



The Civic Mission of Higher Education at a Time of Democratic Discontent

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Despite serious weaknesses in the political culture of the United States today, three promising developments are evident: a renaissance of political theory, reforms of colleges and universities that connect them better to their surrounding communities, and widespread civic innovation outside of academia. The true civic mission of higher education is to bring together political theory and practice, academia and grassroots civic renewal in order to spawn the social and intellectual movements that are capable of reviving American democracy.

Democracy is hardly thriving in the United States today. Whether measured by levels of participation, citizens' satisfaction with the political system (broadly defined), gaps in engagement and power by social class, the actual performance of public institutions, or norms of public reason and civility, the trends do not look good.

But we live in an era marked by three potentially exciting developments that are relevant to higher education and civic life.

First, the last 30 years have seen interesting and important developments in democratic theory, broadly defined. Civic republicanism, deliberative democracy, communitarianism, sophisticated new versions of populism, and cosmopolitanism are some of the theoretical movements that have real momentum.

I am particularly interested in *intellectual* movements that are related to *practical* experiments. I entered this field 25 years ago by studying the deliberative democratic philosophy of Jürgen Habermas in a sophomore seminar and then spending a summer at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, OH. Kettering was then organizing the deliberative events that are still known as National Issues Forums. I am not sure whether Habermas is personally interested in such practical experiments, but the next generation of deliberation scholars definitely *is* interested, and the exchanges between practice and experience have been fruitful.ⁱ

Another important example is the Indiana School of political theory led by Elinor Ostrom and Vincent Ostrom, a couple who died in rapid succession in 2012. Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for revealing how, when, and why groups of people overcome collective action problems to manage common resources. A definition of good citizenship is implicit in her theory: the good citizen is a person who co-manages the commons. That ideal contrasts at least slightly with some other worthy definitions, such as the citizen as an altruistic volunteer, a judicious decision-maker, or a fighter for justice.ⁱⁱ

Because she found that people regularly succeed as good citizens, but only under certain conditions, her theory had profound implications for public policy, for education, and for the strategies of reformers and activists. For her whole life, she was engaged in dialogues and collaborations with all those kinds of people, in her classroom, in Bloomington (where she and Vincent lived), in Indianapolis, in settings around the world, and online—she helped to explain the structure of cyberspace.ⁱⁱⁱ And yet I would basically honor her as a contributor to the renaissance of democratic *theory*.

A second stream of work also begins in academia, but it takes higher education itself as the main site of reform. The presenting complaints are: students and professors have lost a sense of mission and calling; they are not learning all that well or flourishing as people; and they are harmfully disconnected from their peers within academia and (even more so) from the broader society. This conversation took its current shape during the 1980s when organizations like Campus Compact were formed, and it has since spawned a whole range of influential practices. For instance, when students collaborate with community-based organizations that have ongoing partnerships with colleges (the theory goes), they can benefit intellectually and psychologically while contributing to the public good. But that requires engaged scholars, robust community partnerships, appropriate pedagogy, etc.—all of which we have been busily developing for the past 30 years.^{iv}

The third stream is democratic renewal and innovation that emerges from outside academia. I have already mentioned deliberative democracy, which, in practical terms, means recruiting citizens to talk about public issues. That is a large-scale enterprise now. The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation has more than 2,000 individual members who are interested enough in organizing and facilitating public discussions (often linked to local action) that they subscribe to the NCDD mailing list, which is full of practical suggestions.

Another example that I have already mentioned is the idea of citizens managing common resources. In the robust field of civic environmentalism, people are busy doing that, often applying concepts directly from the Ostroms. The River Network has formal partnerships with 600 local nonprofits that are involved in managing watersheds. America's 4,600 community development corporations have financed and built 86,000 housing units.^v The American Libraries Association is a different example of an organization that thinks of itself as the guardian of a commons, in this case, a "knowledge commons."

Another thread in the tapestry is contributed by broad-based community organizing, which often has a deliberative aspect (participants talk and decide on strategies and goals), but certainly differs from pure deliberation in its emphasis on action—including “Direct Action” events. In deliberative democracy, the topic is often “what should be done,” whereas participants in community organizing tend to ask, “What should we do?” The Industrial Areas Foundation, a leading network for community organizing, has 47 regional affiliates now, most of them capable of drawing 2,000 people to a given event.

