

Civic Renewal in America

Peter Levine

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 this article, I define what I mean by “civic” work. I then describe some important current examples and contend that the whole field is growing stronger and more unified. (This independent analysis supports the results of a new book by Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland entitled *The Civic Renewal Movement*.) Finally, I argue that civic renewal should matter to academic philosophers—and vice-versa.

Open-ended Politics

Good citizens care about issues and debates, often passionately. They want to save unborn children or to defend women’s reproductive freedom, to rescue the environment or to promote growth, to achieve world peace or to punish America’s enemies. These are matters of life and death, so naturally we want our positions to win, and we are entitled to fight for public support.

But a civic attitude begins when we notice that a great democracy is *always* engaged in such debates. It matters not only which side wins each round, but also

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what happens to the nation’s public life over the long term. Are most people inclined to participate in discussions and decisions (at least within their neighborhoods and schools), or are many citizens completely alienated or excluded? Do young people grow up with the necessary skills and knowledge to allow them to participate, if they so choose? Do we seriously consider a broad range of positions? Do good arguments and reasons count, or has politics become just a clash of money and power? Can we achieve progress on the

goals that we happen to share, or have our disagreements become so sharp and personal that we cannot ever cooperate?

One may serve civic ends while also fighting hard for a political position, so long as one takes care to avoid collateral damage to the civic culture. Indeed, much of the energy in politics and civil society comes from people who want to promote particular policies and interests. That energy is welcome. Nevertheless, it is important for some people, some of the time, to be mainly concerned about the quality of public institutions and debates. While most citizens engage politically as Democrats, Republicans, or members of another party, we also need at least a few citizens to fill nonpartisan roles, ensuring that elections are fair and government is transparent and ethical. While it is useful for editorial writers and bloggers to promote their own ideological views, we also need reporters who provide facts regardless of the political implications. While it is appropriate for people to form and support organizations that promote their own economic and legal interests, we also need some organizations to worry about the overall political process and culture.

In short, we need political work that is *open-ended*. Instead of defining problems and solutions in advance, such work creates open forums, networks, and institutions in which diverse groups of citizens can make their own decisions and act effectively.

“Open-ended” seems a better term than “neutral,” because neutrality is something of a chimera. Most political interventions have more or less predictable consequences for left and right. For example, someone might register young voters simply in order to increase the level of participation in our democracy. However, if one registers students on my campus, experience suggests that 70 percent will vote Democratic—a partisan consequence. Most journalism benefits one side of the political debate more than another. Before there can be an open public meeting in a community, someone must write an invitation and agenda that may somehow favor one group or perspective. These examples show that political neutrality can be elusive.

Nevertheless, there is surely a difference between trying to inspire, persuade, or manipulate people to adopt a view, versus helping them to form and promote decisions of their own. The latter goal is appealing for several reasons: it reflects the best spirit of liberal education, it builds citizens' capacities for self-government, and it creates the hope that we may together develop *new* policy options and ideologies, for none of the existing ones seem impressive.

If one endorses a full-blown political ideology (complete with appropriate policies, arguments, institutions, constituencies, and tactics), then it may seem morally compelling to further that view rather than to promote open-ended civic processes. However, I doubt that any of the available ideologies, from libertarianism to socialism, is in good enough intellectual condition today to merit anything more than lukewarm support. In that situation, pragmatic, open-ended, participatory civic work is especially important.

It would be unwise to adopt an open-ended approach to politics if public opinion generally reflected deep inequality of knowledge, status, power,

are frustrated by discussions unless they lead to action. In the best civic renewal work, people not only deliberate; they also vote and otherwise influence the state, manage common resources, and build non-state associations and institutions. Deliberation without work is empty, but work without deliberation is blind.

A Human Scale

We might conceive of politics as occurring on two levels. One involves major policy issues, the kind of questions that are ultimately decided by legislative votes, court decisions, and referenda. In considering these issues (e.g., taxation, welfare, war, or the right to abortion), people fall into ideological groups that are represented by major organizations and parties. Voting is a citizen's main source of power. Debating, organizing, petitioning, and raising consciousness are important, but they count only insofar as they change votes. Free and fair elections are what make this level of politics democratic.

