

FINDING A WAY TO DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY:

Rural Montana Historical Societies and the Reinvigoration of the Social Bond

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ABSTRACT

The practicalities of public administration accepting O.C. McSwite's challenge to become the new carrier of the social bond are formidable. This study argues that for public administration to successfully transition from a market-based bond to a social bond of discourse, it is the responsibility of citizens to first firmly establish public discourse as a practice in civil society. This study asks: as a civic association, to what extent does a historical society have the capacity to reinvigorate the social bond? To answer that question this research uses a qualitative strategy in conducting an exploratory study of four rural Montana historical societies and their attendant museums. The findings show that rural historical societies, as active caretakers of community identity within the political realm of civil society, meet the benchmarks for the reinvigoration of the social bond: concern for community welfare; acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society; recognition of a multiplicity of diverse views; and a commitment to public engagement in collaborative, consensus driven decision-making.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project has a qualitative research strategy with an exploratory design. It synthesizes Cohen and Arato's (1994) theory of civil society associations as the reproductive site of democracy, with McSwite's (1997) thesis of public administration as the new carrier of the social bond, and analyzes the position of civic museums within the political realm. This paper documents the themes of deliberative democracy as they appear in the membership of four rural Montana historical societies and demonstrates the extent of their capacity to reinvigorate the social bond necessary for a deliberative democracy.

The problem that prompts this pilot study is the disconnect between the people of the United States and the government of the United States. The central argument of this paper is that a deliberative democracy can bridge the gap between the people and the government, and that the responsibility for effecting deliberative democracy begins in civil society. This paper argues that before public administration can successfully sustain the responsibility as the carrier of the social bond of discourse, civil society needs to aggressively re-establish the social bond. This project examines four Montana historical societies and asks; what is the capacity of historical societies to reinvigorate the social bond?

Deliberative democracy is the connective tissue of this project. Therefore, the themes of deliberative democracy are the benchmarks for this examination of rural historical society membership. The themes are 1) concern for community welfare; 2) acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society; 3) recognition of a multiplicity of diverse views; and 4) a commitment to public engagement in collaborative, consensus driven decision-making. The data show healthy indications of a willingness among historical society members to override private interest in order to work to sustain the community. Historical society membership recognizes that effective public discourse does not privilege anyone voice; instead, it includes a multiplicity of viewpoints which will inevitably introduce contestation as a natural part of discourse and collaboration.

Based on the data, which investigates rural historical societies that have attendant museums, this paper argues for historical societies to become forums for public gathering, discourse, political learning,

and community cohesion. When historical society membership establishes a solid practice of discourse and consensus within the organization, it will have the capacity to become an accessible site where critical inquiry can be made into the current political narrative of the community. Through robust practices of discourse, they can strengthen the social bond within civil society. Under the influence of a strong social bond of discourse in civil society, local public administrators may stop looking to regulations to legitimize their actions. Instead, they may start to reexamine their role and reorient themselves to new, localized context of meanings as a way to solve social problems and take the first steps toward forming a deliberative democracy in their community.

INTRODUCTION

This research project explores the capacity of historical societies to act as political agents in influencing the transition of public administration from a system of market logics to one that implements the relationship model of a deliberative democracy. In order to determine the conditions necessary for public administration to accept McSwite's (2006) challenge to become a carrier of the community's social bond, this research examines the relationship of civil society and state.

The problem that prompts this research is the disconnect between the people of the United States and the government of the United States. There is a gap between the political will of the people and the actions of the government. In order for democracy to be viable, the action of governing needs to be a legitimate expression of the will of the people so the collective good, not individualism, is the function of autonomy. The foundational purpose of democracy is to care for its citizens in such a way that it promotes the good life for all. The reciprocal function of citizenship is to strengthen democracy. The principles that democracy follows to care for its citizens are the same principles that citizens follow to strengthen democracy; at their core are participation and discourse, which are the functions of the social bond.

The premise of this research is based in Cohen and Arato's three-part model of civil society described in *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1994). The three spheres that constitute Cohen and Arato's modern *lifeworld* are civil society, state, and economy; with state and economy distinctly differentiated as subsystems of civil society. Cohen and Arato argue that the genesis of democracy occurs in the sphere of civil society. This research project focuses narrowly on the channels of influence between civil society and state. Moreover, it is particularly concerned with the practical influence civil society associations, specifically historical societies, can exert on public administration to bridge the gap between the sphere of civil society and the sphere of the state.

Currently, public administration is the face of government, and acts as an agent of state. The position of public administration within the state sphere helps to maintain the gap between state and civil society. In *Public Administration as the Carrier of the New Social Bond* (2006), McSwite reasons that

public administration needs to extricate itself from market-based theory which relies on the aggregation of individual satisfaction to create a collective good. Discourse, McSwite argues is the most fundamental of human obligations and it is through discourse, not the market that public administrators can orient citizens to the collective goals of the community. Many other contemporary public administration theorists, most notably Fox and Miller (1995), Famer (1999), King and Stivers (1998) and Denhardt and Denhardt (2007), support public discourse as a function of democracy, as well as a version of the relationship model of public administration that bridges the divide between the spheres of state and civil society. King (1998), Stivers (2002), Denhardt and Denhardt (2007) among others, see public administrators as facilitators of self-governance.

The research done in this pilot study supports the argument that public administration can be a bridge, or channel of influence (Cohen and Arato, 1994), between the civil sphere and the state sphere. The community acts as an equal partner in building the bridge through collaborative practices. As discussed more fully later in this paper, the goal of deliberative democracy is not to give citizens more of a voice, but to make citizens, elected officials and public administrators equal partners in the decision making process of government. Such collaborative efforts re-introduce the principle of self-governance into American democracy. The challenge, obviously, is how to institute such a contemporarily foreign practice as citizen participation into an entrenched bureaucracy. I argue here, that to successfully implement deliberative democracy, the collaborative practice of discourse needs to be legitimate and robust within the sphere of civil society.

This research, conducted in the field and based on primary sources, explores the extent to which historical societies can contribute to reestablishing the practice of civic discourse. As public organizations, historical societies occupy a unique place within civil society at the crossroads of the public sphere (museums and community identity) and the private realm (memories and the development of personal identity.) The history of museums has firm roots in the apparatus of the centralized state, which may not be readily apparent to those who view them as contemporary sources of entertainment. Therefore, understanding the historical influence of museums in shaping community identity, and the

effect of memory in shaping individual identity, can illuminate the political role of the historical society and its attendant museum within the community.

Within both the sphere of civil society and its individual units of voluntary associations, the benchmarks for the practice of deliberative democracy are concern for community welfare, acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society, discourse that includes a multiplicity of diverse views, and a commitment to active engagement in collaborative, consensus driven decision-making. As a trusted and visible civic association in rural Montana, I have chosen to study historical society membership and ask: What is the capacity of rural, Montana historical societies to act as a political agent in reinvigorating the social bond of discourse?

LITERATURE REVIEW COMPONENT ONE:

Deliberative Democracy and a Theory of Civil Society

In *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1994) Cohen and Arato, describe their theory of modern society as a highly differentiated three-part model constituted by the three spheres of civil society, state and economy, with state and economy distinctly differentiated as subsystems of civil society. My argument, following a brief synopsis of Cohen and Arato's model, is limited to the relationship between two of the spheres: civil society and state. Within the sphere of civil society, there are two realms: private and public. The public realm is also referred to as the political realm. Individuals come from the private realm and gather in the public realm to negotiate the political conditions necessary to achieve the good life through democratic means. Cohen and Arato place "channels of influence" between the three spheres of their model, but stress that maintaining the autonomy and primacy of the civil society sphere is essential for reproducing the democratic character that shapes life. Central to their argument is the autonomy of the civil society sphere from which democratic influence emanates *toward* the dual subsystems of state and economy. Cohen and Arato believe that only a differentiated model, which keeps the logics of each sphere (civil society, state, and economy) distinct, can provide the conditions necessary

for articulating political will and collective decision-making in civil society. This theory fully supports Habermas's critical theory of communicative action, which maintains that collective action is the result of public discourse. The authors stress that collective decision-making in civil society is essential to the life of democracy. In acknowledging Tocqueville, they argue that direct citizen participation in ruling and being ruled is "the genesis of democracy" (Cohen and Arato, 1994, p.19). Unlike Tocqueville, they include the public realm as part of civil society; they argue that "unconstrained discussion" is the essential tool in the mediation between state and civil society. Discourse is what maintains the primacy of civil society over state in building democracy.

