

Drawing the Line: Public and Private in America

Andrew Stark

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Andrew Stark may only have intended, in *Drawing the Line*, to discuss how Americans use concepts of public and private to frame public policy debates, but he has pulled the curtain back on a much more sinister process. This book offers a glimpse of the thinning commitment to community that has begun to plague American politics. The pervasive attitude of “us” and “them” has its roots in a narrow conception of who matters.

Stark includes lively discussions of particular (and real) public vs. private debates. For example, how do we decide whether gated communities can use public police to patrol private streets? Should a wealthy parent be allowed to pay the salary of a French teacher for his child and others in his child’s grade, without providing the same resource for the rest of the school or the entire school district? Should private persons or corporations be able to put their name on a public structure (such as a stadium) merely by contributing a large sum of money?

One sobering example of just how far things have gone is a private town in California that maintains its city hall just outside its borders. Why? Because the “public” has access to City Hall but does not have full access to the streets of the private community!

What Stark has unmasked is a breakdown of the values that hold democracy together—a sense of community and the shared experiences and responsibilities that come with it. His examples are often instances of folks with abundant resources withdrawing from the community at large. In so doing, they attempt to shift burdens to the larger community, while seeking to limit their tax exposure to pay for public facilities. Such a person might reason, if he has private security in his gated neighborhood, why should he be required to pay also for public police to patrol the community? This reasoning not only fails to consider, however, the interests of and impact on the larger community, but also the fact that the resident of the gated neighborhood needs and benefits from a peaceful larger community.

Stark does a thorough job of exposing and examining all facets of the issues that fuel these debates, and the principles that underlie opposing positions. What is lacking, and perhaps is beyond the scope of this book, is an examination of those political principles that have in the past stabilized American politics and that have given nearly everyone the sense that they had a skin in the game.

Stark is the author of two previous books on public and ethical topics. His latest book will provoke thought for anyone interested in community, public policy, and politics.

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