Politics at the macro-level can sometimes be "win-win" and creative. Wise legislation and competent public administration can make everyone better off. Nevertheless, much macro-level politics is zero-sum, because (for example) a victory for abortion rights is a loss for abortion opponents—and vice-versa. Indeed, this level of politics *should be* competitive, because tough competition between parties and ideologies gives citizens choices and keeps incumbents honest. Besides, when parties are forced to compete, they mobilize ordinary people to engage as voters and activists; thus competition encourages participation. Perhaps the worst flaw in today's macro-politics is a lack of vigorous competition caused by gerrymandered electoral districts, incumbents' advantages in campaign finance, and various impediments to insurgent campaigns and movements.

A second level of politics—most common at the local level and within institutions—involves direct participation. At this level, many of the people who will be affected by a decision should personally participate in deliberations about it. For example, before a religious congregation makes a major financial decision, often the whole group discusses it. Furthermore, there is no need to isolate discussion from action at the micro-level of politics. The same people who meet and talk about an issue can also implement their own decisions. A student government can decide to implement a mentoring program and then actually serve as the mentors. A neighborhood group can decide to protest a crackhouse and then actually picket it. An academic department can choose a new curriculum and then actually teach it.

The micro-level of politics—characterized by direct participation, deliberation, and what political theorist

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and other resources. We would have to reform the economic structure of society *before* we could trust public deliberations to reach just or wise conclusions.

Indeed, there is such a thing as "false consciousness"—a set of views contrary to people's own interests that they adopt because they are manipulated by cultural norms, status differentials, advertising, state propaganda, schools, religious bodies, and other large forces. However, we are not respectful of our fellow citizens when we diagnose them as having been so manipulated. It requires a remarkable belief in the superiority of one's own views to attribute false consciousness to others. Again, given the weak intellectual condition of all major ideologies today, such arrogance seems misplaced. Besides, it is generally more effective to begin with a sincere attitude of respect and, having genuinely listened, then to express one's own dissenting views.

Much has been written about the ethics of public deliberation. For instance, to the greatest extent possible, discussions should be about policies, not about people. Although competition and disagreement are inevitable, arguments should not be unnecessarily harsh, because studies show that Americans tend to shun political discord.

However, I want to emphasize that talk—no matter how civil and informed—is not enough. Most citizens

Harry Boyte calls “public work”—is not necessarily more pleasant or less divisive than macro-politics. On the contrary, when issues arise in our everyday lives, involve our identities as workers or neighbors or parents, and cause disagreements with people we know well, politics can become intensely emotional and painful. That’s why “office politics” and “academic politics” are phrases with very negative associations. Diana Mutz, professor of political science and communications at the University of Pennsylvania, shows that people tend to avoid controversy within families and social networks. The avoidance of controversy is understandable: persistent disagreement can tear a group apart; and even when most people agree, minorities may feel excluded and mistreated. However, it is possible for micro-politics to be consensual and “win-win” rather than competitive. Indeed, if the main problem with macro-politics is a shortage of competition, then the main flaw in micro-politics is a weak set of institutions, habits, and practices that allow Americans to collaborate on common problems.

We need the micro-level as well as the macro-level of politics.

I contend that there are two main reasons that we need the micro-level as well as the macro-level of politics. First, a whole range of issues is better addressed in a participatory, deliberative way than through state action. Governments can do some things well, but they cannot change hearts, care for individuals holistically, or tailor solutions to local circumstances. Second, participation in micro-level politics may be the most powerful form of civic education, giving people confidence and a deep knowledge of issues that will enable them to participate in macro-politics effectively and wisely.

Examples of Civic Renewal Work

At the heart of today’s civic renewal movement are concrete, practical experiments, including the following.

Practical deliberative democracy. For some thirty years, nonprofits have been organizing groups of citizens at a human scale (say, five to 500 people) to discuss public issues, typically providing background materials and offering some kind of moderation or facilitation. Major 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. Work on deliberation shades into conflict-mediation efforts and inter-group dialogues (which usually involve discussions of identities and relationships rather than issues).