The public realm is understood as a political space where individuals come together to make decisions to secure the good life. In a deliberative democracy, the political goal is the good life for all. Discourse in the political realm informs change and is the site where the "rationalization of action is coordinated" (Cohen and Arato, 1994, p. xvii). Cohen and Arato's contention is that civil society reflects collective identities and their projects, which "can contribute to freer, more democratic societies" (Cohen and Arato, (1994), p. 442). Like Tocqueville, Cohen and Arato believe that voluntary associations are vital in maintaining the democratic nature of a political culture. This means that members of civil society and its attendant organizations, must engage in an active, mutual relationship with public administrators in order to impress indelible democratic character within the sphere of the state.

Tocqueville's and the History of American Civil Society

Theories of civil society and the importance of voluntary associations to the political culture of American democracy begin with Tocqueville. Cohen and Arato build their thesis on Tocqueville's description of active citizen participation in civic associations as essential for the development and expansion of democratic political institutions. In *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (2001), Sheldon Wolin compares the initiation of democracy in France and America. In France, as Wolin points out, the aristocracy defined the public good and then administered its practices, thus shaping French democracy by superimposing the notion of liberty over the relinquished

administrative apparatus of the monarchy and the Catholic Church. On the other hand, American democracy developed out of a dynamic and unplanned political culture that had no aristocracy. Instead, American democracy grew out of a Puritan model of civil society, which fused a theological notion of liberty with political liberty. Wolin argues that the Puritan traditions of membership, participation and authority greatly influenced the civic behavior and mentality of early Americans. As Wolin describes it, in pre-industrial America, town meetings, an unregulated newspaper and voluntary associations spontaneously assumed the functions that, in Europe, had been assigned to the state. As Welch (2006) describes, social commitment to voluntary public organizations combats individualism; and, as Villa (2006) argues, expands narrow self-interest into something far broader in scope. Tocqueville wrote, "...to get involved in the government of society and to talk about it, that is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows" (Tocqueville, 2013, p. 97). In American civil society of the 1830's "public officials...remain mixed within the crowd of citizens...No public official in the United States has an official dress" (Tocqueville, 2013, p 47). More notably, public officials were paid, which prevented "rich and independent officials" from forming "a kernel of an aristocracy" (Tocqueville, 2012, p. 48). Tocqueville's observations attest to American democracy's unique practice of full participation by the ordinary.

A thesis of mutual dependency in civil society. Like Cohen and Arato, O.C. McSwite also draws from Tocqueville. In *Legitimacy in Public Administration: A Discourse Analysis*, (1997) McSwite maintains that in early America achieving the good life was a practical and philosophical consideration based in actions taken by groups of citizens. This was especially true in the small, often isolated townships loosely strung across America. McSwite describes these communities as bound together by paternalistic mutual dependencies, or friendships. Trust was the foundation of these relationships which were necessary for survival of the community. Consequently, "...breaches of mutual trust were regarded as more serious than violence" (McSwite, 1997, p. 59).

Decentralization was the natural result of this vast, non-state terrain with a sparse population. Communication technologies had yet to align a national political culture within this disparate geography.

As Villa describes in *Tocqueville and Civil Society* (2006), the lack of state regulations left the concentration of political power at the local level. The township was at the heart a decentralized democracy. The result was,

[a] federal system with a crazy-quilt of multiple overlapping jurisdictions, complex division of authority and extraordinary decentralization - a masterpiece of political ambiguity, a trade-off between communal liberties and efficiency. (Wolin, 2001, p. 94)

The notion of a federal state was present, but vague. Americans lived the phenomenon of shaping socio-political cultural from the bottom up.

The atomization of collective welfare. McSwite (1997) argues that the collective political action witnessed by Tocqueville, emerged from a community awareness of mutual dependency. Since the industrial revolution, the rise of individualism and a narrow belief in the market logic of efficiency obscures the civic logic of relationships. McSwite traces this phenomenon to the Constitution, which ties national security to commercial prosperity, rather than to the political responsibilities of citizenship. Wolin (2001) believes that the rapid rise of political power wielded by the railroad companies initiated the move away from citizens as the source of political power and political direction. With railroads came advancements in communication technologies; both industries served to connect local economies to a greater economic system. The idea of “nation” began to secure itself in the consciousness of the far-flung and decentralized American communities. As Wolin recounts, the 19th century promise of “prosperity for all” realigned the intimate conditions of local daily life; where you lived, with whom you associated, and the shape of the family. McSwite describes the industrial revolution as ushering in the “atomization of communities through the runaway notion of individualism” (1997, p. 95). The emergent social value became that of the economy (efficiency, productivity, money) which superseded the former concern for mutually dependent relationships within the community. The rationale for sustaining communities through shared experiences was abandoned to pre-industrial American history.

Summary of Component One: Civil Society

Cohen and Arato (1994) contend that civic organizations, representing the collective identities within the community, feed the democratic character of the civil society. In turn, the sphere of civil society influences the democratic character of the administration of the state. Wolin (2001) and McSwite (1997) trace the pre-industrial history of collective action to community values of mutual trust and public discourse. Wolin describes the rules and practices of justice at the time of Tocqueville's visit, as reflecting locally shared values, customs and beliefs; suggesting that there was not the operational gap between community values and administrative practices that exists today. In sum, the earliest Americans achieved political action through mutual dependent relationships. This condition shifts with the meteoric of commercial power, and government strategies dictated by market logics.

LITERATURE REVIEW COMPONENT TWO:

Deliberative Democracy and a Theory of Public Administration

Over the course of American history, as the notion of nation grew and the federal state became more centralized, sphere of the state became a powerful influence over (if it did not completely absorb the function of) function of local public administration. For all intents and purposes, the action of self-governance disappeared during the growth of national strategies, but the ideal of self-governance remains part of American political vernacular. Fox and Miller argue in *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse* (1995) that the current feedback model of administrative accountability and citizen participation does not work. Fox and Miller maintain we live in a procedural democracy implemented by bureaucracy. Elected officials infatuated with the notion of running government like a business. To that end the directive for public administration is to use market logics (based on aggregating individual preferences) to determine public will. Our administrative bureaucracy bases regulatory reform on quantitative data, not on qualitative experience of those affected by the regulation. This narrow understanding of statistical data as complete "fact" creates an incessant cycle of regulatory reform, which keeps the public standing powerless and frustrated at the periphery of the decision-making process. The public perceives public administrations as synonymous with bureaucracy, and a formidable barrier to the

democratic ideal of self-governance. A complex of regulation and reform clogs the channel of influence that Cohen and Arato (1994) deem so important to democratic growth. McSwite (1997), and other public administration theorists, call for disentangling public administration from wholesale absorption by the state; and for the reintroduction of the collaborative practices of a deliberative democracy. These scholars maintain that if public administrators realign themselves with the citizenry through public discourse, they can act as the carrier of the social bond of discourse (McSwite, 2006). Public discourse between citizens, elected officials and public administrators as government experts, can be the basis for a contemporary paradigm of political collaboration. A critical trait of this new paradigm is Stivers's (2000) notion of active listening. A re-invention of the discursive political space that holds civil society and public administration are partners the political matrix will ultimately channel democratic influence towards the state.

