



HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2014

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.



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WE ARE THE ONES WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR: THE PROMISE OF CIVIC RENEWAL IN AMERICA

Written by Peter Levine

Marietjie Oelofsen, Reviewer

Democracy is not working as it should. Citizens feel sidelined because their representatives in government pay more attention to the wishes of powerful interest groups, and are more interested in using policymaking to settle political scores than in considering the views of their constituents. “Certainly, we Americans are in a bad mood about our nation and our public life.”

We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For (Oxford University Press, 2013) invokes a powerful phrase from the civil rights movement. Levine sets out an argument for civic engagement with potential to address the asymmetry of decision-making power between government and citizens. In Levine’s definition, civic engagement includes “a combination of deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships.” Current civic engagement efforts, Levine argues, do not have sufficient scale and power to reform the institutionalized culture of problem solving in the country: “The way to achieve such reforms is to organize one million most active citizens into a self-conscious movement for civic renewal.” The goal of this book, says Levine, is to “develop practical strategies for expanding and rewarding open-ended politics under difficult circumstances.”

Levine begins by describing the “difficult circumstances” Americans face. High dropout rates in schools, disproportionately high rates of incarceration, expensive health care, the troubled economy, global warming, and dysfunctional financial and academic institutions, says Levine, are problems that citizens have to address through “more and better work by the residents of a whole community.”

But, says Levine, if citizens want to address serious problems, they need to be more than “thoughtful and committed” citizens. Commitment and thoughtfulness, says Levine, has to be combined with questions about the timeliness of the action, what action

would be most effective, and the “good means and good ends” to be achieved. These questions have to be supported by “a combination of values, facts, and strategies to think wisely about politics.” Levine devotes two chapters to the notion of “values,” elaborating on the values at the core of talking and listening, civic work, and civic relationships. He also considers the values that give expertise, ideology, and the market new meaning when viewed through the lens of civic engagement and civic renewal. Two chapters address the state of American democracy. Levine provides an historical analysis of the rise and fall of civil society, the part played by the media in (not) recognizing civic engagement, the effects of inequality and class divisions on the potential of diversity and representativeness of civic groups, and the corruption of public institutions that encourage special interests and “discourage civic engagement.” Levine details the ongoing citizen-engagement efforts that he sees as the network of civic organizations that could form the basis of an emerging civic renewal movement. He provides concrete proposals on how to aggregate the fragmented efforts of citizens involved in “scattered” pockets of “sophisticated, demanding, and locally effective” civic engagement into a cohesive civic renewal movement.

Levine is clear about civic engagement. He is also clear about what civic engagement is not. Civic engagement is not just about talking or deliberating public problems; it consists of “talk and work.” “Work” means taking concrete action. In my reading of Levine, *work*, in this instance, also includes *willingness* to have open-ended discussions with citizens who hold different opinions, or who may look different from us, or who come from different backgrounds. It also includes making difficult choices about finite resources, sharing responsibility, and owning problems by taking action, with other citizens, to try and solve them.

Apart from the theorists and practitioners one would expect to feature in a book dealing with civic engagement—Jane Addams, Hannah Arendt, Harry Boyte, John Dewey, Robert Putnam—three voices stand out, at least for this reviewer, as influential in Levine’s conceptualization of a theory of change in the norms for civic engagement and civic renewal: Elinor Ostrom, John Rawls, and Amartya Sen. He recognizes Elinor Ostrom, the 2009 Nobel Laureate in economic sciences, for the way in which she and

her group understand the “creation and management of common resources.” Levine finds Ostrom’s framework appealing for its emphasis on citizen centeredness and her de-emphasis on the separation between the state and the private sector. This, says Levine, opens up the possibilities for citizens to engage with diverse institutions and a diverse combination of institutions. Levine questions modern academic philosophy’s inability to provide theoretical guidance on how to change the world. Levine points to John Rawls as “a leading example” of proponents of *ideal* theory that “does not offer a path to a better society but only an indication of what one would be like. It is a highway without the on-ramp.” Levine also draws on Amartya Sen’s critique of ideal theory and pushes the critique “further than Sen does”; where Sen argues that changing society happens through “global dialogue” with enough leverage to influence “the actual decision makers” (whether these decision makers are people with votes, or consumers, or powerful leaders), Levine’s theory of change, which is also “meant to exemplify a different approach to scholarship,” speaks to “readers who can act (collectively) to enhance democracy in the United States.”

Levine interlaces theory and practice throughout the book, while remaining (deliberately?) vague about the precise roots of his own theoretical lineage. In Chapter Five, Levine discusses the potential of theoretically based solutions to the dysfunctional praxis of politics in America in greater detail. He finds utilitarianism, populism, libertarianism, and egalitarianism wanting as proposed theoretical solutions. What is needed, he says, is “an ongoing dialogue in public forums about what the public interest requires.”

Levine’s thoughtfulness about the complexity of issues that theorists of participatory and citizen-centered approaches to democratic governance face is a strength of this book. Levine is as mindful of the obstacles encountered by citizens involved in the practice, or work, of civic engagement: “The kinds of practices that I advocate in this book are poorly funded, invisible in federal and state law, understudied by academics, neglected in education, and ignored in news and popular culture.” Levine weaves ample examples of civic practice that stumble against the barriers of institutional power throughout the book. But he also has ample, and inspiring, examples of civic practices that work, and he cites concrete examples to

demonstrate why some civic engagement efforts work and why others may not be as successful.

His argument for civic engagement and civic renewal is not “an argument for revolutionary change,” and it is not an argument for “participatory democracy” to substitute for the “constitutional order of markets and representative institutions.” It is an argument that “more and better civic engagement is a path to social reform.” Levine is modest about what could be realistically accomplished in getting a civic renewal movement off the ground: he sets his hopes on levels of civic engagement in the mid-twentieth century, with prospects for added equity and equality. Levine does not pretend to have all the answers: “No one knows for sure how to involve citizens in the administration of health plans over time.”

The plan for a road to civic renewal sketched out in the last chapter is specific. The question to start with, says Levine, is not *what is to be done*, but *what should we do?* The former is the “wrong question” because it “hides the subject and suppresses accountability.” The latter is the “better” question, says Levine, as long as the “we” goes beyond a normative concept of citizenship. “Instead, I mean to take the ‘we’ quite seriously. What should *we* do?—I who writes these words and you who reads them—along with anyone whom we can enlist for our cause.” Levine is concrete about potential members, what should be done, what the potential gaps are, how the civic renewal movement will be formed, what the function of the movement would be, and what the priorities for this movement could look like.

Who would benefit from reading this book? Levine asks this question himself, and in the spirit of the book, the question is accompanied by a call for reflection and a call for action: “Who will read this book, and what can they do?” The audience for the book, he concludes, depends on the way in which the publishing and the media industries are structured to promote it, and the extent to which the topic of the book captures the public’s interest. Those who do get to read the book can join organizations and networks available to them. In more general terms, this reviewer would recommend this book to citizens who are interested in civic engagement—why it is in trouble, and what could be done to revive its presence in America’s public life.

This book is a powerful and concrete proposal for moving civic engagement from important, but modest, localized efforts to a forceful, cohesive national movement of civic renewal. I, for one, hope the publishers, the media, and the readers will come to the table to help make this happen.

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