On occasion, public deliberations have significant effects on official policies. One recent example was Listening to the City, a process organized by AmericaSPEAKS in Lower Manhattan. Participants caused the first round of plans for rebuilding the World Trade Center to be scrapped. A few government agencies are using deliberative techniques instead of public hearings and notice-and-comment procedures to “consult” the public.

Community economic development. Deliberation also occurs within non-profit 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 in *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly*, a corporation can influence political decisions in many 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.”

Even people who favor low taxation and light regulation may believe that democratic communities should be free to make their own policy choices without undue influence from capital. Unfortunately, in the absence of alternatives to the standard corporation, democracies must do whatever firms want. Trying to restrict capital flows simply violates the laws of the market and imposes steep costs. On the other hand, the success of CDCs, land trusts, and similar innovations proves that viable alternative to the standard corporation indeed exist. It is possible to increase the wealth of people in poor communities by creating economically efficient organizations that are tied to places.

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, NY), 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.

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 over-exploitation. 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.

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 over-extend 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.” Since 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. When we hear the phrase “public media,” we may first think of publicly-subsidized organizations that produce and broadcast shows to mass audiences. Indeed, within the

constellation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), NewsHour Productions, and Public Broadcasting Service, one finds interesting work that could support civic renewal. However, “public media” is much broader than CPB; it should include 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 websites, email-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. All across the country, people are producing community blogs (websites on which citizens post short news items and comments), elaborate “content management

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systems” that allow citizens to contribute news to local websites, and “podcasting” projects (short audio clips of news or music that can be downloaded and heard on cell phones and other portable devices). While most of the material created for these new technologies has nothing to do with politics or social issues, there is a substantial amount of real community news and deliberation.

Newspapers are also venues for relevant work. In the 1990s, many professional journalists were interested in writing the news in ways that would better support public deliberation. (See my article on public journalism in the winter 1994 *Report from the Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy*.) That movement is no longer a political force, but it has left an important imprint in newsrooms. Furthermore, because of the Internet, newspapers are keen to become more “interactive.” Although interactivity can be a mere gimmick or a way to enhance an individual’s experience on a website, 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. Since 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. Examples include “wikis,” documents posted on web sites that can be added to and edited by anyone who visits the site. The *Wikipedia* is a whole encyclopedia created this way. *Wikipedia* is strikingly accurate and well written for an enormous website edited only by its own readers, and it exemplifies a certain kind of deliberation. A good example in a geographical community is the Bakersfield, CA, *Northwest Voice*, which consists entirely of material submitted by

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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-War universities were mostly committed to the idea that experts “‘solved problems’ by bringing the latest technical knowledge 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 appli-

cation of expertise to community problems). In competitive universities, teaching and service were generally valued less than scholarship. All three enterprises suffered from the understanding of research as strictly technical.

Today, however, one finds many counter-trends, including various impressive scholarly research programs that require close and mutually respectful interactions among scholars, students, and geographical communities, social movements, 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 Partnerships exemplifies several civic trends in higher education: a move from “service” to collaboration; a rediscovery of geographical communities; a reflection on colleges’ power as employers, builders, and consumers; and a turn to sophisticated research that *requires* learning with and from non-academics. Ostrom’s work on commons is another good example: it is theoretically original, yet it depends on her learning from lay partners. Campus Compact and the Democracy Collaborative are centers 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 abandon civic courses and curricula. Major educational reforms, culminating 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 teachers. 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, traditionally fractious, have come together to create the National Alliance for Civic Education (NACE) and then the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. The Campaign is an effective advocacy organization that brings together all the leading organizations that specialize in formal

civic education, plus major nonprofits that have pledged to support their agenda, including the American Bar Association, both national teachers' unions, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and thirty-five additional other organizations. They are working to ensure that the next generation of educational 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 a third of which now offer it), but also in colleges. Much service-learning is non-political; 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 discussion 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 Clearinghouse 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, 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 and Growth 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. My basis for that claim is the set of social ties that I observe as part of my official work, which involves numerous meetings and conferences in many parts of the United States (probably more than 75 per year). I am constantly struck by the appearance of the same people, or of people who know others in the broader network.