Discourse: The Modus Operandi of Deliberative Democracy

The basis for a model of deliberative democracy is discourse, but there is no single best model of citizen participation, or reform of public administration. The thesis of deliberative democracy holds that political representation is not effective enough on its own. Elected representatives and public administrators need to collaborate with citizens to determine the means to solve social problems. The design of deliberative democracy in this paper calls for citizens to be at the center of political action which involves more than helping set the political agenda. They are physically at the table with elected representatives making decisions through consensus. For political theorist Hannah Arendt the political realm of a democracy must be a space where people with multiple perspectives come together in civility, and directly participate in decision making that affects their community (d'Entrevés, 2008). This approach is one, among many, referred to as a "relationship" model and is distinctly different from the business/efficiency model that presently determines most contemporary government practices.

The relationship model invokes Follett's Law of the Situation in which experience often trumps authority. Follett recognized that solutions often come from the most experienced people at the table and

not from those with the most official authority. It follows that those who have the most experience with a law or regulation are usually those citizens affected by it. King, Felty and Susel, in *The Question of Participation: Toward Authentic Participation in Public Administration* (1998), propose that citizenship should not be reduced to passive acts of voting, blue ribbon committees, or public comment periods (which often commence *after* a legislative vote.) Instead, citizens are part of the decision-making process from the beginning. Weeks, who conducted a case study of four large scale trials in participatory public budgeting, argues that “a deliberative model of democratic governance... offers a practical opportunity for all citizens to participate, ...[and] engages citizens in the same problem-solving context as elected officials” (Weeks, 2001, p 360). In other words, an authentic political solution incorporates citizen participation.

Public Administrators as Professional Citizens in a Deliberative Democracy

To secure citizen participation, King and Stivers in *Government Is Us* (1998), and Denhardt and Denhardt in *The New Public Service: Serving Not Steering* (2006) argue that public administrators must reimagine their position in the political realm and see themselves as experts, not authorities in the deliberative process. King and Stivers (1998) maintain that public administrators should reinterpret themselves as professional citizens which would align them, rather than separate them, from the citizenry. In their book *Civic Dialogue, Arts and Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy* (2005), Korza, Bacon, & Assaf indicate that the most challenging hurdle for administrators is to accept that collaborative, robust public discourse requires “untying expertise and authority.” In authentic public conversation there is equity of power, with no one voice assuming a privileged position. An administrator who maintains “that [their] expertise inherently confers authority and power” (McLean, 2011, p. 72) will sabotage the collaborative premise of public dialogue.

Public dialogue within a deliberative keeps public administration relevant. A participatory model of governance reconfigures public administrative responsibilities. McSwite (2006) describes the new public administrator as one who is conscious of the local context of meaning, and whose goal is to orient

citizens toward their collective situation. Denhardt and Denhardt (2007) envision the critical function of a public administrator as facilitating effective discourse that builds a collective notion of public interest. In many ways, these advocates for a new form of public administration are invoking another aspect of Follett's Law of the Situation: practices and procedures are determined anew with a fresh set of circumstances. Public administration theorists, who support a relationship model, believe person-to-person interaction sustains democracy.

McSwite (2006) argues that public administration accomplishes efficacy only if it abandons a market-based strategy of efficiency. Efficiency and productivity are indelible American traits, but perhaps a more comprehensive understanding of these notions could expand their meaning from a simple calibration of inputs and outputs to one that recognizes the non-rational human impulses that influence decision-making in unpredictable ways. Using terms from Farmer's analysis of public administration, *P.A. eth-talk: Is it ethical?* (2000), efficiency can be understood as a form of 'comprehensive practicality' if it recouples notions of productivity with notions of mutual dependence and collaboration. Acknowledgment that we are mutually dependent on one another in a communal quest for the good life predicates the reintroduction of a relationship model of governance.

Citizenship Expectation and "Difference" in a Deliberative Democracy

Under these proposed conditions of a relationship model with discourse as the essential element of deliberative democracy, the citizenry would learn to recognize contestation as a political tool, rather than a barrier to problem solving. Contestation makes participants aware to change in community circumstance and works to keep public administration germane. King, Felty, & Susel (1998), McLauren in *Rereading Hannah Arendt on Bureaucracy, Administration and Associations* (2002), Stivers in *Toward Administrative Space: Hannah Arendt Meets the Municipale Housekeepers* (2002), and King and Kensen in *Associational Public Space: Politics, Administration and Storytelling* (2002) all maintain that public discourse goes hand-in-hand with Hannah Arendt's notion of contestation. In reaching a new understanding of political life, community members would recognize contestation as natural and

perpetual function of public discourse. King, Felty, & Susel (1998), (King, 2002), McLauren (2002), and Stivers (2002) refer to this new form of American political life as a realm of irreducible differences where confrontation is unavoidable, but where “the political blossoms.” These scholars caution that participants in public conversations should not expect publicly held solutions to dissolve differences. Nor should collaborative efforts strive to create programs that try to manage every contingency, instead they should create programs within a local, contemporary, context of meaning. King, (2002) and McLauren, (2002) maintain Arendt’s argument that difference (a multiplicity of perspectives) is the hedge against totalitarianism and so, is essential to democracy. Hummel (2002) and Stivers (2002) prescribe a reflexive approach to public discourse; one which provides a critical opportunity for all participants to discover, sort out, and possibly counter, privately held assumptions.

The Process of Discourse in a Deliberative Democracy

McLauren (2002) argues that discourse can lead to new sense of consciousness in the minds of both citizens and public administrators, and the possibilities of handling old problems in a new way can emerge. The goal is for *the process* of collaboration to have value for all the participants so that the public believes that government action is legitimate. The critical requirements of this bottom-up approach to public conversation demand that public administrators let go of a sense of exclusive authority; and that citizens “admit the collective responsibility [they] bear for the community” (Rushing and Austin, 2008).

A realistic model of robust deliberative democracy is contextual and partial. The intension of deliberative discourse is to solve social issues within a locally prescribed set of ethical norms understood by, and emanating from, the community. Catherwood and Leonard in *Playing for the Public Good: Arts and Planning in Government* (2012), and Stivers (2002) argue that the best way to come to legitimate solutions for social ills is through political practices that champion active citizen participation at the start of the decision making-process. Scholars acknowledge the challenging practicalities of such an undertaking in any environment: experimental and iterative (McSwite, 1997); inconvenient for contemporary lifestyles (King & Stivers, 1998); long in duration and never perfect, never finished.

Summary of Component Two: Public Administration

Following the theoretical and practical prescriptions of McSwite, Stivers, King, and others, public administration can act as a bridge between the state and the political realm of civil society by instituting public discourse as the tool of self-governance. Public administration is in a uniquely position to re-introduce self-governance as a principle of state, by extending democracy practices reproduced in civil society through channels of influence toward the state. Due to our procedural democracy (Fox and Miller, 1995), the bureaucracy of public administration has clogged the channel of influence between civil society and state. McSwite (2006) argues that if public administration abandons market logics, it has the capacity to act as a carrier of civil society's social bond of discourse. Ideally, discourse in a deliberative democracy is a vigorous, iterative contestation about public policy that entertains diverse viewpoints of both citizens and elected officials, and the experts in public administration facilitate the process. The goal of those who advocate for deliberative democracy is not to shun efficiency, but to give it a more inclusive and contextual meaning that is determined collectively. This will lead to public policy that stems from a localized context of meaning. Under these conditions, public administration provides an open channel for the mechanisms of civil society, such as voluntary associations and social movements, to create democratic practices that influence the functions of the state sphere.

