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Abstract

This essay locates deliberation and deliberative theory as an important strand in a larger interdisciplinary and political movement, civic agency. The civic agency movement, and its related politics, a politics of civic empowerment, include a set of developing practices and concepts which enhance the capacities of diverse groups of people to work across differences to solve problems, create things of common value, and negotiate a shared democratic way of life. Stirrings of civic agency can be seen in many settings, including efforts to recover the civic purposes and revitalize the civic cultures of institutions such as schools and colleges.

Keywords

deliberation, public work, civic agency, civic studies, politics, democracy

In mainstream political theory, participatory democracy has sharply declined since the 1960s and 1970s, as Jeffrey Hilmer found in a recent survey of worldwide literature on democracy (2010). Theory is matched by widespread feelings of powerlessness. People are deeply troubled about the direction of society as a whole; they see most institutions as remote and focused on narrow gain; they worry that people are divided by race, ideology, religion, and class. Moreover, such feelings are acute in higher education, where educators experience an avalanche of changes -- cost cutting, new technologies, demands that higher education be narrowly geared to the needs of today's workplace (Boyte et. al., forthcoming 2015). In the new documentary about the state of higher education, "Ivory Tower," Andrew Delbanco, professor of American Studies at Columbia, notes an "apocalyptic dimension" to discussions about today's higher education.

Yet citizen aspirations for more substantial voice are also widespread, across the political spectrum. Obama's campaign theme in the 2008 election -- "yes we can" -- was followed by Occupy Wall Street and growing progressive concern about growing inequalities and corporate power. Tomas Picketty's dense and academic new work, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, has climbed high in the bestseller list. Meanwhile discontent on the left finds counterpart on the right in conservatives' challenge to "big government" and systems dominated by credentialed experts.

In such an environment, deliberation has emerged as a way to bridge ideological and other differences, pointing beyond citizens as voters and volunteers, helping to generate hope for a more substantial democratic politics. But deliberative democracy is not, by itself, a new stage of active democracy nor is it sufficient to get us there alone.

In *The Deliberative Practitioner*, John Forester shows the insufficiency of deliberation by itself when he describes what is going on during examples of significant change (1999). He warns of the dangers of excessive focus on language: "We always face the danger that we will listen to what is said and hear words, not power; words, not judgment; words, not inclusion and exclusion; 'mere words' and not problem-framing and . . . strategies of practice." Forester uses the phrase "city building in practice" to describe "the politically astute work of these practitioners and the planners and designers like them." He employs the term, "participatory action research" to convey rich bottom-up stories, describing changes that take place: "transformation of done-to into doers, spectators and victims into activists, fragmented groups into renewed bodies." He calls this "the ability to act together," arguing that "if we overemphasize the talk and the dialogue. . . we risk missing what is truly transformative about such work."

Deliberation can be seen as one important strand of civic practice in a larger movement focused on "the ability to act together" on common challenges, in environments where scripts are insufficient. This ability is usefully described as civic agency. Other innovations developed over the last generation contribute as well to civic agency. These include theory and practice of citizen-centered governance of common resources, which won the late Elinor Ostrom the Nobel Prize for Economics; the concept of "public narrative," developed by long time civil rights activist and community and union organizer turned Harvard professor Marshall Ganz, which helped to animate the Obama campaign in 2008; broad based community organizing; asset mapping of low income communities developed by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann; and an

emerging effort, civic science, which aims to dismantle the “cult of the expert,” reintegrating scientists into democratic society. Civic science is the theme of a high level workshop at the National Science Foundation in October, 2014, rethinking the role of science in society. The new volume edited by Peter Levine and Karol Soltan, *Civic Studies*, brings a number of these strands together in the new field focused on agency and co-creation.

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship and its partners have also sought to integrate many of these themes in the framework of citizenship as public work, aimed at deepening civic agency. Public work can be defined as self-organized efforts by a mix of people who create things, material or symbolic, whose value is determined by a continuing process of deliberation.

The public work framework reimagines settings like schools, colleges, businesses, government agencies and others not as part of a static “system world” but rather as human inventions, communities which can be reorganized to become enabling environments for agency. This requires conceiving work itself as activity whose public dimensions can be deepened. Work is at the heart of self-interest in all institutions, including colleges and universities. Seeing institutions as communities, building public relationships, undertaking changes in cultures to make them more public, and thinking in political terms about knowledge, as well as other power sources, highlights the dynamics of work routines, norms, and identities. A deliberative public work approach to democratic change differs from a service framework, which urges people to “do more” or “be better.” It also differs from the issue focus of most civic activism. Public work connects interests to citizenship and the public good by inviting people to “make work more public,” more interactive, collaborative, visible, and filled with public purposes. It aims at what Maria Avila, long time community organizer who translated organizing methods into Occidental College, calls “culture change.”

We saw this early on in our partnerships with Nan Kari and a group of faculty, staff, and students at the College of St. Catherine, who addressed the challenge of “making teaching and learning more public” through adapting community organizing methods. We have also seen public work extensively in schools in an initiative called Public Achievement. Public Achievement involves teams of young people, ranging from elementary through high school students, recently also involving college students, who work through the school year on public issues of their choice. Members of the team are coached by adults who help them develop achievable goals and learn political skills and political concepts. At St. Bernard’s Elementary School, a low-income school in North St. Paul, Public Achievement became the centerpiece of the school’s culture in the early and mid-1990s through the leadership of then principal Dennis Donovan. Insisting that all forms of work in the school, including teaching, have public and empowering dimensions, Donovan helped us realize the potential for “Public Achievement-style education” to revitalize civic sites of education and power in the life of communities. Since its founding in 1990, Public Achievement has spread to several hundred communities and schools in the United States and as well as to Poland, Northern Ireland, Gaza and the West Bank, Israel and elsewhere.

Many other efforts to “make work more public” are also appearing. In fact, we moved the Center for Democracy and Citizenship to Augsburg College in 2009 partly out of the belief that departments and programs in a medium sized liberal arts college like Augsburg, with a strong citizenship mission and the spirit of an “urban settlement,” have freedom to innovate largely

missing in today's research universities, with their incentive systems inextricably tied to rankings wars and with highly meritocratic and individualistic cultures. At Augsburg, special education, the Ph.D. transcultural program in nursing, environmental studies and other units of the college are beginning to incorporate civic agency themes into curricular and co-curricular initiatives in substantial ways.

Deliberative public work and other strands of civic agency point to a new, civically empowering politics, or civic agency politics. Civic politics shares with progressives the recognition of the crucial roles government can play. It draws on a rich history of the New Deal in the 1930s and elements of the Great Society in the 1960s, when government was an effective and empowering partner with an active citizenry. Civic politics also draws on conservative communitarians such as Mary Ann Glendon, William Schambra, Bob Woodson, Yuval Levin, Russ Douthat and others, who stress importance of communal ties and cultural continuities.

Civic politics also points beyond today's left or right. Such politics stresses citizen as co-creators of the world, more than deliberators about the world, and democracy as a society, not simply an electoral system. The challenge is to build sustaining foundations that can unlock the tremendous civic potential now largely dormant among our people and in our institutions.

Selected Readings

Harry Boyte, Ed., *Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2015).

John Forester, *Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

Jeffrey D. Hilmer, "The State of *Participatory Democratic Theory*," *New Political Science* 32 (March 2010), pp. 43-63.

Peter Levine and Karol Soltan, Eds., *Civic Studies* (Washington: AAC&U/Bringing Theory to Practice, 2014).

Author Information

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