Innovations that originate within government and as the result of public policy also deserve mention. Just to name one type, Federally Qualified Health Centers provide health services at the local level. By law, they must have governing boards of which more than half are current clients of the center who demographically represent the population that the center serves. They employ 123,000 full-time staff and may have, by my estimate, 120,000 citizen board members.

My book entitled *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (2013) is devoted to mapping the whole field of civic renewal and providing some theoretical underpinning. My point here is simply that civic innovation is flourishing outside of academia; I estimate that at least one million Americans are actively involved.

By the way, my list of organizations and my estimate of the number of civically engaged Americans depend on my definition of authentic “civic engagement.” That is (and ought to be) a contested question, related to fundamental debates about what makes a good society and a good human life. I won’t defend my whole philosophical position here, except to say that the efforts that impress me most always have three dimensions. They are *deliberative*, involving talking and listening about public issues. They are *collaborative*, involving actual work that yields public goods or helps build the commonwealth. And they improve *civic relationships*, which are relationships characterized by mutual respect, appropriate power dynamics, and such civic virtues as loyalty and hope.

Having identified three major streams (intellectual movements, reforms in academia, and civic renewal efforts outside of higher education), my next obvious move is to argue that they must flow together. That conclusion built into the cliché of “streams.” It’s always easy to say that several important things are taking place and it is time to combine them. The hard part is actually bringing them together. But the good news is these streams do flow together in the most challenging and sophisticated experiments in higher education. These experiments test and develop advanced social theories; they engage students, faculty and staff in ways that transform education; and they connect higher education to the rich field of civic renewal outside of academia.

Although it is always helpful to integrate theory and practice, academia and society, that is more important today than usual because of the challenging context outside of higher education. It is not that the objective circumstances of the United States are worse than ever before: the situation was more dire when Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt took the oath

of office. But we lack the vital political movements that provide frameworks for effective citizenship.

Today, most academics (both scholars and administrators) who are involved with civic engagement endorse three ideas. First, they care about college students as whole people, considering their emotional and social wellbeing as well as their academic success. They argue that students benefit psychologically, spiritually, and intellectually, from engaging with communities. Second, they maintain that students should not only seek fulfilling educational experiences, but also fight for justice even if that has costs for themselves. Students must ask the really difficult and troubling questions. Third, they recognize that students in the liberal arts face a terrible shortage of traditional jobs, but they argue that civically engaged graduates can find—or create—worthy career paths.

All that is true, but putting the three parts together is very difficult. In fact, I doubt that anyone can do it alone: asking profound and troubling questions, taking effective action, finding a relevant career path or calling, and obtaining personal satisfaction and fulfillment along the way. You can do all of that if you belong to a thriving political or social movement, but not if such movements are missing.

In other words, we cannot merely encourage students to ask and explore *questions*. They must also have a menu of available *answers*. Meaningful answers are more than ideas or theories. They consist of ideals plus strategies, current leaders and role models, agendas, institutions, jobs, cultural expressions, and vocabularies, all wrapped up together.

For instance, if you went to Washington with FDR in 1932 or JFK in 1960, you thought you were building something new and great. You had ideas, leaders, agendas, and institutions all ready to embrace you. You could engage in debates within those movements, but you had a structure. In 2008 and 2012, young people voted for the candidate who supported the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society, Barack Obama. But very few young people felt called to Washington to work for the federal administrative state. Its heroes are dead, its ideals are fulfilled or compromised, its vocations seem routine.

If you went to Washington with Reagan and the resurgent conservatives of 1980, you also had an agenda, ideals, theories, strategies, and living heroes. My sense is that the conservative movement does not provide any of that for young people today.

A subtle case is the Civil Rights Movement. In *Freedom Summer*, Doug McAdam shows that the 1,000 young white college volunteers who went to Mississippi in 1963 did not (for the most part) benefit personally from that experience. They tended to struggle with jobs, relationships, and psychological issues later in life.^{vi} The Civil Rights Movement was certainly a structure that developed leaders. But for that purpose, it worked better in 1955 than in 1963. By the early 1960s, it was beginning to splinter, its dynamic and vibrant debates turning divisive and caustic. Also, an argument had broken out about whether white middle-class leaders had a place in the movement. I think the critics of their participation had a point, but for young white

volunteers, the argument was alienating. Most moved to the anti-War or Women's movements, but the transition was tough.