LITERATURE REVIEW COMPONENT THREE:**Museums and the Political Realm**

It is not necessary to have the social or political conditions of early America to reestablish a democratic ethos of active citizen participation. American life still includes some of Tocqueville's essential conditions for a democracy that deters individualism, among them: town meetings, a free press, and civil associations. Public administrators may not be aware that the political/public realm and the private realm share the civil sphere. Civic organizations are a symbolic manifestation of the values held by their community (Stivers, 2000), but public administrators may misconstrue civic organizations as part of the private realm simply because they are often outside the realm of government. However, there are

both political and public administration theorists argue that civic associations have historically “provided new spaces for, and new forms of, political participation” (Wolin, 2001, p 237); civic associations can serve as a site to counter political powerlessness by preserving the social bond of discourse that is essential to the processes of self-governance.

In contemporary America, it is natural to think of museums as part of civil society, but all western museums have their roots in the sphere of the state shaped by the Enlightenment, and were used as political tools to shape national identity. However, as we shall presently see, the grand urban American museums were brought along through private commercial interests and flowered in the sphere of civil society, not state. Additionally, the museums of the rural historical societies in this study are inherently free of the civil society polemic of public and private, since they tell unique community stories through private objects. Consequently, as Levin describes in *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* (2007) the members of rural historical societies may reveal more about contemporary grassroots American political culture than we might otherwise learn through large, universal museums whose collection represents cultures from around the world.

The History of Museums and Community Identity

As McClellan writes in *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth Century Paris* (1994) and Pearce holds in *Museums, Objects, and Collection* (1993) the intent of museums is to signal “who we are;” which makes them an integral part of the history and philosophy of knowledge and, as such, they are cultural sites symbolically embedded with political meaning. McClellan (1994) argues that all Western museums, even the small and eclectic, are born of the political strategies of the Enlightenment, making them politically charged spaces. Other museology scholars describe the culture of collecting objects and the practice of “attentive looking” (Alpers, 1997, p. 26) of these collections as a unique Western strategy for authenticating a sense of political community (Clifford, 1988). The precursors to museums were elite and princely collections shaped two centuries

prior to the Enlightenment. These collections, known as curiosity cabinets, were a mosaic of the sacred and the profane; a mix of religious objects, natural objects and art. This eclecticism reflected the interpretative process of the period, which was to “[select] items that aided them in developing a meaningful understanding of the world” (Findley, 1996, p 50). Conforti, in his contribution to *A Grand Design: the Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1997), Duncan in *Civilizing Rituals* (1995), Malraux in his seminal treatise, *Voices of Silence* (1953) and McClellan (1994) all comment that through the influence of Linnaean taxonomy, and the pedagogical approach of the Enlightenment in natural history collections, eventually, royal art ministers recognized that dividing royal art collections into a hierarchy of categories promoted their own national political and cultural agenda. The political intention of royal art museums of the period was to make visible the ideals of an imagined national culture and to remind their nobles of the power of the crown (Evans, 1999; Lebovics, 1994).

Beginning with the French Revolution and the nationalization of the Louvre, continental princes and their administrations saw royal art collections as avenues of public influence over citizens from every walk of life, and anticipated a political benefit in loosening restrictions to public access. McClellan (1994) describes the designation of the Louvre as a permanent public space and its contents the property of French citizens as “creat[ing] a sensation because it was tied to the birth of a new nation” (McClellan, 1994, p 9). Sovereignty, McClellan (1994) maintains, shifted from “royal” to “state” and galleries which had formerly served to glorify the divine patrimony of the King, now began to function as patrimonial instruments of the state. The Louvre functioned as “the keeper of the nation's spiritual life” (Duncan, 1995, p. 26), and its lending relationships with regional civic societies were intended to reinforce the centralized power of French political culture.

Shaping political culture. Conforti, in his essay, “The Idealist Enterprise” from *A Grand Design: the Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1997), and Hudson in his book *Museums of Influence* (1987) both describe the British aristocracy as initially reluctant to create a national museum, but as they continued to reap enormous profits from their imperialist conquests, the government was anxious to quickly cultivate ways to translate an abundance of raw material wealth into goods that could dominate

Western trading markets. In this quest to advance the economy of the regime, the British government developed a social engineering campaign to civilize, educate, and train the English masses. The inaugural effort in 1851 was a months-long event Imperial Exhibition: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. The South Kensington museum was built in 1871 and modeled after this widely popular Imperial Exhibition which brought together thousands of people from across the socio-economic strata and regions of the country. South Kensington's mission was to instill the aesthetic values of the elite into the working class and to function as an educational tool in the promotion of technology and national economic stability. Hudson (1987) describes the museum's pedagogy as based on the accessibility and the variety of its displays and aimed at engaging the working man and, notably, his wife and family. To meet that end, the museum was built on the outskirts of the slums of London, and was open at night and on the weekends to accommodate a working class schedule.

The South Kensington exhibits reached beyond the fine arts to include the natural sciences and industrial design, along with anthropological sensations that mimicked the popular Imperial Exhibitions. South Kensington was an astounding success; it attracted tens of thousands of visitors each week and launched the theory of "public service through education" (Conforti, 1997, p 23). Education was understood to be a museum's civic duty, using the fine arts to promote a new sense of the public sphere, one that mixed the social classes – not always to the liking of the upper classes who complained of the smell, and boorish behavior of their fellow attendees and provided an opportunity to promote patriotism and groom the lower classes through sophisticate example. Conforti writes that with its repeat attendance figures, South Kensington became an official educational facility that promoted the "useful arts." The model was copied in miniature through the country.

Finding an identity through history. During this time, middle class Americans influenced by modern developments in science, technology, and critiques of history began to have a new understanding of how they fit in the great scope of life in the world. As Pearce (1993) argues, for the first time Western peoples saw themselves as products of the past and catalysts of the future. American museums were influenced by the civic mission of their European, state run fore-bearers, but never entertained the notion

of a national arts administration. The state did not fund nor administer American museums during the 19th and early 20th century. During this period the United States was moving more slowly towards a centralized state administration. The few, grand, open-to-the-public museums were typically financed by the private equity generated through commerce, and “impress[ed] the values of the cultural elite on an immigrant population” (Conforti, 1997, p. 24). Those values celebrated the market: productivity and usefulness in such areas as science and engineering. Conforti contends the American elite considered it their civic duty to teach, train, and tame the post-Civil War immigrant “mobs.” McClellan (1994) points out that the motto of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts during the 1870’s was “Art, Industry and Education.” Philadelphia, Boston, and New York had institutions that followed the South Kensington model, but they were independent from government development or oversight, and did not entertain the practice of creating centrally controlled satellites throughout the country as seen in Britain and France. The United States has never instituted a national museum administration which has allowed for the flourishing of decentralized, independent local museums.

Donner in *Assimilation and Localism: Some Very Small Towns in Mass Society* (1998), Coombes in *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identity* (1988)s, Kaplan in *We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity* (2000), Levin (2007), and Singer in *On the Symbolic and Historical Structure of an American Identity* (1977) have all indicated that during the mid-19th century, while the East coast elite was building large, open-to-the-public institutions, American historical societies had been proliferating across the United States. These same scholars argue that this proliferation indicates attempts by prominent citizens to assure their community a place within American history; and, moreover, to secure the community political legitimacy through historical evidence. Often, the founding of state historical societies, as in the case of Montana, preceded the founding of the State by decades. During the 1830s through the 1890s, historical society publications and collections brought a sense of socio-political cohesion to territories and states, particularly as the United States expanded westward. When community members establish a historical society they declare their community a society governed by rules, with honored customs, habits and traditions. Historical societies

are repositories for socio-political community character, symbolizing the community belief that it is significant enough to have a history, and most importantly, to have a future.

The social bond. Civic organizations are a conscious manifestation of the unconscious social bond of discourse, one that is ethically prescriptive, normative, and based on community values (McSwite, 2002). Community identities are shaped through the discourse and actions of civic associations within the political realm of civil society. Historically, European states impressed the logics of the state, while American commerce impressed the logics of the market, i.e. “usefulness”, on museum-going publics. American historical societies have the unusual position of straddling the dual realms within civil society since they are at the intersection of the public realm that shapes community identity, and private realm of memories and personal identity development. This potentially makes them a credible resource of influence in securing the social bond of discourse so necessary to a deliberative democracy.

