A REVIEW

of

KF Research:

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Civic Initiatives in American Democracy

Peter Levine

This article is excerpted and adapted from “Civic Renewal in America,” an article written by Peter Levine and published in Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly, Vol. 26, Winter/Spring 2006.

Our formal political system is coarse, unproductive, and short-sighted. Outside of formal politics, however, a robust movement is beginning to renew civic engagement in America. In The Civic Renewal Movement, Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland describe the major currents of that civic work. This article provides a similar account, although it is based on an independent set of observations.

The heart of today’s civic renewal movement is a set of concrete, practical experiments, including the following:

Practical deliberative democracy. For some 30 years, nonprofits have been organizing groups of citizens at a human scale (say, 5 to 500 people) to discuss public issues, typically providing background materials and offering some kind of moderation or facilitation. Some of the important organizations in this field include the National Issues Forums (mainly self-selected adults deliberating face-to-face, with published guides), Study Circles (a similar process, but usually more embedded in community organizing), Deliberative Polls (randomly selected citizens who meet for several days), and online forums, such as E-The People.

Community economic development. Deliberation also occurs within nonprofit corporations that aim to create jobs and income and that are formally tied to neighborhoods or to specific rural areas. These corporations include co-ops, land trusts, and community development corporations (CDCs), among others. One of the biggest weaknesses of democracy today is the mobility of capital. As Gar Alperovitz, University of Maryland professor of political economy, argued recently, a corporation can influence political decisions in multiple ways, including the “implicit or explicit threat of withdrawing its plants, equipment, and jobs from specific locations.” What is more, “in the absence of an alternative, the economy as a whole depends on the viability and success of its most important economic actor—a reality that commonly forces citizen and politician alike to respond to corporate demands.”

However, the success of CDCs, land trusts, and similar innovations proves that viable alternatives to the standard corporation exist. It is possible to increase wealth in poor communities by creating economically efficient organizations that are tied to places and unable to threaten to disinvest.

Democratic community-organizing work. The Industrial Areas Foundation (which has created and worked with many CDCs and other neighborhood corporations) represents a form of community organizing that builds the political capacity, as well as the wealth, of poor people. Instead of defining a community’s problems and advocating solutions, IAF organizers encourage relatively open-ended discussions that lead to concrete actions (such as the construction of 2,900 townhouses in Brooklyn, New York), thereby generating civic power. Though IAF is a major force in this field, it is not the only one. Asset-Based Community Development emphasizes the importance of cataloguing and publicizing the assets of communities as a prelude to development. The goal is to shift from thinking of poor communities as baskets of problems, to recognizing their intrinsic capacities. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is also a hub for this kind of work.
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Work to defend and expand the commons. The “tragedy of the commons”—that tendency of any resource not privately owned to be degraded as people over-use or fail to invest in it—is real. Consider the collapse of global fish stocks due to overexploitation. However, many unowned resources actually flourish for generations or even centuries because they are nurtured by strong communities with appropriate habits and values. New examples of commons include land trusts and co-ops as well as cyberspace, understood as a whole structure, not as a series of privately owned components. Scholars, such as political theorist Elinor Ostrom, who works closely with communities, have begun to understand the principles and practices that underlie effective commons—whether they happen to involve grasslands, computer networks, or bodies of scientific knowledge.

Although the network for civic renewal faces daunting challenges, it is a multifaceted, innovative, and increasingly coherent political force in its own right.

Practical work to protect and enhance commons is underway within the American Libraries Association, because librarians see themselves as defenders of public artifacts (the books, maps, databases, and Web pages in their collections), public facilities (library buildings, meeting spaces, grounds), and public ideas (including all human knowledge that is not patented or copyrighted, plus copyrighted books that people can borrow and read). Librarians believe that these public goods face numerous threats, ranging from patrons’ abuse of library books and budget cuts to corporations’ efforts to overextend copyright law. However, the ALA fights back in the courts and legislatures.

Meanwhile, librarians encourage constructive public participation in local libraries to enhance the value of these commons. An example is the September Project, an impressive series of discussions, art exhibitions, readings, and performances that now take place in thousands of public libraries every September 11th, as a democratic response to the terror attacks. Collaborative efforts to restore and protect natural commons (ecosystems) are often undertaken under the name of “civic environmentalism.” Because the keys to robust, sustainable commons include public deliberation and the wide dispersal of civic skills and attitudes, commons work must be viewed as closely related to civic renewal.

Work on a new generation of public media. “Public media” is much broader than conventional public broadcasting; it includes any communications medium that promotes the creation and sharing of ideas and cultural products relevant to public issues. So defined, the most compelling public media today originate from thousands of grassroots groups that create Web sites, e-mail-based discussions, and audio and video segments.