This is a mere impression. It could be tested with rigorous network analysis, which I believe would be quite useful. In brief, researchers would begin with several key organizations (such as the ones listed above) and ask decision-makers to list the other groups with which they collaborate. Researchers would then move to those groups and ask, in turn,

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about their collaborations. Software can automatically generate network maps based on such data. I would hypothesize that a network map of civic renewal would show many links binding the whole field.

Lacking the resources actually to conduct such a study, I have used a very imperfect substitute. Instead of asking people to list their partners, I have examined electronic links among organizations' websites. A web link provides imperfect evidence of actual collaboration, but it does reveal a conscious decision to connect two organizations.

I used software called IssueCrawler to generate the diagram shown below. I began with four nodes that I chose because of my sense that they represent important consolidations of civic work since the 1990s: the Civic Practices Network, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement), and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. IssueCrawler detected all the sites to which these four linked, and then all the sites that were linked to those, and so on, until it had built a large database of networked websites. It then placed the sites on a two-dimensional plane based simply on the degree to which sites linked to one another. (The software has no information about the nature of any organization or the content of any website.) The resulting map shows the websites at the core of this network. They turn out to involve adult public deliberation, civic education, service-learning, higher education reform, and political reform. If the map were allowed to display more nodes, it would become too large and complex to present as a single image; however, a complete map would reveal further links to the fields of community organizing, urban planning, conflict resolution, and social software.



It is important to note that while the civic renewal movement may be robust and coherent, it suffers from *insufficient diversity*. Most of the organizations listed above are predominantly, sometimes exclusively, white. Minorities are best represented in the work that involves community economic development; they are not well represented in civic education or in much of the deliberation field.

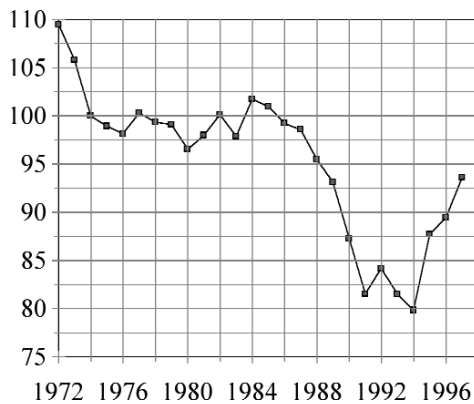
Those working in social movements tend to make two historical assertions without hard evidence. They assert that the problem that concerns them (whatever it may be) is getting worse, and that they belong to a newly formed movement that is beginning to reverse the decline. Since these two claims are convenient clichés, one might doubt my assertions that America's *civic* condition has declined and that a new civic renewal movement has recently formed. Certainly, lamentations of civic decline are as old as Plato. In 1790, the French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet

observed that *every* generation accuses itself of being less-civic minded than its predecessors.

However, some aspects of civic life certainly have declined, and some new strategies and organizations certainly have formed to renew civil society. When the National Commission on Civic Renewal created an Index of National Civic Health (INCH) in 1999, its index was comprised of twenty-two indicators of civic health, shown in the trend line below. I believe that the steep decline in *almost all* of those indicators of civic health captured by INCH between 1984 and 1991 promoted genuine alarm and caused people to work on civic renewal by the mid-1990s. For various reasons, including civic-renewal work, the situation had begun to improve by 2000. This is not to say that INCH includes all relevant indicators, or even that everyone agrees with the proposition that "civic health" had declined. But there was pretty widespread agreement, rooted in people's daily experience, that we had a

problem. (No comparable data exist after the year 2000, so one cannot continue this trend line after Sept. 11, 2001.)

The decline of the INCH variables impelled activists to form a robust Civic Renewal Movement in the 1990s. I also propose a *generational* reason for this development. During the War on Poverty, launched in 1964 by the Johnson Administration as part of the Great Society initiative, the Federal Government paid the salaries of thousands of mostly young people who worked at the



The year 1974 is a baseline, set at 100.