Historical Society Museums and Communal Identity

Not all historical societies collect artifacts; some societies are meant as meeting places to discuss the publication of historical accounts, or function strictly as genealogical resources. Those rural historical societies that do have artifact collections often have informal, idiosyncratic exhibits without labeling or explanatory text. This can be the result of inadequate financial resources or, a lack of expertise. More formal acts of collecting and displaying are often seen in urban historical societies, and large, well-funded museums; these sites also host more vigorous debates about representation. Contemporarily, Kaplan (2000), and, in particular, Schwartz & Cook in *Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory* (2002), argue that archivists and curators at every level within political society wield political power through representation and display. An archive, whether public or civic, whether of objects or documents,

represents enormous power ... over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are ... Archives are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested and confirmed. (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, p. 1)

The representing strategies at the level of a rural historical society, as distinct from those of the large, urban universal museum, is that its members are self-consciously working to represent their own community, not someone else's. The organization's mission is to authenticate community identity through the preservation of personal stories and evidence of collective actions and customs. The collection of a rural historical society is a symbolic representation of the political life of a community; and its members believe securing a community identity through history leads to community sustainability.

Public and Personal Memory. Scholars of public memory see history as a community's shared interpretation of the past that is activated by contemporary issues (Dickenson, Blair & Ott, 2010). However, "shared" does not equate with "same." Personal memories can be quite distinct from the public memories which are often reified in public monuments. In his lecture, *The Value of the Original in the Digital Age* (2012), Carl Posy describes archival collections as triggering an abundance of personal memories which give concrete meaning to the objects on display. Posy describes memory as a landscape of past experience that shapes both individual and collective identity. Clifford (1988) has argued that because history and memory are reified in museums people regard museums as sites of authority. Therefore, museums are repositories of the symbols that constitute our values. These values, based on memory, affect our decisions on "what to draw close and what to push away" (Posy, 2012). Posy describes history as the vanguard of self-building narrative and as such, influences behavior. Furthermore, he argues that personal identity narratives crave the details that history can provide. Historical societies bring together, and publically share, the private memories of donors and the membership. Through robust public discourse, the values inherent in these memories become part of the community identity.

A historical society museum can be a unique representative entity within civil society because these collections often preserve the memorabilia of other civic associations. As an example, one collection included in this study a labor union poster calling for strike is prominently displayed amidst the railroad exhibit. This supports Coombes (1988), and McClellan (1994) theses that museums are places rich in both memory, and political symbolism. A museum's power as a cultural institution, lends authority

to its strategies of organizational display, which can reinforce “official” cultural values (Ames, 1972). In choosing items for display, or preservation, the historical society leadership may or may not be conscious of the power they are assigning to particular political practices (Paynter, 2000). Memories are highly subjective and can serve any number of personal or political needs (Gillis, 1994). The considerable barbed wire collection in one Montana historical society museum may seem to be curious or meaningless exhibit to some, but for many western ranchers barbed wire is a potent political reminder of the loss of open range. Through public discourse disparate interpretations of a collection, in combination with official archives, can provide a more comprehensive and inclusive community narrative.

Political Agency. Some political theorists argue that civic associations can counter political powerlessness (Wolin, 2001; Villa, 2006; Welch, 2006.) Historical society museums are places that often celebrate both experience and memory. Moreover, they have the potential to set an example in civil society of creating a more comprehensive understanding of their world through the conflation of facts and values. Historical society collections include historical facts such as objects, printed and dated records, and photographs. Community values are represented in stories, and customs. Family and community memories, often in the form of published storytelling, distinguish a historical society collection from an official government archive. In the past, the political agency of American women and minorities was compromised by their exclusion from official government archival records (Bastian, 2003), but the historical societies in this study show that women and minorities are largely present in community memory. A more complete community narrative would include both official and unofficial versions of a historical episode. By combining the two, the historical society collection represents a more comprehensive community narrative that illuminates essential community values. For instance, the memories of community members rallying and coming together during a disaster are important to a community’s identity because, as a whole, the stories illustrate the ethical value of mutual aid, despite any conflict that may exist in the details of various recollections. In conjunction with the official archives of public administration, the “un-official” archives of historical societies can make for a more encompassing understanding of the community’s ethical and normative bonds. This active conflation of archives (facts)

and memories (value) is the condition McSwite (1994) argues is essential for authentic discourse in a deliberative democracy.

Summary of Component Three: Museums and the Political Realm

Historical societies can be the standard bearers of a community's political identity. Local or historical attitudes, habits, and traditions are reinforced through the society's museum collection, publications, outreach programs, and public monuments. However, the very mores the membership seeks to reaffirm may have exclusionary effects of which they are unaware. Through the reflexive process of discourse, historical society members and community members at large can precipitate a re-evaluation of community mores (McLauren, 2002). Robust public conversation keeps historical societies relevant. Cohen and Arato (1994), Fox and Miller (1995), McSwite (2006), and other scholars cite the iterative experience of discourse within civil society and public administration as strengthening the practice that is essential to any deliberative democracy.

METHODOLOGY

This project has a qualitative research strategy with an exploratory design intended to assess the capacity of rural Montana historical societies to reinvigorate the social bond of discourse. Historical societies with museums are the subject of this pilot study since they are actively involved in the maintenance of community identity, which is a function of the social bond. The criterion for the unit of study is a non-profit, or public, historical society with a museum that represents a town or area population of approximately 2000 people. Primary source data was gathered on four historical societies which represent a convenience sampling. The study utilizes a three-part methodology in an effort to achieve reliability and validity. The first was a review of the museum collection on display. The second part was individual, semi-structured interviews with six open-ended questions. The third part was review of approximately one set of meeting minutes from each year that the society has been in operation.

The examination of the museum collection utilizes simple, direct observation, in which the unaccompanied researcher looks for signs of community identity and indications of a capacity for

community discourse. The examination occurred before conducting the interviews, or reviewing the minutes, so that the comments of others would not unduly influence the researcher's observations. Each society provided full access to their available minutes, but spotty record keeping made the selection of meeting minutes an inexact process. In sum, minutes from each site approximated 30 pages. The method for procuring interviews involved the curator/director of each historical society acting as the key informant. Each curator/director selected four historical society members to participate in the interviews using criteria designed by the researcher: one participant had to be a member who pays annual dues but is not, and does not consider themselves to be, an "active" member; one participant needed to be a member who sits on the executive board; where possible participants were a mix of ages and gender. Sixteen members and four curator/directors participated for a total of 20 interviews. The interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes. The anonymous interviews were conducted and recorded in a museum office, or in a conference room at the town's public library; one interview was conducted in a private home. The interviewees understood that the interview transcription eliminates the names of people mentioned, as well as some place names, in an attempt to secure anonymity of the interviewee, and to afford participants the opportunity to speak without restraint.

The interviews, collection observations, and meeting minutes were open coded using NVivo10 and grouped according to themes. The most relevant data for this study met the four benchmarks for the capacity of a historical society to reinvigorate the social bond: 1) concern for community welfare; 2) acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society; 3) discourse that includes a multiplicity of diverse views; and 4) a commitment to active engagement in collaborative, consensus driven decision-making. Not all the data fell into one of these categories; which suggests there are other avenues of inquiry into the organizational nature of rural historical societies.

DATA DISCUSSION

While it is rare in the United States to take part in the sort of town meetings that Tocqueville witnessed, small town America still has other civil bodies that Tocqueville deemed essential to democracy: rural communities often have a newspaper, and voluntary organizations continue to abound throughout the United States with one out of four Americans volunteering (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2013). Moreover, as McLauren (2002) and Stivers (2002) point out, many civic associations already conduct deeply established political activities, such as faith-based homeless shelters and food banks, which act as a political safety net for the failures of the government and the market.