In short, we must reckon with the political and intellectual context in which we work. If our young people lack a choice of vibrant political movements, that will make our educational mission much harder.

Colleges and universities cannot build political movements. Because our institutions must be politically neutral and devoted to pluralist debates, they cannot set about launching the equivalents of New Deal liberalism or Reaganite conservatism. But worthy political movements can emerge from the combination of intellectual ferment and debate on campus, grassroots civic experimentation, and partnerships between academics and community organizations.

In fact, that is exactly how I would tell the story of our great political movements.

For example, American liberalism was ascendant in the mid-Twentieth century, from the election of Franklin Roosevelt until the end of the Lyndon Johnson administration. In that period, it had everything that an ideology should: millions of active adherents, heroes and leaders, supportive organizations (from the AFL-CIO to the ACLU), legislative victories and an unfinished legislative agenda, empirical theories and supportive evidence, and moral principles. The principles could be summarized as the famous Four Freedoms that President Roosevelt announced in 1941 (freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion; freedom from want; and freedom from fear), but we could spell them out a bit more, as follows. The individual liberties in the Bill of Rights trump social goods, but it is the responsibility of the national government to promote social goods once private freedoms have been secured. The chief social goods include minimal levels of welfare for all (the "safety net," or Freedom from Want), equality of opportunity (achieved through public education, civil rights legislation, and pro-competitive regulation in the marketplace), and consistent prosperity, promoted by Keynesian economic policies during recessions.

These ideas had support from sociology and economics and could be developed into a whole theoretical structure. Franklin Roosevelt constructed a temple to Thomas Jefferson because he wanted to show liberalism's debts to that enlightenment philosopher; the interior of the Jefferson Monument is bedecked with quotes favorable to the New Deal. Other parts of the liberal synthesis can be traced back to Alexander Hamilton. John Maynard Keynes, Louis Brandeis, Gifford Pinchot, and Felix Frankfurter were more proximate intellectual sources. We could understand the New Deal as a development of Victorian liberalism that added arguments in favor of federal activism to combat monopoly, environmental catastrophe, and the business cycle.

But I would tell the story an entirely different way: as the "scaling up" of concrete examples and experiments that were undertaken originally in a highly pragmatic vein. Think, for example, of Jane Addams in 1889. She is a rich and well-educated person who has no possibility of a career (because she is a woman) and who is deeply troubled by poverty in industrial cities. She

is impressed by the concrete example of Toynbee Hall, a settlement house in London. She and Ellen Gates Starr move into a house in a poor district of Chicago without a very clear plan for what to do. They launch projects and events, many of which have a “deliberative” flavor—residents come together to read challenging books, discuss, and debate. They work in a pragmatic intellectual milieu that encourages people to set assumptions aside. For example, their frequent visitor John Dewey, from the University of Chicago, wrote,

There is no more an inherent sanctity in a church, trade-union, business corporation, or family institution than there is in the state. Their value is ... to be measured by their consequences. The consequences vary with concrete conditions; hence at one time and place a large measure of state activity may be indicated and at another time a policy of quiescence and laissez-faire. ... There is no antecedent universal proposition which can be laid down because of which the functions of a state should be limited or should be expanded. Their scope is something to be critically and experimentally determined. ... The person who holds the doctrine of 'individualism' or 'collectivism' has his program determined for him in advance. It is not with him a matter of finding out the particular thing which needs to be done and the best way, under the circumstances, of doing it.

Out of the pragmatic, problem-solving discussions in Hull-House come a kindergarten, a museum, a public kitchen, a bathhouse, a library, numerous adult education courses, and reform initiatives related to politics and unions. Some 2,000 people come to Hull-House every day at its peak, to talk, work, advocate, and receive services.

In the 1920s, when progressive state governments like New York's start building more ambitious social and educational services, they fund settlement houses and launch other institutions (schools, state colleges, clinics, public housing projects, welfare agencies) modeled on Hull-House and its sister settlements. Then, when Roosevelt becomes president and decides to stimulate the economy with federal spending, he creates programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that are essentially Hull-House writ large.

