

*A Roundtable On*

## EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

*The Civic Education Roundtable, reported substantially in the following pages, took place at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, in Chicago, on September 3, 1992. It was organized and chaired by Richard Battistoni of Baylor University, currently on leave at Rutgers University where he is directing a program in citizen education and community service. In introducing the Roundtable Battistoni said: "We thought it appropriate that the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, which at its origin almost 100 years ago dealt mostly with citizen education and public service, but which has professionalized and moved quite far afield from those concerns, would be an ideal place to continue the discussion that's going on across the country about what it means to educate for citizenship, how community service relates to that and the role of democratic theory with respect to both." Position papers were presented by Harry Boyte and Benjamin Barber with responses by Craig Rimmerman, Tim Stanton and Leslie Hill.*

### CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC WORLD

*Harry C. Boyte*

We need a conception of citizenship that is active, engaged and adequate to the challenges of our complicated world. Citizens develop, they do not emerge full blown; and their capacities are cultivated only through tough, challenging, serious practical and theoretical education in what Benjamin Barber has well termed the democratic arts. Barber and I agree on the importance of a strong conception of citizenship; on the centrality of civic education to any honest rendering of education in a purported democracy; and on the significant challenge such a view of civic education presents to customary ways of conceiving citizenship, education, and service. Moreover, I greatly appreciate the leadership that Benjamin Barber and Rutgers University have provided in renewing collegiate interest in civic education.

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#### The Nature and Ends of Politics

Where we have differences is about the content and pedagogy of civic education. These differences grow from differing views on the nature and ends of politics, what it is that students learn to practice as they become citizens and, closely linked, the nature of the arenas in which such politics takes place. For Barber, community forms both the condition and also the end of civic politics. I argue, in contrast, that the aim of civic education should be to develop students' capacities to act with effect and with public spirit in a diverse, turbulent public world made up of multiple and fractured communities.

Although they overlap, our perspectives also have different axial concepts — community versus public; and they have different central emphases — a shared way of life versus practical politics. In many respects, my exchange with Ben today is of a piece with an ongoing debate that I have had recently with the Communitarian Platform group formed by Amitai Etzioni and William Galston, in which Barber is also a leading figure. An elaboration of these differences is forthcoming in the October issue of

their magazine, *The Responsive Community*. Although I have disagreements with the Communitarian Platform, I believe that their general project — the re-engagement of political theory with the current challenges of politics — is very important indeed.

For communitarians, the concept of community shapes both the ends and pedagogy of civic education. Communitarians like Barber hold that the aim of civic education should be a shared life in a participatory community. Moreover, the *process* of learning such politics must be communal. As Barber put it, "civic education should be communal as well as community based. If citizen education and experiential learning of the kind offered by community service are to be a lesson in community, the ideal learning unit is not the individual but the small team, where people work together and learn together, experiencing what it means to become a small community together."

Despite differences between Barber and John Dewey in other respects, Barber's approach helps to retrieve the Deweyian alternative to the institutionally focused civic education — what is called "civics" — that most of us have suffered through at some time. The Deweyian alternative generates a very different understanding of citizenship than that conveyed by high school trips to Washington or classes on "how a bill becomes law." Like Dewey, Barber sees democracy as an organic way of life and his pedagogical theory holds that civic education proceeds through ever-expanding communal identifications. Dewey's argument in *The Public and Its Problems* thus has strikingly contemporary overtones, "Vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range ... Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community."

The communitarian approach to civic education and to politics more broadly has important strengths as a critique of thin, rights-based and institutionally-focused views of the citizen's role. Moreover, against the background of the polarized, moralistic clashes of our time — and the right wing crusade this election year to expunge from acceptable political discourse any pluralist understandings of religion, family, patriotism and much else — liberal communitarians have developed a welcome middle ground of discussion about values that balances contending principles of free expression and individual development with social obligation. Their efforts are attentive to the real-world conflicted political landscape about values that their left wing critics neglect.