J-Lab, the Center for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland, for instance, makes grants to grassroots groups to conduct “micro news” projects. “Interactive.” Although interactivity can be a mere gimmick or a way to enhance an individual’s experience on a Web site, some journalists now experiment with interactive features like blogs for democratic purposes.

Public media production and work to defend the commons come together in the field of positive hip-hop. Youth of all races now produce music and poetry that confronts serious social problems and depict themselves as three-dimensional human beings, not as thugs. Hip-hop culture usually involves borrowing, quoting, and parodying snippets from mass media. Because this is a powerful democratic activity, there should exist a commons composed of cultural products available for such “fair use.” Unfortunately, over-restrictive copyright laws threaten the growth of this commons. Young people in the hip-hop world are increasingly aware that they have a stake in dry issues like copyright.

Development of social software. I mentioned blogs in the last section. They are one example of a new behavior enabled by software. Many developers are working on other software to enhance discussion and collaboration. A good example in a geographical community is the Bakersfield, California, Northwest Voice, which consists entirely of material written by citizens. People submit news items that are automatically sorted by location and topic. The result is a Web site that looks exactly like a professional online newspaper, even though it is created by volunteers. Copies are printed with advertising supplements and distributed to every household.

While some of this frenzied innovation is driven by purely technical interests and goals (and by the prospect of making money), many in the subculture of “hackers” are committed to the commons and to norms of voluntary collaboration.

The engaged university. Colleges and universities have great civic potential as producers of knowledge, sites of deliberation, and powerful nonprofit economic institutions, rooted in communities. However, William Sullivan, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that post-World War II universities were mostly committed
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Children taking part in the Indiana State Fair’s Marion County 4-H Youth Day Camp pet a sheep in the sheep barn at the fair. The camp, for kids aged 8 to 12 and run by the Indiana State Fair, is to introduce inner-city youth to the opportunities of 4-H programs.

to the idea that experts “solved problems’ by bringing the latest technical knowl-
edge to bear on matters which, it [was] widely presumed, the public as a whole was too limited to understand, much less address.” This attitude could lead to the overvaluation of certain forms of technical knowledge and the denigration of public deliberation. It also sharpened distinctions among research (defined as sophisticated scholarship assessed by academic peers), teaching (the transmission of expert knowledge to students), and service (the application of expertise to community problems). In competitive universities, teaching and service were generally valued less than scholarship. All three enterprises suffered from the understand-
ing of research as strictly technical.

Today, however, one finds many countertrends, including various impres-
sive scholarly research programs that require close and mutually respectful interactions among scholars, students, and geographical communities, social move-
ments, or professional groups outside the academy. For example, the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania provides opportunities for distinguished scholars to advance their own disciplines by conducting research that benefits (and takes direction from) residents of West Philadelphia, where the university is situated. Penn has also used its economic leverage in constructive ways, collaborating with community partners.

The Center for Community Partner-
ships exemplifies several civic trends in higher education: a move from “service” to collaboration; a rediscovery of geo-
graphical communities; a reflection on colleges’ power as employers, builders, and consumers; and a turn to sophisti-
cated research that requires learning with and from nonacademics. Ostrom’s work on commons is another good example. It is theoretically original, yet it depends on her learning from lay partners. The Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland is a center for research and experimentation on the engaged university.

Civic education. From the 1960s through the 1990s, most scholars argued that explicit civic education had no lasting effects. In the same period (although not only because of the scholarly nay-
sayers), schools tended to aban-
don civic courses and curricula. Major educational reforms, culminat-
ing in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, have made civic education a low priority.

Nevertheless, some nonprofit organizations have continued to provide textbooks, programs, and seminars for teach-
ers. These groups include the Center for Civic Education, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Streetlaw, Public Achievement, Choices (founded at Brown University), and the Bill of Rights Institute, among others. Their programs usually combine a focus on perennial democratic principles with investigations of immediate issues relevant to students. They also tend to combine experiential learning (e.g., debate, community service, advocacy) with reading and writing.

Since 1999, these nonprofits, tradition-
ally fractious, have come together to create the National Alliance for Civic Education (NACE) and then the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Campaign is an effective advocacy organization that brings together all the leading organiza-
tions that specialize in formal civic education, plus major nonprofits that have pledged to support their agenda, includ-
ing the American Bar Association, both national teachers’ unions, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and 35 additional organizations. They are working to ensure that the next generation of educa-
tional reform will not again ignore civics.