Index of National Civic Health, including measures of trust, associational membership, and participation in civil society.

grassroots level, organizing communities and running programs. Overall, the Great Society included elements of bureaucracy and centralization, but it also required the "Maximum Feasible Participation" of citizens. While the War on Poverty did not end in victory, it generated a lot of civic experimentation.

Some people who were heavily involved in those experiments later switched over to electoral politics. Some burned out or lost the opportunity to serve when their budgets were cut. But a considerable number continued to experiment and learn, often moving from federal programs to nonprofit organizations. When they lost their government grants, nonprofits developed local financial sources. When individuals and nonprofits got tired of fighting city hall, they developed collaborative relationships with local governments. By the 1990s, those who were still political activists had mostly become very pragmatic and were ready to do effective civic-renewal work. Their trajectory is a major theme in Sirianni and Friedland's *Civic Innovation in America*. Sirianni and Friedland argue that the Civic Renewal Movement marks the full mat-

uration of the Baby Boom and the arrival of younger people whom the Boomers mentored.

Another impetus was the defeat of the Soviet Union at the hands of civil society. Well before 1989, most leftists in the West had become thoroughly disenchanted with the Leninist regimes of the Warsaw Pact. Nevertheless, the fall of the Soviet Union—and the triumph of such dissidents and reformers as Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel, Poland's Lech Walensa and Adam Michnik, and Russia's Andrei Sakharov—was an important moment for the Western left. It clearly displayed the moral superiority of civic work over Marxist state-centered politics. And it revealed that civic culture was an important historical force, not merely a phenomenon of the underlying economic system. Because dissidents built healthy civic spaces in Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, those countries could overthrow communism and build democracy. In countries that lacked such a civic culture, the same overthrow led to civil war.

Meanwhile, as authors like James C. Scott and Michael Edwards have argued, economic development is usually disastrous when it relies on social engineering and top-down mandates. Even when governments are reasonably well-meaning, as in Tanzania or India, state efforts to promote growth and equity usually backfire. Again, what seems to matter most are democratic institutions and political culture. As Edwards argues, "It's the polity, stupid." Edwards had a stint at

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the World Bank at a time when many of the lending institutions were beginning to recognize the importance of civil society.

The Role of Philosophy and Philosophers

This effort to map one current reform movement has implications for how philosophers ought to work. For the most part, contemporary philosophers and normative theorists address the largest or smallest scale. That is, they either consider the overall structure of a society and the definition and distribution of fundamental rights and essential goods; or they consider decisions and dilemmas faced by individuals. I contend that philosophers ought to address the middle range, exemplified by actual social movements. Analysis at that scale requires significantly different methods from those that are typical in the discipline today.

It is often noted that a narrow focus on the moral behavior of individuals is inadequate because decisions about such important matters as abortion, euthanasia, divorce, and discrimination are constrained and framed by large social institutions. An equally serious mistake is to concentrate exclusively on what the late Harvard philosopher John Rawls called the "basic structure of society." After all, the only mechanisms we have for distributing wealth and protecting rights are the actual institutions that exist today. And the only means we have for changing our institutions are social movements, political parties, and organizations.

I can argue, as part of a theory of justice, that everyone has a right to affordable health care. However, I cannot defend the proposition that our actual government spends our money very effectively, transparently, accountably, or equitably. Nor can I name a social movement capable of achieving excellent, universal health care in our present circumstances. Thus a debate about basic entitlements and rights is fundamentally sterile. It is politically irrelevant because it does not confront the main argument against government, which is not libertarian but pragmatic (i.e., government does not work very well). The debate is also normatively weak because it assumes that we can have better institutions and movements than we do. As in the old joke about the economist on the desert island who "assumes a can-opener," philosophers who promote egalitarian (or libertarian) societies without discussing how to reform actual institutions and build movements are just avoiding the hard issues. They also overlook the most normatively interesting and unexplored questions, which involve political strategies under imperfect conditions. Finally, by focusing on the

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distribution of rights in a hypothetical just society, they overlook the creative and fulfilling aspects of political engagement in our real world.