Yet there is another current of citizenship education that I am convinced is more fruitful for teaching the active, multi-dimensional understanding of public agency needed in our time. This is the civic education that takes place when people learn the politics of public problem-solving, defined as the give-and-take, messy, everyday activity in which citizens set about dealing with the general issues of their public worlds.

Throughout American history, the process of public problem-solving has been the way that millions of citizens developed a sense of their stake in the nation, their capacity to act as citizens, and their self-identification as "citizens." For instance, immigrants in the first several decades of the 20th century learned practical politics and citizenship in political mediating institutions like settlement houses, neighborhood schools, reform press groups, the Workmen's Circle, active unions and other forms of worker organizations that created a sense of economic "citizenship" as well as community involvement. These

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connected peoples' everyday lives to the larger public arena in a fashion that taught a variety of public skills and roles. Similarly, in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s Southern blacks long excluded from public life developed a parallel version of such civic education in the hundreds of citizenship classes sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Yet such civic education has been far more developed in the real world than in the works of 20th century American political theorists. Though the argument's full articulation is beyond the scope of this presentation, I want to note that while the American pragmatic tradition for which John Dewey served as a pivotal architect has insights and resources to offer a theory of civic education in this vein, the conceptions of politics and the public world offered here are more akin to those of continental theorists such as Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Jurgen Habermas than to American political thinkers.

Problem-solving, as employed in the civic education that I advocate, is not a narrowly utilitarian term. It involves values such as respect for human dignity and different points of view, an openness to the long-term, a will-

ingness to think of one's own particular interests in light of the needs of the whole. Finally, it entails learning a constellation of concepts and the translation of concepts into effective public action.

As background, it is important to note that service and information-based institutional life rest upon a widespread assumption that most people are unconcerned with and incompetent at theorizing their daily experiences — unable to look in a systematic, analytical way at the general concepts that structure their environments. The consequence of this assumption is that education, including civic education, focuses on conveying bodies of knowledge, information, and discrete skills. Further along, professional training involves the application of bodies of specialized knowledge through systematic techniques and methodologies. This technical and information-driven focus is reproduced widely within service and information environments.

People rarely, if ever, have the chance to make explicit, think, debate, reflect upon, and engage seriously diverse points of view about the underlying conceptual schema and frameworks that organize and structure their actual practices. As a result, most remain entirely dependent on the hidden class of conceptualizers, who themselves are seldom challenged by real world practitioners or by disciplinary perspectives beyond their own training. Our world overflows with technical assistants, consultants, program managers. Few, indeed, have learned to think well about what they are doing or why they are doing it.

Even most activists assume that most people are anti-intellectual and only concerned with the immediate and particular: the issue, the campaign, the cause. More than a dozen training centers have emerged in the last two decades to teach community organizing, lobbying, and political action. Virtually all focus on concrete skills, techniques, and information: how to chair a meeting; put together a leaflet; do an "action"; how to form a coalition; target "the enemy"; mobilize one's resources around the chosen issue.

In contrast, an approach to civic education focusing on conceptual skills combines systematic reflection on political and civic concepts and practice with their application, out of the view that political practices are always, in part, *constituted* by one's conceptual framework and repertoire. Such an approach cultivates capacities for the exercise of practical judgment, critical thinking, and self-evaluation that are crucial to strong and effective citizenship in our fractured, multi-layered world.

I argue that the concepts most important to a framework that structures effective action in the public world are public space, interest, power, and politics as practically-oriented and citizen-centered. This constellation distills the lessons of a three year experimental project in civic education, Project Public Life based at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. We work with a wide variety of groups — teenagers, low income parents, 4-H,

rural communities, health workers, nursing home residents, government employees, as well as my graduate students — to generate a sustainable re-engagement with politics and an approach through which people reconceptualize themselves as active citizens.