Service-learning. A particular strand of civic education involves combinations of community service with academic study of the same topic. Service-learning is popular not only in K-12 schools (about one-third of which now offer it), but also in colleges. Much service-learning is nonpolitical; it involves acts of charity and service, such as cleaning up a park or visiting elders. Often the underlying theory derives from experiential education (whose proponents believe that students learn best from doing); this need not have anything to do with civic or political values. However, within the large field of service-learning, one finds avid discus-
sion of how to engage young people in solving social problems—as a pedagogy. Careful, independent evaluations of some excellent service-learning programs have found that participants develop civic identities that last well into adulthood.

The National Service Learning Clearing-
house and the National Service Learning Partnership are hubs for this network.

Community youth development. Much of the best civic education takes place not in schools but in youth groups that are concerned primarily with healthy adolescent development. Increasingly, adults in 4-H, the Scouts, and urban youth centers believe that engaging teenagers in studying and addressing local social problems are vital ways to develop their intellects and characters and to keep them safe. Much like proponents of asset-based community development, these people want to treat their subjects (in this
case, kids) as partners and assets, not as bundles of problems. They also emphasize local geographical communities as excellent subjects for youth to study and as venues for youth work. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and the Forum for Youth Investment are important hubs in this movement. The Coalition for Community Schools brings a similar set of values to its work with K-12 schools.

In Hampton, Virginia (and to a lesser extent in other communities), youth have been integrated into the city’s governance. Youth are recruited into school and neighborhood boards, where they make significant contributions to their communities. Leaders emerge and are tapped for the citywide police and school advisory boards, which have major influence.

The Strength of the Movement

I am convinced that the civic renewal movement whose main elements I have mentioned so far forms a reasonably tight and robust network. That claim could be tested by interviewing leaders about their ties to other groups and analyzing the resulting network data. Lacking the resources to conduct interviews, I have examined the electronic links among organizations’ Web sites. A Web link provides imperfect evidence of actual collaboration, but it does reveal a conscious decision to connect two organizations.

When software called IssueCrawler analyzes the links among hundreds of Web sites devoted to civic renewal, it finds many connections among institutions concerned with public deliberation, civic education, service-learning, higher education reform, and political reform. Further from the core of this online network are sites for community organizing, urban planning, conflict resolution, and social software. Overall, IssueCrawler reveals that the field is tightly interconnected—confirming what is evident if one attends many face-to-face conferences. Although the network for civic renewal faces daunting challenges, it is a multifaceted, innovative, and increasingly coherent political force in its own right.

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Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement

**Derek Barker**

This article is excerpted and adapted from his article of the same name in the Higher Education Exchange published by the Kettering Foundation, 2006.

More than ever, higher education professionals are starting to describe their work using the words participatory research, public scholarship, and community partnerships. In fact, words like these are being used in the titles and mission statements of centers, programs, and other initiatives to broaden the idea of scholarship and deepen the connection between higher education institutions and the public realm. For the past few years, I have been tracking these projects as well as the work of independent scholars who have similar approaches. I see an exciting group of academics trying to make the case that civic work makes for good politics—and good scholarship. Civic work helps scholars generate more practical research questions, enables them to collect more data, and allows them to see their ideas working in practice. Engaged scholars are finding that their practices are not something they do on the side in addition to their academic research. They embrace different methods and emphasize varying aspects of democratic politics, but their work can be understood and assessed as a “scholarship of engagement.”

Five emerging practices are showing how higher education professionals can expand the idea of scholarship and enrich the political life of their communities. Each one is animated by a specific theory of democracy, and as a result each one uses its own methods to address a specific set of public problems. What drives these practices is the intent of the scholar, not the methods they employ. While academic scholarship is often driven by the training and expertise of the scholar, engaged scholars are driven by what they intend to accomplish. By thinking about the scholarship of engagement along these dimensions, my intention is to provide a clear and systematic framework through which to understand and assess the work that makes up this movement, while also recognizing its diversity.

The scholarship of engagement concept was first stated in the work of the late Ernest Boyer. Boyer’s work was dedicated to expanding the idea of scholarship beyond research published in peer-reviewed journals, in order to recognize and value all the things that academics actually do. One of Boyer’s later works took a further step to argue that the idea of scholarship could be further broadened to include the scholarship of engagement: practices that overlap with the traditional areas of scholarship but also incorporate practices of collaboration with public entities.

So what does civic work have to do with scholarship? What is “scholarly” about the scholarship of engagement? By linking civic work to scholarship, this terminology reflects a growing awareness that civic work can further academic as well as political goals.

Practices of civic work can also make a difference in what Boyer calls the “scholarship of teaching.” For a long time, the service-learning and experiential-learning movements have been showing that students can benefit from seeing the ideas discussed in the classroom applied practically in the outside world. What the scholarship of engagement adds to these pedagogies is a conscious effort
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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