You are a citizen of a group (regardless of your legal status) if you seriously ask: “What should we do?” The question is what we should do because the point is not merely to talk but to change the world. Thinking is intrinsically connected to action. We don’t think in focused and disciplined ways about the social world unless we are planning to act; and we don’t think well unless we learn from our experience.

The question is what we should do, not what should be done. It’s easy enough to say what should be done (enact a global tax on carbon, for instance). The tough question is what we can actually achieve. That requires not only taking action but obtaining leverage over larger systems. Since our tools for leverage are mostly institutions, this question requires careful thought about real and possible institutional forms. It is also, by the way, not the question “What should I do?” Of course, that is also important, but I cannot achieve much alone and—worse—I cannot know on my own what I ought to aim for. I must collaborate in order to learn enough about what to do.

The goal of civic studies is to develop ideas and ways of thinking helpful to citizens, understood as co-creators of their worlds. The question is what we should do, so it is intrinsically about values and principles. We are not asking “What do we want to do?” or “What biases and preferences do we bring to the topic?” Should implies a struggle to figure out what is right, quite apart from what we may prefer. It is about the best ends or goals and also the best means and strategies. (Or if not the best, at least acceptable ones.)

Finally, the question is what we should do, which implies an understanding of the options, their probabilities of happening, and their likely costs and consequences. These are complex empirical matters, matters of fact and evidence.

Academia generally does not pose the question “What should we do?” The what part is assigned to science and social science, but those disciplines don’t have much to say about the should or the we. Indeed, the scientific method intentionally suppresses the should. In general, philosophy and political theory ask “What should be done?” not “What should we do?” Many professional disciplines ask what specific kinds of professionals should do. But the we must be broader than any professional group.

In response to the question "What Should We Do?" a group of scholars and activists have joined to form the emerging academic field of "Civic Studies." It is the intellectual component of civic renewal, which is the movement intended to improve societies by engaging their citizens. The concept of "Civic Studies" as an academic field was coined in 2007 in a statement by a group of scholars when they designed a summer institute on the subject. The framing statement is available at the website footnoted below. A more complete portrayal of the nascent field of "Civic Studies" can be found at its website (http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/civic-studies/) along with links to its organizing members. The website presents "Civic Studies" in part as follows.

The goal of civic studies is to develop ideas and ways of thinking helpful to citizens, understood as co-creators of their worlds. We do not
define “citizens” as official members of nation-states or other political jurisdictions. Nor does this formula invoke the word “democracy.” One can be a co-creator in many settings, ranging from loose social networks and religious congregations to the globe. Not all of these venues are, or could be, democracies.

Civic studies asks “What should we do?” It is thus inevitably about ethics (what is right and good?), about facts (what is actually going on?), about strategies (what would work?), and about the institutions that we co-create. Good strategies may take many forms and use many instruments, but if a strategy addresses the question “What should we do?”, then it must guide our own actions – it cannot simply be about how other people ought to act.

I have no complete theory of “Civic Studies” to offer, but here are five principles, drawn from various authors and from experience.

**Learn from Collaboration**

Our methods should be interactive and deliberative. I will not decide what we should do; we will. Yet procedures will not suffice. It is not enough to say that a diverse mix of affected people should sit together and decide what to do. If I am seated at that table, I must decide what to advocate and how to weigh other people’s ideas. A deliberative process creates the framework for our discussion, but we still need methods to guide our thinking.

It is important whether our substantive beliefs are structured so as to permit interaction and learning. The question is not (only) whether you believe in equality or liberty, in God or in science. The question is how you use those ideas in your overall thinking. If, for instance, you immediately return to a few core principles, it will frustrate deliberation, collaboration, and learning. It is equally damaging to drop ideas quickly in order to avoid conflict. The ideal is genuine intellectual engagement with other people, through both talk and action.

**Be Humble**

In deciding what to do, we should be conscious of intellectual limitations. This is what I take from conservative thought: a serious doubt that we will come up with a better plan than what our predecessors devised, what the community in question already does, or what emerges from uncoordinated individual action. That doubt can be overcome by excellent thought; but we must be reasonably cautious and humble about ourselves.