I believe philosophers ought to give much more attention to the middle range between individuals and the basic structure of society. Philosophers should focus on the strategic and ethical choices faced by concrete institutions, networks, and social movements at the present historical moment. That is why I study the civic renewal movement, but it is equally useful for philosophers to write about and interact with other current movements, from environmentalism to Christian conservatism.

Another reason to work at the middle range is to increase one's impact. To be sure, moral and political

philosophy can be valuable without being practical or politically consequential. However, I believe that many mainstream political theorists want to influence the world. Their method is to address the sovereign: the power that can shape the overall structure of their society. Historically, the sovereign was the monarch, so philosophers from Plato to Bacon tried to get the prince's ear. Today, the sovereign is supposed to be "the people," so engaged political theorists attempt to influence public opinion. They do so by translating their ideas into relatively readable, public arguments.

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expressed. Besides, even if people are persuaded by an argument, they also need skills, confidence, and institutions through which to act. Thus it is much more consequential to find organizations and social movements that have broad constituencies, because one then can become involved in their discussions about goals and strategies. If philosophers are willing to adopt an open-ended approach to politics, not only will they form and express their own views in these discussions, but they can also learn from other participants. Philosophers can offer deep reflection about normative matters; in return, they can obtain invaluable information and insights from practitioners.

The model presumed by many political theorists is:

- (a) develop and refine views about how society should be organized;
- (b) promote those views in public fora; and
- (c) hope that legislation is passed to implement the vision.

As an alternative, I recommend that philosophers:

- (a) find organizations that seem to be enhancing the quality and quantity of public engagement;
- (b) help address the ethical and strategic questions those organizations face; and
- (c) learn from the ideas that citizens develop.

Focus on concrete reform efforts influences one's methodology as a philosopher. Moral philosophy always has some empirical basis; it depends on contingent facts about people and institutions. If philosophers are concerned about the distribution of goods and rights in a whole society, then they must know the facts about wealth, poverty, justice, and injustice in a nation or across the globe. They should also master arguments in political, moral, and legal theory. For

The Deliberative Democracy Handbook Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century

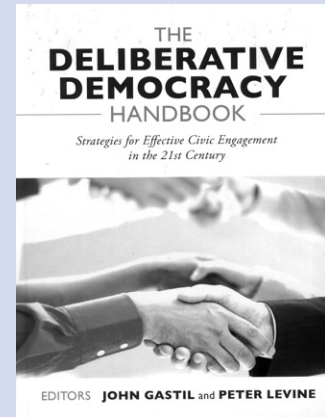
Edited by John Gastil and Peter Levine

"The Deliberative Democracy Handbook is a terrific resource for democratic practitioners and theorists alike. It combines rich case material from many cities and types of institutional settings with careful reflection on core principles. It generates hope for a renewed democracy, tempered with critical scholarship and political realism. Most important, this handbook opens a spacious window on the innovativeness of citizens in the US (and around the world) and shows how the varied practices of deliberative democracy are part of a larger civic renewal movement"

—Carmen Sirianni, professor of sociology and public policy, Brandeis University, and coauthor, *Civic Innovation in America*

"The Deliberative Democracy Handbook, edited by John Gastil and Peter Levine, is an important collection of readings for anyone interested in the role of citizen participation in the public policy process. It provides concrete examples of successful efforts to expand public input in decision-making at the local, state, and national levels. The book also grapples with emerging challenges to the continued development of these efforts in the future."

—Robert Mark Silverman, associate professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University at Buffalo, the State University of New York



The Editors

John Gastil is professor of communication at the University of Washington. He has collaborated with members of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), the National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), AmericaSpeaks, and the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums. He is author of *Democracy in Small Groups* and *By Popular Demand*.

Peter Levine is director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and a research scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, both housed in the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs. He is a cofounder of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and author of *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy*.

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both purposes, the most important information and ideas are available in libraries and in discussions among academics. Direct engagement with the world outside academia is unnecessary.