Historical societies have the potential to act as a site for initiating political change, even if the action is limited to making community members more conscious of community values. This is what happened at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992 when African American artist Fred Wilson curated a controversial installation “Mining the Museum.” In part, this installation paired “unlike” objects from the society’s collection, such as Baltimore *Repousse*-style silver pitchers and bowls, with rusted slave shackles; and cigar store Indians “face to face” with the portraits of historically prominent Maryland patriarchs. The intent of the exhibit was to reveal how museums frame history through their choices of what to display and what to omit (the statuary and shackles were in the museum’s storage basement.) The museum scholars and administrators consider the installation a landmark exhibition that reveals the political power museums have in shaping communal identity. Ideally, and what this paper proposes, is that those involved in such an installation would facilitate a public discourse on the “questions the installation raised about history, truth, values, and ownership” (Adair, Filene, & Koloski, 2011, p230). Unfortunately, in this case, the museum it was unprepared to facilitate such an undertaking. This story led me to ask, what is the capacity of a rural Montana historical society to act as a political agent in community discourse? To what extent can historical society members reinvigorate the social bond of discourse necessary for deliberative democracy to succeed?

Deliberative democracy is the connective tissue of this research. The benchmarks for this study are the themes of, concern for community welfare; acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society; inclusion of a multiplicity of diverse views; and a commitment to public engagement in

collaborative, consensus driven decision-making. It is important to iterate that I chose to study rural Montana historical societies because they were geographically convenient for me, and not because I think there is evidence that rural Montana communities have a more authentic access to discourse than other places. Though not part of this research, it is possible that the visibility and respected standing of historical societies in rural communities in combination with a small population may provide an opportunity for broader influence within the community.

Interview Data Set

Defining Attributes of Democracy

There was one direct interview question about democracy: What would you say are attributes of democracy? This is a tough question that causes most interviewees to pause, and some, not to answer at all. The inability for the participants to easily reference democratic traits is an indication of how the procedural model of democracy has kept citizens removed from participation in, and gaining experiential knowledge of governance (Fox and Miller, 1995). This is evident in the subjects' frustrated tone (which cannot be transcribed) when discussing the issue of democracy. Historical society members make repeated allusions to two of the traits of deliberative democracy: *self-governance* and *freedom of expression*.

The interviewees introduce the *trait of self-governance* when they talk about the power of "a voice" or "having a say". They believe that their opinions matter, "[In a democracy] everybody's opinion is listened to one way or another. We don't have to be afraid to say what we think." There were also references to the capacity to serve: "[...] people are offered the opportunity to be involved." "Democracies give you the opportunity to serve." These comments illustrate that while some believe self-governance is a lost practice, it is still held as one of the ideal functions of democracy. Their comments suggest that while these members may be unfamiliar with the thesis of deliberative democracy, they have a high, intuitive regard for its practices.

Interviewees reference the trait of *freedom of expression* both in response to the first question about democracy and the second more indirect question: In what ways do you think your historical society might represent the democratic values you have described? One responds, “I think the democratic way connects to the historical society probably in the fact that the people [here] can mold their historical society as they want.” Another remarks, “[The history in the museum] can tell us the way things were, and maybe the way things should be today, when we had less government intrusion.” While the principle of freedom of expression may be the rallying cry of individual autonomy, it may also indicate the capacity for the historical society members to respect multiple perspectives that are dissimilar to their own. However, one cannot equate the capacity to entertain different views with a mastery of the challenges of debate. While community members may express a belief in the theory of democracy, they did not directly address the practices of government, or suggest new practices. Instead, these members describe what democracy *should* look like. The repeated references to the traits of *self-governance* and *freedom of expression* indicate their theoretical desire to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives.

Theme of Concern for Community Welfare

With the exception of the research question addressing familiarity with other Montana historical societies, the interview questions managed to precipitate reflections about community welfare. A concern for community welfare indicates a willingness to allow public interest to override private interest. When concern for social welfare results in action that meets the needs of the community, it produces community stability. The two traits of this concern are *civic engagement* (more than voting,) and *working to sustain the community* through the maintenance of community and personal identity. The historical society subjects talk animatedly about the welfare of their communities, the importance of active engagement, and creating sites for community interaction.

Some believe that their political power lay in civic engagement, “So we may not have the power nationally, but we do have the power locally to provide a safe place for people to live and help out your

neighbor; which our community through the food bank and the churches does a pretty good job.” “I like to belong to organizations I feel are constructive and benefit the welfare of my community.” When asked about how the organization reflected democratic values one member replies: “I think that the board is interested in the well-being of our society because they don’t put themselves first. They listen to what’s working and what’s not...They are not doing the “What’s in it for me?” kind of attitude.” Some spoke of a natural inclination to override individualism, “Just the idea of giving of yourself to better the community is key.”

Historical society members have a clear ideas about the power of civic engagement, indicated by the use of phrases such as “... [we have] volunteers that won’t quit [helping]” and, “... we have an obligation.” One member argues, “We can’t just say we are a democratic country and a democratic community and then expect everything to be taken care of for us. We have to be responsible for being a part of providing and securing, so we live in a safe place.”

Members express the second trait, *working to sustain the community* in the role they believe they play in the preservation of community and personal identity. “I think, to me, it boils down to a sense of place... By preserving and making available research, artifacts and documents we’re allowing [people] to get in touch with home.” One comments, “... the [historical society] brings the community in, maybe it helps create the community.” Another talked about the significance of preserving personal identity, often referring to family histories as “important.” Members often refer to the historical society as a site for education, and describe the society’s role as “pertinent;” believing that one “learns from history” in order to understand how to handle contemporary community issues. “I can’t imagine how we can plan our lives without taking into consideration what has gone before us, the people that have paved the way for us.”

Taken together, comments about the traits of community concern, *civic engagement*; and *working to sustain the community*, indicate that historical society members feel they are participating in something they see as a valuable contribution to the security and viability their community. The overwhelming attitude among the interviewees is that civic organizations are about coming together as a group and

working to ensure some facet of community welfare. Their comments attest to their high capacity for active citizenship.

Theme of Recognition of Mutual Dependence

McSwite (2006) argues that public awareness of mutual dependence is the key for authentic public discourse. Remarks about mutual dependence are scattered across the responses to the interview questions. The historical society members often exhibit an acute awareness of mutual dependency within their community. Interviewees, inspired by “the pioneers,” often mention the ability and need to “work together,” “lend support” and, “survive whatever trial.” One describes a particular photo, and cites it as evidence that, “They knew how to share back then, and work together. They depended on one another, and just by looking at that picture I can understand that...” There is also a sense of equity and support for other community members; one person agrees to a theoretical mill levy for the historical society, commenting: “It’s like with the schools... the mill levy helped my kids when they were in school, so you feel like you want to continue to help someone else’s kids.” In sum, the members not only credit their forebears for valuing mutual dependence, but also one another: “There’s a kind of an honor system that goes along with democracy. Trust. You have to have a lot of trust in people.” The theme of mutual dependency on one’s neighbors is still apparent in Montana farming and ranching communities.

Theme of a Multiplicity of Viewpoints

The organizational ethos of a deliberative democracy includes a broad awareness that participation in public discourse must represent a multiplicity of experiences within civil society. *Diversity* and *inclusion* are traits of the theme of *multiplicity of viewpoints*. The interviewees mention ethnic diversity (“Indians,” “Croatsians,” “Blacks,” “Asians,” and “Japanese Americans”) but the references are in a historical context. Census Bureau data shows Montana population to be 89.7% white with Indians representing 6.5% of the population; and while many subjects appear to have an interest in Indian history, there was no evidence that historical society members have a sustained and active

relationship with the contemporary communities of the Indian nations in Montana. In general, their definition of diversity is contextual for Montana: economic, geographic, occupational, newcomers, and youth.