I do not think the result was especially coherent, intellectually. Liberalism in its golden age incorporated a populist commitment to majority rule along with civil libertarian principles that protected minority rights. It empowered professionals within government agencies and yet often criticized expertise and bureaucracy. It had one foot in “good government” reform movements that were hostile to bosses and parties, and another in big-city urban machines. It inspired people who advocated decentralization, smallness, and local control along with enthusiasts of great national programs. Often those ideas coexisted in the same mind, as when President Lyndon Johnson declared a national war on poverty, asked for huge federal appropriations, and said, “This program asks men and women throughout the country to prepare long-range plans for the attack on poverty in their own communities. These are not plans prepared in Washington and imposed upon hundreds of different situations. They are based on the fact that local citizen's best understand their own problems and know best how to deal with those problems.”^{vii} Rather than criticize the Great Society for inconsistency, I would

salute its balance. An ideological movement that promises to improve the world and that is built on experience will embrace exceptions, tensions, and even contradictions; it will not be pure.

By emphasizing liberalism's pragmatic, experimental roots, I do not mean to deny its intellectual achievement. Jane Addams, for instance, was an extremely learned and insightful writer. But I suggest that in a healthy ideological movement, intellectual reflection follows practical experimentation, not the reverse. It is important that Addams refused to work under the aegis of the University of Chicago but only invited its luminaries to mix with laypeople under the roof of Hull-House in a Chicago ghetto.

One could write a somewhat parallel story about American conservatism in the period from Ronald Reagan's election to Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." The conservative movement had intellectual forebears, writers like Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and William F. Buckley. But its signature policies were not necessarily consistent with any of these authors' ideas (which, in any event, conflicted with one another). That is not a criticism but a respectful acknowledgement that conservatism was a balance of diverse principles, heroes, examples, and cultural expressions—not a simplistic application of ideas.

Today, no ideology exists that is commensurate to our intertwined and stubborn problems: climate change, terrorism, de-industrialization, crime, the lack of social mobility over generations, the close association between economic security and educational attainment, and rising health-care costs. We have available some good policy ideas and supportive arguments and evidence, but those are only *elements* of a worthy ideology. Contemporary liberalism emphasizes the duty of the government to provide services such as health insurance. At the same time, it stresses the deep corruption of government, its oppression of children in factory-like schools and degradation of welfare-recipients, its susceptibility to "capture" by special interests, its dependence on Congress, which is riddled with lobbyists' money and outrageous procedures. Scratch a liberal who wants to expand the government's role and you will find someone who is deeply angry with government. Ask a liberal college student who voted for Obama whether she would like to work in the administration, and she will probably roll her eyes.

Liberalism must include not only proposals for new programs, but also plausible strategies for government reform, powerful and trusted organizations that support these ideas, examples of successful programs, and living leaders and role-models. By that standard, contemporary liberalism is (at best) just at the start of a comeback. Conservatism, at the same time, seems almost devoid of positive ideas.

If it is right to understand the great ideologies as expansions of pragmatic experiments, then we should be looking to today's innovative clinics and health plans, land trusts and co-ops, community service projects, and socially minded businesses for the concrete cases that merit expansion. We are less in need of completely new theories than of what the Brazilian theorist and cabinet member Roberto Mangabeira Unger has called a "culture of democratic

experimentalism.”^{viii} This experimentation should be decentralized, participatory, and driven by citizens, not just experts. At the same time, it should be reflective and intellectually challenging, and participants should consider and debate larger frameworks. To promote these experiments and that debate is the true civic mission of higher education.

Endnotes

- ⁱ See, for example, John Gastil and Peter Levine, *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005)
- ⁱⁱ Peter Levine, “Seeing like a Citizen: The Contributions of Elinor Ostrom to ‘Civic Studies,’” *The Good Society*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2011), pp. 3-14
- ⁱⁱⁱ Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, eds., *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)
- ^{iv} For a recent overview, see The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *The Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2012)
- ^v Community Wealth, <http://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/cdcs/index.html>
- ^{vi} Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially pp. 199-232
- ^{vii} Johnson’s 1864 “State of the Union Message,” anthologized in Marvin E. Gettleman and David Marmelstein, *The Great Society Reader: The Failure of American Liberalism* (New York, 1967), p. 184. For context, see Peter Levine, *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 48-53.
- ^{viii} Unger, *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 187.