## The Public Arena and the Fragmentation of Social Space

We have found that the concept of the public world as a diverse, pluralist, heterogeneous social space of many different interests, viewpoints, communities, and histories holds the potential to address effectively the fragmentation of social spaces today. This fragmentation, for which communitarians have no solution, means that almost everyone experiences multiple and fractured communities of culture, gender, work, interest, voluntary group, geography and the like. Moreover, local communities seem radically distant from the world of large institutions that stand over us like granite mountains on the social landscape. A concept of the public arena gives people a conceptual and linguistic framework to understand themselves as serious agents — responsible, creative citizens — in solving public problems of concern to them in a fashion that is attentive to impact on the larger society. Public language helps people to draw upon their own interests and histories, to recognize and develop their capacities, and to envision work with others with whom they do not wish to live "in community."

Public spaces are environments that are open, accessible and involve a mix of different people and groups. In such settings, principles of democratic action involve political arts such as developing political relationships, listening and speaking well, understanding and practicing power, negotiating and bargaining, practicing judgment, holding participants accountable. Moreover, the aim of politics is common action on significant problems, which means the ability to work pragmatically with a variety of others, whether or not one likes them. Blacks in the Woodlawn area of Chicago and white ethnics in Cicero, for instance, have different views of racial justice, based on different histories. Seeking common understanding is liable to deepen awareness of the divide, without any mechanism for bridging it; in contrast, finding ways to work together on issues like housing can notably improve race relations. Similarly, the search for a communal consensus between Jewish pro-choice women and Hispanic Catholic pro-life women can drown out the possibility of collaboration on problems like teen pregnancy. When groups with divergent understandings of justice and morality develop practical work together out of different interests, they may continue to have radically different points of view on basic issues. But they often learn mutual respect.

Public principles of action overlap with but also are distinguishable from the capacities developed in both private life and community. In private life, for example,

we assume similarity of outlook and belief. In the public world it is much more effective to assume dissimilarity and to investigate others' interests and values. In private, we want love, intimacy, loyalty. In public, principles such as respect, recognition, and accountability are more workable bases for democratic action.

Unlike classical republicanism, which emerged from the small community of the polis and sharply separated the public world from the private, this approach shows the distinctions but also connections between public and private. Personal concerns commonly draw people into the public arena, but the best principles for democratic action in public are different than those in private life. We define community as the overlapping and intermediate realm between personal and public environments, with its own characteristics and principles of action. None of this can be neatly categorized: every environment includes some mixture of public and private and communal aspects. But the art of effective politics involves, crucially, the ability to understand in what kind of space one currently is acting.

Public space has two elaborations — localized public spaces and mediating political institutions — that strengthen the understanding and practice of active citizenship. Localized public spaces — free spaces — are environments that offer possibilities for reintegrating everyday life experiences, places not excessively dominated by one particular perspective but rather where one encounters diverse viewpoints, arguments, ways of looking at and defining problems. Public spaces, moreover, have their own resources, challenges, and dynamics that teach lessons indispensable to civic education not found in smaller communities.

For instance, in Project Public Life we have found that teenage teams taking on problem-solving projects are best inspired and challenged by initial larger conferences where they encounter groups of teens with very different backgrounds and interests. These larger public events prove much more powerful motivators to reflect on concepts of "citizenship" and public-connection than a progression from small team communities outward. Such spaces allow different perspectives and interests to surface. They create environments for students to draw upon their experiences in settings infused with other educational insights. Public spaces provide students with chances to learn civic skills such as chairing meetings, speaking, working with diversity and negotiating different viewpoints, handling conflict, and listening. In sum, skill in public space allows students to develop a sense of themselves as public, able actors on a larger stage.

Drawing attention to the concept of the public arena also allows students to think strategically about possibilities for deprofessionalizing the mediating political institutions which connect peoples' daily experiences with larger environments. This is done not by denying the usefulness

of professional information but by locating it in a larger context of many frames of reference and sources of knowledge useful in addressing public issues, what might best be called a return to "common sense." Political parties, unions, settlement houses, service agencies, schools, and other organizations once connected peoples' everyday lives to the larger world of public governance and policy in ways that created an obvious, vivid *stake* in politics. These mediating institutions continue to connect peoples' lives to the larger public world. But they have become recast in a professional-client pattern. Yet in Project Public Life we have discovered that groups like campus service programs, Extension Services, many public and parochial school teachers and health provider organizations are aware of the inadequacy of excessively professionalized delivery approaches in which experts simply deliver services to client populations.