Within these definitional confines, all the members of historical societies interviewed in this pilot study prove to be very conscious of the trait of *diversity*. One member admits that while diversification is a goal, it is also “a struggle.” Some members describe their communities as places that, “love new ideas,” and are “very accepting of new people.” Historical society members think their associations value divergent viewpoints. One member calls into evidence: “the diversity of the people who are [on the board].” Another comments, “This is not a closed group.” Curators when discussing their exhibits, often mention diversity. Three of the curators want “rotating displays” that emphasize different parts of the society’s geographic bounds. They mention “this diversity in showing how people lived,” and “the various factions or diversity of groups.” When asked to name an item in the museum collection that significantly represents the area, one member responds, “[It] would probably one of the quilts, because there again, I like it when all the people in all aspects of life have a part and are brought together. I think the quilt, and I’m thinking of the one that kind of shows all different aspects of the valley . . . , just the way our museum does. So that’s kind of like the one object that includes everybody. And you can look at that quilt and find your own place in life in that quilt.”

The *trait of inclusion* is central to discursive practices since robust participation is the function of a deliberative democracy. Comprehensive participation ensures that the result of collective action are legitimate. Inclusion is on the minds of historical society members when they speak about democracy. “To me [democracy] means being accepting of people, respecting their religion, respecting their outlooks on life, treating them equally. . . . We are not a closed [community].” These comments represent an awareness of a broader audience in the community. A historical society’s public outreach projects and museum events reveal a dimension of inclusion. Members describe the historical societies role in “getting [people] out in the world;” and “becom[ing] a gathering place.”

Inclusion and diversity may be the most critical elements of authentic public deliberation. A multiplicity of perspectives, where no one voice is privileged, is essential to democracy. The interviews revealed that historical society members seem to believe in those ideals. This is evidence that a historical society has the capacity to contribute to the expansion of diversity necessary to maintain American democracy.

Theme of Collaboration

Collaborative practice is a process that does more than entertain a multiplicity of views. The goal of collaboration is collective action. The traits of collaboration are *experience over authority*, *storytelling* and *contestation*.

There are direct references to collaboration in this study, and members seem to accept the inherent challenge of collaboration; “Everybody has to climb on board to make it successful,” and, “You need a good solid board with a variety of opinions, and knowledge, and personality types.” One interviewee mentions that the historical society museum can add depth of content to public discourse: “If people have a sense of place the more likely they are to invest in the area, talk about it, be a participant in the decision-making processes.” Another member cites the historical society as a place for political change, describing it as a place “to exchange ideas.”

Historical society members often have a long and intimate knowledge of everyone in the room. The trait of *experience over authority* describes a weak hierarchic system where power is more loosely shared. In an environment where experience is power, collaboration has a greater chance of being accepted as an organizational practice. As one person described, “Not one person in charge [The historical society] has to be a community thing to work.”

The trait of *storytelling* uses Hannah Arendt’s notion that “story telling is a means by which one visits different perspectives” (Disch, 1993, p. 687). *Storytelling* plays a sizable and popular role in historical societies. The practice of reinforcing personal or familial identity through stories can have the crossover effect of reminding historical society members that everyone’s story is important, and can

reinforce collaboration when participants learn something about themselves through listening. As one member says, “To me, maybe I don't like all my neighbors, but they've taught me a lesson in life...we all learn from each other's hardships, and the stories we share, the stories of their grandfathers.”

Another definition of storytelling is a narrative that reinforces the personal identity necessary for survival. Formal, recorded storytelling is a large part of a historical society's mission, and the four rural historical societies in this study all publish books, and compile archive recordings of local oral histories. These local history books are unedited, so the voices are distinct in their manner of storytelling. They are often considered “bibles” and are used to end family history “debates.” A repeated refrain is that other people's stories were “important.” One member talks about the importance of maintaining a community history, “You take that away from the people and ... that destroys the country because people have no sense of being, no sense of identity.”

The trait of *contestation* is the ability to accept debate as natural, though difficult, part of public discourse. Within one organization, members seem undaunted, albeit a bit weary, by the process of trying to come to consensus, “[We've got] nine very different individuals with nine very different personalities. In some ways it makes things tough, but in some ways it's good because we all bring something to the table. We try and take in everybody's view point, and then there's sometimes when we just vote on it, and majority rules.”

One member encourages others to voice their thoughts and is disappointed when members “never say *a* word” (their emphasis.) Members cite the importance of “showing both sides” and having a comprehensive narrative of history, even when it might be unpleasant.

Storytelling and contestation are the underpinning of collaboration. In keeping with the logics of deliberate democracy, the historical society members in this study show awareness that if individual preferences are set aside, the group can “make it work as a whole.”

Minutes Data Set

While the minutes tell a story about the development of each society, they are not a robust source of data concerning the capacity of historical societies to practice discourse. Once established, each society keeps minutes, though in the beginning the record keeping is idiosyncratic and heavily weighted by the subjective nature of the secretary. Taken as a whole, the minutes indicate societies often had a club atmosphere and meeting usually include food and a form of entertainment, whether a-sing-along or storytelling by a local “historian.” The minutes convey a strong sense of camaraderie among members. As the historical society gained membership they invited speakers, and as their coffers grew, they were recognized and advised by curatorial experts on how to manage and maintain their collection. At this juncture (of informal club and expert advice) two historical societies began to investigate hiring paid curators/directors. Relative to the experience of the professional staff, the minutes reflect organizational strategies in collection management, solicitation for funding, and member management.

Funding and maintenance issues dominate the minutes for each society since they are critical to organizational viability. Another prevalent topic, which provides evidence of the trait of *civic engagement* (concern for the welfare of the community), is the frequent mention of thank-you’s. Historical Societies are so dependent on volunteer efforts that thank-you’s, both verbal and written, are a meeting ritual. Collaboration is marginally verified in the frequent mention of the Chamber of Commerce as the society’s number one civic collaborator, while references to the collaborative trait of *expertise over authority* are plentiful with evidence of members pooling knowledge and expertise, such as building contractors or legal advisors.

The trait of *inclusion* (a multiplicity of viewpoints), especially the concern of engaging community youth, is seen in the minutes of all of the historical societies. There are records of young docent programs, high schoolers involved in the production of the society newsletter, or in helping with society grounds keeping. A common multigenerational venue is an annual family picnics. Two historical societies celebrate the achievements of women, including the establishment of a Mutual Benefit Club in

1909, which is described as an organization that “helped found the town.” Another act of inclusiveness is meetings that rotate to different parts of the association's geographical boundaries.

Increasing public participation is always on the minds of the board members. The following quotes each come from a different society in the study:

- “To sustain the project and avoid the loss of historical materials, the projects [should] be attached to some enduring entity with unrestricted access to the public.”
- “Newsletter items discussed. Send to any and all interested regardless of cost.”
- “Voted to join the Chamber to get more businesses interested in the Society.”
- “Society’s multi-generational family picnic is open to the entire community.”

Observation of the Collection Data Set

While the collection observation data are less useful in illuminating foundational practices that could lead to deliberative democracy; they do suggest that the membership can resource their collections to facilitate debate on contemporary issues; for example, unionization, volunteer safety services, communication technologies and the dichotomies between town and ranch life.

Summary of Findings

My research question asks: What is the capacity of rural Montana historical societies to act as a political agent and reinvigorate the social bond of discourse in their communities? The data collected in this pilot study show that the four rural historical societies in this research met all the benchmarks of a deliberative democracy: concern for community welfare, acknowledgement of a mutual dependence within civil society, discourse that includes a multiplicity of diverse views, and a commitment to active engagement in collaborative, consensus driven decision-making. Meeting these benchmarks indicates that historical society members have the capacity to affect the discursive practices of a deliberative democracy. One limiting factor in this study is the contextual nature of diversity in Montana. So it is not clear, despite what the data may reveal, how participants would react if demographic events broadened

the definition of difference within their community. While instituting the collaborative, discursive process in rural Montana has real possibilities, the quality of the process has the potential to be problematic. This may prove true in any American community.

