

10-25-2013

Review of *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* by Peter Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Recommended Citation

Shaffer, Timothy J. (2013) "Review of *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* by Peter Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol9/iss2/art18>

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Abstract

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Keywords

civic renewal, deliberation, citizenship

“Good citizens deliberate. By talking and listening to people who are different from themselves, they enlarge their understanding, make themselves accountable to their fellow citizens, and build a degree of consensus” (p. 3). Peter Levine begins his recently published book with an emphasis on the importance of diverse citizens engaging one another through discussion and deliberation. In an opening chapter entitled “Overview: The Public and Our Problems,” Levine quickly makes the point that deliberation alone, however, is not enough: “People who merely listen and talk usually lack sufficient knowledge and experience to add much insight to their conversations, and talk rarely improves the world” (p. 3). Deliberation is most valuable when connected to work—the work of active and engaged citizens. It is the combination of deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships, Levine argues, that offers the best alternative to a politics that is shaped strongly by institutions and ideologies that marginalize the voice and agency of citizens.

The book is comprised of seven chapters but the conceptual foundation is articulated in the second chapter, “How to Think About Politics: Values, Facts, and Strategies,” where Levine argues that we should think about politics as the combination of facts, values and strategies. He offers a succinct explanation of what he means: “We need to know facts because we should not try to do something that is impossible, or redundant, or that has harmful but unintended consequences.... We need values because otherwise we cannot distinguish between the effective, small group action of Mussolini’s *fascisti* in 1922 versus the civil rights movement’s leadership in 1955.... Finally, we need strategies. It is insufficient to wish for better outcomes and determine that those outcomes are possible. We need a path to the desirable results” (p. 24-25). For individual citizens and entire communities, the ability to understand the complexity of public problems and then to act in collaborative ways with others is an important element of making our democratic society more inclusive of ordinary men and women rather than only viewing (American) politics as being shaped by interest-groups.

As a leading scholar contributing to what has been referred to as the civic renewal movement, Levine’s philosophical contribution to the literature is developed around what he calls a “different theory of change and is meant to exemplify a different approach to scholarship.”¹ He directs the book at readers who can act to enhance democracy in the United States by working with one another. In his words, “because we are far more effective when we act collectively rather than singly, this book identifies networks of organizations that an individual can join and influence. The book’s strategic recommendations, empirical evidence, and moral arguments are all

¹ Regarding the civic renewal movement, see Robert K. Fullinwider, ed. *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999); Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); ———, *The Civic Renewal Movement: Community Building and Democracy in the United States* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2005).

addressed at members (and prospective members) of these networks” (p. 33). The strength of the book is that Levine is both a leading scholar on citizenship and civic renewal and someone who has been deeply involved in the *work* of civic renewal since the late 1980s. When he speaks about various civic organizations, it is done as someone who has often been involved with the efforts of these various organizations and not just someone removed from the realities of working to improve democratic habits and practices.

The bulk of the book develops the three elements of politics as values (chapters 3 and 4), facts (chapters 5 and 6), and strategies (chapter 7). For those who study and/or practice deliberation, the argument made here is that deliberation is most fruitful for learning when talk is embedded in relationships among citizens and connected to their common work. Levine puts it this way: “deliberation without collaboration is empty, but collaboration without deliberation is blind (p. 39). It is not a surprise, then, that deliberative democracy is less about creating structures that look like juries or legislatures and more about a “busy, heterogeneous civil society” where people come together in a variety of ways (p. 42). It is in his writing about values, Levine notes the limitations of “expert and disciplined guidance” and the inability of having empirical information replace moral concepts or reasoning (p. 48). While expertise can help make sense of social problems, citizen participation in decision making (with deliberation being an important venue for such participation) and action steps is critical because nonprofessionals are often better than experts “at the assessment of whole objects” because they know the context in which something has occurred rather than being an “outsider who arrives to apply general rules” (p. 68).

Chapter 5, which is the first of two chapters on “facts” that explores the large-scale (most destructive) trends affecting our democracy, highlights the transformation of traditional civil society, public institutions, and the growing divides among people that contribute to what other scholars have referred to as the “big sort” (p. 100).² With such fractures in civil society, where do citizens fit when so many forces have made it easier to watch from the sidelines rather than be involved and engaged with others? It is in chapters 6 and 7 that Levine begins to point to the possibility and promise that citizens can and have organized themselves and their institutions to respond to the challenges we collectively face. Whether political, media, or educational reform or the improvement of local communities through community-based economic development, asset-based community development, and the creation of community development corporations, American society is being challenged and reshaped by the diffuse efforts of many citizens and groups.

Chapter 7 concludes the book with a sense of how people have organized (as outlined in chapter 6) and what the serious obstacles and deficits are that we face. These include a political system that favors

² Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

professionally led, well-funded interests; major social policies being hostile to active citizen participation; news media generally overlooking examples of deliberation and public work but instead focus on competition; and schools and colleges offering inadequate civic education, among other factors (p. 162-163). Helpfully, Levine devotes a few pages to the shortcomings of two popular strategies for increasing broader, better, and more influential civic engagement: strategic messaging and social networking. While helpful in a general sense, these are limited resources for civic renewal. Instead, Levine suggests that the various institutions and organizations involved in civic renewal strengthen their networked relationships with one another and align their efforts.

Using the civil rights movement in the United States as an example, Levine notes the dense networked relationships various organizations and groups had with one another. What he suggests for the civic renewal movement is the formation of civic renewal coalitions rather than attempt to create one “powerful, well-funded, broadly representative political organization for civic renewal (p. 178). These coalitions should have three major functions: the continuing debate about the theory of civic renewal, the communication of public messages to the roughly one million Americans who have been engaged in civic work, and the advocacy of civic work which will inevitably be shaped by local needs and challenges (p. 179-183). While acknowledging that publishing a list of priorities in a book is limited and static, Levine nevertheless offers a list of ten priorities for national efforts that, in his view, would help shape the civic renewal across the country.

After the final chapter there is a, “A Note on the Title of this Book” since the phrase “we are the ones we have been waiting for” was so popularized during then Senator Barack Obama’s successful campaign for president in 2008. Noting the somewhat uncertain origins of the phrase (though it did have roots in the civic rights movement), the book closes with this statement: “Ultimately, it is *our* phrase and we have the obligation and opportunity to develop its meaning through our talk, our work, and our civic relationships” (p. 191). This book is a significant contribution to the literature about the civic renewal movement and the possibilities that we have, as citizens, to improve our democratic society. It articulates a philosophy rooted in both thoughtful practice and observation. At its core, this statement helps articulate what we need to do in order to be people who deliberate and talk with one another, understand issues, and act together. If we don’t, who will?