The heart of conservative thought is resistance to intellectual arrogance. A conservative is highly conscious of the limitations of human cognition and virtue. From a conservative perspective, human arrogance may take several forms:

- the ambition to plan a society from the center;
- the willingness to scrap inherited norms and values in favor of ideas that have been conceived by theorists;
- the preference for any given social outcome over the aggregate choices of free individuals;
- the assertion that one may take property or rights away from another to serve any ideal; and/or
- the elevation of human reasoning over God’s.

These are separable claims. You can be an atheist conservative who has no objection to elevating human reason but deep concerns about state-planning. That is why conservatism is a field of debate, not a uniform movement. But it’s also possible to build coalitions, since, for example, Christian conservatives and market fundamentalists can unite against secular bureaucracies. Their reasons differ, but it is not only their practical objective that unites them. They also share a critique of the bureaucracy as arrogant.

Edmund Burke, an 18th century Irish political philosopher who served as a prominent member of the British Parliament, is considered by many to epitomize the ethic of conservatism. He stood for the
proposition that the status quo is likely to be better than any ambitious reform. Even if current institutions are based on unjust or foolish general principles, they have gradually evolved as a result of many people’s deliberate work, so that they now embody some wisdom. People have accommodated themselves to the existing rules and structures, learned to live with them and plan around them, and have woven more complex wholes around the parts given by laws and theories. Meanwhile, proposed reforms are almost always flawed by limited information, ignorance of context, and downright arrogance. In politics, as in medicine, the chief principle should be: “First, do no harm.”

In any debate, the Burkean conservative position is worth serious consideration. I come down on that side pretty often. And given the alternatives, I almost always vote for the Burkean political party in the United States, which is the Democratic Party.

It is the Democrats, after all, whose main goal is to defend the public institutions built between 1900 and 1960: neighborhood public schools, state universities, regulated capital markets, federal health programs, science funding, affirmative action, and the like, against untested alternatives based in the abstract theories of neoliberalism. Importantly, Democrats defend existing institutions without heartily endorsing them. A typical Democratic position goes something like this: Neighborhood public schools are inequitable and sometimes oppressive, but they need our support because lots of teachers and families have invested in them, they are woven into communities, and the radical critiques of them are overblown.

In fact, no one maintains authentic conservative ideals in the United States as well as the grassroots activists who organize everyday civic initiatives: service projects, community-based research studies, public deliberations, and the like. Typically, they place themselves far to the left of the political spectrum. But that just demonstrates that our political spectrum has been oddly scrambled. Civic activists are precisely the people who advocate respect for local norms and take an “asset-based” stance toward the institutions, resources, and norms of the communities where they work. They also work independently of the state and try to build the capacity of free citizens to solve their own problems. These are authentically conservative ideals.

Criticize from Within

Pure conservatism would preclude any criticism of existing institutions and norms. That will not do. But our critique of the shortcomings of our society should be “immanent,” in the jargon of the Frankfurt School, a group of social theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, and particularly with its contemporary leader, Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas has long argued that we should make more explicit and try to improve the implicit (“immanent”) norms of a community rather than imagine that we can import a view from nowhere.

I would alter the idea of immanent critique in two ways. First, we should not look only for contradictions and hypocrisies in the norms underlying social and political discourse. Holding contradictory ideas is a sign of maturity and complexity, not an embarrassment. And if you look for contradictions in order to advance your own view, then you are not actually practicing immanent critique. You’re hoping to score debating points in favor of a position external to the community. The immanent critique I recommend is subtler and more respectful than that. Second, it is not always directed at communities, whether geospatial, ethnic, or political. Sometimes it is directed at practices and fields. In fact, I see special value in intellectual engagement with fields of practice whose expressed aims are appealing but which need help with the details.

Avoid the Search for Root Causes

Here is a little fable that illustrates this point:

A group of middle class students has volunteered to serve meals at a homeless shelter. They love the experience. During the reflection session later, one remarks, “Serving the homeless was so great! I hope
that shelter will still be open in 50 years, so my grandchildren can serve.”

A progressive educator cries, “No! Our goal must be to end homelessness. You need to think about root causes, not just serve free food once a week. What are the fundamental causes of homelessness?” Chastened, the students do serious research and determine that homelessness results from poverty, which, in turn, is a byproduct of global capitalism.