In sum, despite the natural limitations of a pilot study, this data suggests that members of historical societies are more consciously aware of their role in the political realm than might have been previously expected, and that the appropriate conditions exist for reinvigorating the social bond of discourse. With solid internal preparation and practice, the historical societies can use history as a launching pad to host public discussions on contemporary issues. Thus, discursive practices established within the association can extend out into civil society.

CONCLUSION

The operational problem of bridging the gap between the people and the government in the United States inspired the research for this paper. What conditions are necessary for public administration to transition from practices structured on a market model to one based on a relationship model? According to Cohen and Arato's (1994) theory of civil society, change within the state are initiated by the political actions of civil society. Some scholars argue that in a rapidly diversifying democracy, public administrators need to reimagine their purpose in a democracy as the carriers of the social bond (McSwite, 2006). The practical hurdle for public administration is instituting such foreign practices as discourse and full participation in a bureaucracy. I argue that before public administration can sustain the role as carrier of the social bond, civil society needs to be aggressive in re-establishing the social bond of discourse. If the democratic trait of self-governance can be reproduced within civil society it will ultimately influence the practices of public administration.

Many arts and heritage associations are very serious about civic dialogue, but there is little evidence that they are heading toward collective political action. Members of civic organizations need to keep in mind that the goal of public discourse is not simply to exchange ideas, but to bring about democratic action. Additionally, I maintain that civil societies will remain politically ineffective, if they

continue to ignore the expertise that public administrators, as professional citizens, can bring to their process. The inclusion of public administrators in a civil society dialogue can set the stage for building a bridge between the sphere of civil society and state. It is the responsibility of any civic organization that wants a role as a public forum, to keep their eyes on the prize by building a strong democratic infrastructure within the state.

The primary socio-political motive of the rural historical societies in this project is to answer the question “Who are we?” by resourcing objects, memories, documents and public monuments that reify community cohesion. Rural historical societies as trusted, inclusive places can create a safe political space for reinvigorating the social bond. A historical society’s museum collection can serve not only as the proxy witness to past cultural life, but also as an accessible site where critical inquiry can be made into the current political narrative of the community. Lowenthal (1996) has written that heritage “clarifies the pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes” (p. xi). Because a rural historical society has a unique relationship with the community, it can use its collection as a resource to facilitate public debate on contemporary community issues. Rural Montana historical museums are partial reflections of the political and private realms of the community. The data in this pilot study indicates that historical society members believe that their organization is making a valuable contribution to the sustainability of their community, and to democracy. The four historical societies in this study have reached the benchmarks that indicate their capacity to reinvigorate the social bond within their communities through the practice of organizational discourse and consensus. Through these practices, the membership can set a precedent for other civil associations to do the same. There are any number of social issues that can appropriately use the historical society as a discursive platform: the status of volunteer fire departments, geographic issues such as flood plains, water rights; there are veteran issues, and issues of commerce. Authentic administrative action stems from robust public discourse that lead to change. Without action or change, the participants will see dialogue as ineffective, and may be reluctant to participate in future endeavors.

It should be noted, the limitation of this study is in its examination of capacity, *not the ability*, of historical society members to reimagine their organization as a public forum. However, if society

members prove they have both the capacity, and the skill, for public discourse, the society can become a site for public gathering, discourse, political learning, and community cohesion. When civil society reinvigorates the social bond of discourse, it will be noticed by public administration. Under the influence of civil society public administrators may stop looking to regulations, or to the Constitution, to legitimize their regulatory action. Follett's Law of the Situation predicts that solutions come from the people who are closest to the problem. If public administrators look towards their public, and their established discursive practices, they will find new, localized context of meaning for their work. In doing so, they can transform public administration from a bureaucracy to a legitimized channel of influence in a deliberative democracy.

Additional Lines of Inquiry for Further Research

An Issue of Age

Members of Montana historical societies tend to be older than 50 and they are often preoccupied with how to attract younger members. It may be that if historical societies successfully facilitate public discourse, it will attract younger participants who are eager to become active in community service, but who are not attracted to the current government methods of public service. A long-term research study on the effects of public facilitation by historical societies can show if there is any shift in the membership demographic.

Influence of the Administrative State

McLauren (2002) argues that a civic association is the reassertion of self-governance and solidarity against administrative tendency to bureaucratize. However, civil associations may tend towards bureaucratizing the more they are involved in a standardizing environment. In this study, there was anecdotal evidence suggesting that as historical societies increase their contact with professional associations and government offices, the organization becomes more standardized. These relationships often introduce much needed best practices in the areas of preservation, display, policymaking, and fund

raising and possibly, these relationships lead to more successful financial conditions. However, the historical society board, and staff, needs to remain aware that more formalized historical society has the potential of weakening its grassroots connection. A comparative study of historical societies can examine whether a professionalized historical society needs to make a more conspicuous effort to keep an authentic grassroots relationship with the community.

Sustainability and Asset Based Community Development

In the continuing effort to make rural communities sustainable historical societies are a unique place to study the formation and reinforcement of community identity and the effect of geography on a community's sense of place. Scholars debate whether the emergence of localism is a political reaction to the phenomenon of economic globalism (Donner, 1998; Boswell and Evans, 1999; Hall, 1993; Jonas, 1988). From this perspective, the role of small town historical societies in the maintenance of local identity is particularly meaningful.

Sense of place is rooted in difference (insiders/outside), and this perception of difference is how community cohesion is achieved (Boswell, 1997). Some academics critique globalism as having a homogenizing threat to a local sense of place and distorting the meaning of community (Robbins, 1997). Hall (1993) has counters that globalization has neither replaced nor destroyed the attachments to the notion of local identity (p. 350). Others concur with Hall, suggesting that globalization may in fact help re-embed localism, and the continued proliferation of historical societies are one manifestation of this re-embedding (Donner, 1998; Levin, 2007).

In Montana technological change has brought about demographic changes and created a dramatic shift from a culture based on railroads, mining and agriculture to one based on an amenities-service culture (Bryson & Wyckoff, 2010). Cultural geography is of particular value to Montanans. Nature-based ideals have long served to promote the pastoral ideal of Montana, and have powerfully contributed to its amenities-based economy, which devalues communities with dramatically altered geography as a result of mining (Bryson & Wyckoff, 2010).

Further research may show that an independent, grass-roots community focus can feed into larger government planning processes, giving the community power to define “the future before someone does it for us” (Catherwood-Ginn & Leonard, 2012). Research can show if historical societies can serve as a public space to facilitate dialogues about community identity and sustainability.

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Appendix A**Interview Questions****1. Why did you become a member of the historical society?****Prompts**

What is the importance of your historical society?

What is the HS mission?

What do you consider your role as a member?

2. How are artifacts/docs chosen for inclusion in the museum?**Prompts:**

How are they chosen for display?

Historical relevance?

What are the collection narratives?

Is it an accurate narrative?

Pick three items that are representative of the community

COMMUNITY

3. Describe how you think the historical society relates to the community.**Prompts:**

How is the HS important and useful to your community?

Is the HS reflective of community?

Is there a diversity of viewpoints?

Are there any conflicting views within the membership about the role of the Historical Society?

EXTENDED COMMUNITY

4. Describe other Montana historical societies with which you are familiar.**Prompts:**

Value of those collections?

How are they different or similar to yours?

How do you feel about government sponsorship?

DEMOCRACY

5. What would you say are attributes of democracy?**6. In what ways you think your historical society might represent the democratic values you have described?****Prompt:**

Value for the future?