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Such groups can be engaged with the idea of practical citizenship education in ways that suggest new mechanisms for connecting peoples' lives to larger arenas of decision making and policy. Extension agents using the conceptual map of a public-spirited "citizen politics," for instance, have changed their approach when communities ask for aid on issues like teenage suicide. Instead of simply delivering "expert advice," they pose the problem as a public issue about which citizens, including young people, must come to grips, talk through, and take action.

### **Interest, Power, and Elite Biases of Knowledge Systems.**

Modern societies have seen an extraordinary elaboration in the pattern of elite and technical domination of policy-making that Max Weber first noted in detail. Weber proposed that authority in industrial societies was shifting to those who organized and controlled scientific and technical knowledge and who exercised control over the interpretation and application of such knowledge. At the center of this is the emergence of specialized languages and methods through which experts define problems, identify remedies, and evaluate success.

As a result, the service world has developed a distinctive language with expansive claims to humanize society through teaching "care" and "concern." Such claims, moreover, find expression in community service programs, which focus strongly on individual helping and one-on-one interventions.

This language greatly complicates any understanding of civic education that involves systematic exploration of a dynamics of power, interest, and politics. Yet concepts of interest, understood broadly, not narrowly, and power, understood in interactive, relational terms allow civic education to make explicit the dynamics that normally function in a hidden fashion.

"Interest," in this rendering, is distinguishable from selfishness or from selflessness. It is different from the self-sacrifice and loyalty that characterize personal relations and personal space (one might well sacrifice all for one's child, for instance). But it is also different from the conventional equation of "self-interest" with its narrow calculation of individual gain. Interest (from the Latin, *inter esse*, meaning to be between) means a serious exploration and analysis of the passions, history, and meanings that move people to public action. It means recognition that concepts of "self" and "interest" are dynamic, changing over time. In the case of students, self-interests typically involve not only personal motivations, but also entail reflection on evolving identifications with various communities of reference and identity like "African-American" or "future journalist."

Moreover, students need to think extensively and well about the contours of power in the modern world. This includes but goes beyond traditional views of power as a set of largely zero-sum and one directional interactions based on scarce resources (capital, position), where one party "has" power and the other "lacks" it. Power analysis involves a more interactive, dynamic view that recognizes the fashion in which even in situations of considerable inequality there are always reciprocal and mutually transformative dimensions to power interaction. It also entails attention to the way many contemporary institutions are organized around professional expertise and information resources and are challenged by assertions of communal authority or moral appeal by dispossessed and powerless groups. These dynamics are inevitably complex, multidimensional and far from zero-sum.

Acknowledging self-interests — that everyone has a personal stake and reason and history, a narrative, behind their actions — and power relations — that the assertion of knowledge claims always involves power-laden acts — shatters the norms of service in a double sense. Service and information systems typically mystify the relations of power and interest embedded within them. In service systems experts define and diagnose the problem, generate the labels for talking about it, propose remedial techniques, and evaluate whether the problem has been

solved. Yet helpers present themselves simply as objective, caring people, whose interest is only in serving the client.

For students, assuming the role of apprentice-service providers, denial of their interests and power creates a pose of altruistic care that they are likely to carry with them. For low income people and other "recipients" of such care, in contrast, the denial by providers of their own stake and power makes it difficult to assert with confidence any disagreements with expert advice or to resist being infantilized.