However, books are inadequate if one hopes to address the moral and strategic choices confronting people in a social movement at the present time. For instance, in 2006, many people in the field of youth civic education are wrestling with the potential advantages of a shift to much *smaller* high schools. Several major cities, prompted by the Gates Foundation and other donors, are actually building small high schools that each have a different academic "theme," such as the arts or public service. These schools provide more choices to students and families but less diversity within each building; tighter communities but less individuation of curriculum. Philosophers of civic and

moral education who rely predominantly on books would be unaware of this reform, which is just developing (and may die before it reaches large enough scale). I know about it because I attend meetings, interact with foundations, and help to lobby policymakers. Since groups will not invite me to their meetings unless I come as a participant, my usual stance is one of participant-observer.

Civic Models: More Hamptons

Earlier, I mentioned Hampton, Virginia as a particularly civic community. Hampton is an old, blue-color city, not in any way privileged. Yet the city has reinvented its government and civic culture so that thousands of people are directly involved in city planning, educational policy, police work, and economic devel-

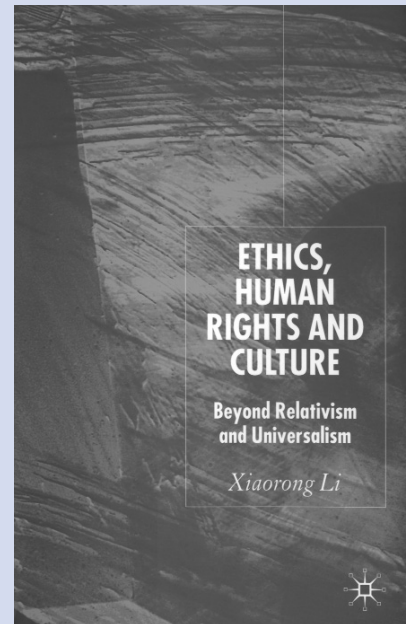
Just published

Ethics, Human Rights and Culture: Beyond Relativism and Universalism

Xiaorong Li

This book engages with crucial topics within ethics: whether values are universal or culturally relativistic, and whether any shared human values are real or can only be imagined. It approaches these topics with an inventive and original understanding of culture as developed in recent anthropological work. Reflecting on a range of real-life ethical scenarios, from honor-killing to torture, where different traditions or foreign customs are a factor, the author raises challenging questions and takes readers to uncharted territories within ethical debate.

Xiaorong Li is Research Scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland (College Park, Maryland).



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opment. The prevailing culture is relatively deliberative; people listen, share ideas, and develop consensus, despite differences of interest and ideology. Young people hold positions of responsibility and leadership. Youth have made believers out of initially suspicious police officers and school administrators.

Imagine that the whole country were more like Hampton. Then we could have a really interesting debate about distribution and other classic philosophical issues. Those who promote a more activist stance for the government would be able to cite examples of good municipal regimes that are truly accountable to their citizens. Those who are skeptical about the public sector would be able to find flaws in the Hampton model. Such a discussion, far from sterile, would generate rich insights and practical ideas.

So how can intellectuals help to make America more like Hampton? First of all, they should be aware of the civic innovation that is going on today. Hampton has been the subject of at least two scholarly studies. The authors used their own networks of practitioners to identify Hampton as a site of civic innovation. We need plenty more of that kind of writing.

Second, we must grapple with the subtle and difficult issues that all such cases raise. How did Hampton get where it is today? Are its achievements sustain-

able? Are they replicable? Is the city's deliberation truly inclusive? Does all that participation generate good economic and social outcomes? Is democracy worth the time people have to spend in meetings? To me, these are the crucial questions, much more likely to yield insight and impact than any novel argument in favor of a theory of justice.

Peter Levine
Research Scholar, Institute
for Philosophy and Public Policy
Director, CIRCLE
School of Public Policy
University of Maryland
plevine@umd.edu

Sources: Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland, *The Civic Renewal Movement: Community Building and Democracy in the United States* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2005); William M. Sullivan, "The Public Intellectual as Transgressor," *Higher Education Exchange* (1996), p. 20; Michael Edwards, *Future Positive: International Co-operation in the 21st Century* (Earthscan, 1999), chapter 3.