They are trying to figure out what to do about capitalism when the Brazilian legal theorist and former cabinet member Roberto Mangabeira Unger happens to walk by. “No!” Unger might declare. “You are assuming that the link between poverty and homelessness is natural or inevitable. You have derived patterns from data drawn from limited and partial experience and restricted your imaginations to what you believe are ‘lawlike tendencies or deep-seated economic, organizational, and psychological constraints.’” We human beings have made the social world and we can change any part of it—not only the parts that you have identified as deep structures, but also any of the other elements or links.

“Your ‘confining assumptions...impoverish [your] sense of the alternative concrete institutional forms democracies and markets can take.” By focusing on the biggest and most intractable factors, you guarantee defeat, whereas any part of the picture could be changed. It would be possible to have a capitalist society with poverty but no shortage of homes. What if we got rid of all zoning rules and rent control but gave everyone a voucher for rent? What if public buildings were retrofitted to allow people to sleep comfortably in them at night? What if some houses were shared, like ZipCars, and homeless people occupied the temporarily empty ones? What if ...?”

The idea of "root causes" is a misleading metaphor. Social issues are intertwined and replete with feedback loops and reciprocal causality. There is no root. Sometimes it is better to address an aspect of a problem that seems relatively superficial, rather than attack a more fundamental aspect without success.

**Keep the Ship Together**

In deciding what we should do next, we should not turn our attention to ultimate ends, for example, to a theory of the good (let alone the ideal) society. First, the path toward the ideal is probably not direct, so knowing where you ultimately want to go may send you in the opposite direction if you look for a shorter path. Second, we should be just as concerned about avoiding evil as achieving good. Third, our concept of the ideal will evolve, and we should have the humility to recognize that we do not believe what our successors will believe. And fourth, we are a group that has value—the group may even give our lives the value they have. It is just as important to hold the group together as to move it forward rapidly toward the ideal state.

There’s a great scene in the movie *Lincoln* when the president tells Thaddeus Stevens:

> A compass, I learnt when I was surveying, it’ll—it’ll point you True North from where you’re standing, but it’s got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you’ll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what’s the use of knowing True North?

These are the words of Tony Kushner, who wrote the screenplay, not (as far as I know) of President Lincoln himself. But they make an important point. Knowing where we ought to end as a society tells us very little about our best next move. Sometimes a tactical retreat or a sidestep is well advised. Thus political philosophy does not address the question, “What should be done?” unless it is married to political strategy—and the division of disciplines and departments makes that combination rare.

I would actually push the point further. There is no end, no literal True North. As we move through time as a people, we keep deciding where we ought to go. Moving in the right direction is important, but so is holding ourselves together as a community so that we can keep deciding where to go. Sometimes, the imperative of maintaining our ability to govern ourselves is more important than forward motion.

In his fine book, *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic*, Stephen Elkin introduces this metaphor:

> Those who wish to constitute a republican regime are like
shipbuilding sailors on a partly uncharted sea who know the direction in which they sail, since the kinds of ports they prefer lie that way. This much they can agree on. To attempt to agree on anything more specific will defeat them, their opinions on the matter differing significantly. They also know too little for substantive agreement to be possible. ... It is clear that the relations among the shipbuilders are fundamental. Because they must build, rebuild, repair, and modify the vessel as they sail and learn—and because they must alter their course—...it matters whether the shipbuilders’ modes of association are such as to facilitate this learning and the decisions they must make. ... These modes of association are then at least as important as the ports toward which the shipbuilders sail.  

So it is with a republican regime. Elkin adds that the “essential problem is one of creating a design that provides the capabilities that are needed to keep the regime oriented in the right direction.”

Lincoln provides a rich example for thinking about this problem. He knew the North Star (in that case, abolition) but he also strove to keep the ship of state together because abolition was not the only or final destination our ship could reach. Lincoln’s was the great case, but the same situation confronts every leader—and every citizen. For instance, our current president named the North Star in his Second Inaugural:

We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American, she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.

But how can we move a divided America closer to that objective? That is an example of a question that is worthy of us, as citizens.