looks quizzical.* What do you mean?

**Brandon:** Well, the traditionalists, for example. They're against anything new. Anything. The trouble is something is always new, but things never stay new for long. So, they find themselves in a constant muddle that just gets worse over time.

**Kaitlin:** For example?

**Brandon:** Take social security. They're against it and have been from the start, but its now 80 years old and going into its third and fourth generations. There isn't too much that is more traditional than that!

They were against it originally simply because it was a tax on business. Chamber of Commerce and Manufacturers' Association led the charge but all along that undermined their own self-interest. It was selfish, and more than a little contradictory.

**Jason:** Contradictory?

**Madison:** Yes. If you were a traditionalist and completely honest, you'd have to admit that at least since the industrial revolution business, manufacturing and markets have been among the most disruptive forces of modernism. The 'creative destruction' of capitalism, you know. In the late 18th century, Oliver Goldsmith, and later Ruskin and others got all worked up about that. Markets are the main destroyers of tradition, without a doubt! So, how can protecting business possibly be seen as conserving anything?

**Brandon:** So they shifted ground? Rather than emphasizing their anti-modernism, conservatives adopted a pro-business stance; they jumped right into bed with everything they had once opposed. I think that's what killed him. (gesturing toward the coffin on the right). He probably died of compound terminal hypocrisy!

**Madison:** And then the social security tax proved to be not so very onerous, and their employees, of course, love it. And when did it actually abridge anyone's liberties in any meaningful way?

**Kaitlin:** Now that they're both dead, I say we declare the old fights a draw, and get on with enjoying today in Café Society. How about a glass of wine and some nachos?

*They walk back to their table in the outdoor café. Nixon approaches to take their orders and Brandon makes a call on his cell phone. As they do so, the two groups of mourners pick up their respective coffins and exit into the wings.*

*After a brief interlude, The Individual reenters the stage, along with a partner of equally indeterminate gender. They begin to dance together silently, as other couples join them in the public square until the stage is filled with couples, all dancing in rhythm to the same silent music.*

**Madison:** Oh, look. She's found some friends. Looks like they've formed a dance troupe of some sort.

*The lights go down and the curtain closes.*



# The Theater of Life

*Outside the theater, beneath the canopy. A bourgeois couple, dressed in the fashion of the moment, step outside and pause briefly.*

**Bourgeois #1:** So, that's it then, is it?

**Bourgeois #2:** I guess so. (*Reading*) Voluntary action is the venue of last resort for those who care to pool their intellectual, social and financial resources. Blah. blah. blah. The principle resources and skills needed are always right at hand. Voluntary action can also produce common and public spaces within which relationships, knowledge, morals and practices can be generated. . . .

**Bourgeois #1:** So what else is new? I don't get it. I just don't see what the big deal is.

**Author:** We know you don't. One of the real ironies of the present is that lots of people don't get it.

**Bourgeois #2:** Let's head on over to Café Society and get a drink and listen to the band. I hear there's a new group called The Commons playing there and later, we can see if we can score some real 'voluntary action.'

*They laugh and exit down the street.*

*As they go, stage lights come up. A growing crowd of people continues to exit the theater onto the public street individually and in small groups. A few individuals emerge alone. The groups are all talking among themselves. In the far corner is a constantly changing holographic statues of the Celebrity of the Moment and another of A Man on a White Horse. A number of groups suddenly turn and walk directly toward the statues mumbling softly.*

**Groups:** “Some one needs to help us. Who is going to save our democracy?”

*At the near corner, a young man suddenly jumps onto a lamp post, and hanging rather precariously begins to speak.*

**Young Man:** Listen, people. I don't know what you think they can do that you can't. But I think I agree with at least part of what I think the author must have meant. But I definitely disagree with some other things.

**Voice in the Crowd:** One thing is for sure. . .

*The voice is drowned out by multiple voices suddenly all speaking at once.*

**Another Voice:** *To the author.* It looks like things stand pretty well where we left them.

**Author:** Only as long as you let them.

*Gradually, it becomes apparent that more and more people are gathering into a single group at the middle of the street. Then, it becomes more and more obvious that this is not one crowd, but many people talking in small groups. Slowly, shouting to the crowd is replaced by a multitude of small groups, speaking and listening, and individuals moving among and between groups.*

*Finally, the Individual dances out of the theater and continues to dance round and round, ignoring the knots of people who continue to talk. Suddenly, the Individual pauses, looks about and speaks.*

**The Individual:** So I guess what happens next is up to me.