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# The President's House Is Empty

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**Losing and Gaining Public Goods**

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**Michael Hardt, Bonnie Honig, Elaine  
Kamarck, Tracey Meares, K. Sabeel  
Rahman, Marshall Steinbaum**

# The President's House Is Empty

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## Editors' Note

*Deborah Chasman & Joshua Cohen*

ON INAUGURATION DAY 2017, we published an essay by Bonnie Honig called “The President’s House Is Empty.” The online reaction was extraordinary—the piece went viral, sending a record number of readers to *Boston Review’s* website.

Honig’s starting point—as in the updated version we are publishing here—was the President’s announcement, made months earlier, that Melania and Barron Trump would not be moving into the White House. For Honig, this decision to “opt out” symbolically crystallized our increasing abandonment of public things—from education to clean water—and our diminishing sense of being a public who are “in it together” and who all depend on those things.

So when we brainstormed in early spring about urgent topics for this issue, and thought about environment, health care, and education, we were struck by the thread that tied them together: they could all be grouped under the idea of public goods—things that are arguably necessary for a decent life, that are owed to citizens of a democracy, and that provide a common space that we all share. In the United States

today, these goods are endangered and access to them is constricted by class and race.

In this issue we consider these public goods: what they are, how to provide them, and how to ensure equitable access, whether they are delivered through the private or public sectors. More than that, several contributors suggest that the very act of defining and providing these public goods is constitutive: they help to give us a sense that we are a public, not simply a collection of individuals who live in the same place. As Sabeel Rahman writes in the lead essay to our forum, what is at stake is not only what we owe to each other, but who we are. If Rahman is right, then debate about public goods is at the same time debate about what it means to be an American.

We hope you are provoked by what you read here—and provoked enough to share and argue about it with your friends, neighbors, and colleagues. After all, the greatest public good in a democracy is democracy itself.