Liberal, democratically inclined theorists of human development both identify and illustrate these problems. Thus, for instance, Robert Kegan, a Harvard theorist and practitioner who synthesizes psychoanalytic and existential-phenomenological approaches to developmental theory, keenly depicts the condescension in client-professional relations, from education to psychology. According to Kegan, in typical therapeutic transactions, "the natural supports of family, peer groups, work roles and love relationships come to be seen as merely amateur approximations of professional wisdom." Kegan argues that "American mental health workers are themselves vulnerable to what amounts to the *goals of adjustment*, couched in terms of health, which lead to equal — and probably equally unwitting — exercises in social control" as found in totalitarian societies.

Kegan suggests that at its best, professional aid, "rather than being a panacea for modern maladies, is actually a second-best means of support." Psychologists can better practice their art when they recognize that "clients" can never be understood in terms of "stages" of their development. People are instead "their (own) creations, the meaning makers, not the made-meaning. The existing model of development intervention too easily translates into the goal of 'getting people to advance stages.'"

Despite his democratic intentions, however, Kegan reflects the limits of the service world. Thus, he neglects entirely any client-centered approaches to problem-solving, such as the growing self-help movement. He overlooks the interactive quality of relationships between professional and client, in which both parties always impact each other. Instead, he aims at an ethic of all-encompassing and boundless care on the part of the care-giver. Such a goal, hoping to humanize the world, ends up mystifying real interests and power relations with inevitable moral on-upsmanship. Though skeptical of the expansive claims made by care givers, he proposes as his solution a "culture of intimacy" as the highest form of human development, and an unbounded, unlimited openness by professionals to suffering of all kinds. Such a proposal reproduces on a personal level the limitless, totalizing logic that can be found in the public realm in the most sweeping of ideological politics. In practice this sort of language makes it far more difficult for gullible clients to see the professional as another human being, with interests, background and fallibilities, like their own.

A language of care hides the dynamics of public environments: recognition of different interests, conflicts, power. It creates the pattern that C. Wright Mills once observed as characteristic of modern society, shifting the focus from public problems to private discontents. In contrast, attention to self-interest and power "publicizes" hidden dimensions of the service world.

### Citizen Politics, Not Innocence

A personally and narratively grounded engagement with themes of citizenship is, finally, considerably reinforced by attention to understandings of politics and action that develop a view of the citizen as a multi-dimensional actor. Today both liberals and critical intellectuals reproduce a spectator role for citizens. In academic and intellectual discourse, "ordinary people" tend to be seen as either marginal actors – voters, for instance, or consumers and clients of government – or victims of the unilateral operation of power. In consequence, citizens lose the middle ground of public action where the point is neither vindication nor talk but rather practical engagement in the complex process of creating the world. Yet without a framework for politics that puts citizens into the equation as central agents, ordinary people remain unaccountable, irresponsible outsiders who imagine themselves pure and "innocent" of any role in the world's problems. The resonances of citizen are narrowed to roles such as voter, volunteer, ideological partisan, client, expert, and community member.

By way of contrast, a view of politics as citizen-centered and also as historicized, full of contradiction, ambiguity, and practical tasks, prompts several important understandings. It allows students and others to recognize their inevitable involvement – their "complicity," in a sense, in the creation of the world – by highlighting the ubiquitous nature of politics. Such a process begins by developing students' capacities to "map" the political dimensions of their environments. Almost everyone tends to do political

mapping individually and intuitively (think how often teenagers analyze "who likes whom," the power relations among different factions and interests, the reasons for subgroups forming). Yet people almost never learn systematic tools and concepts with which to do such analysis.

Citizen education which is designed to create what we call such political mapping offers a wider range of options than is available in service programs. For instance, I assign teams to report on diverse public and political environments, from neighborhood organizations to city bureaucracies, and to analyze them using concepts like power, interest, politics, accountability.

In experiential projects, attention to the everyday practice of citizen politics encourages people to learn the daily strategic practices and thinking that can lead to significant democratization of systems. People figure out how to "do politics," with attention to larger public goods, rather than to imagine themselves as outsiders.

In sum, civic education should be designed to move students to reflect on their lives and careers in ways that allow them to integrate their concerns with larger arenas of governance and policy, and help them to understand and develop their capacities to act effectively in such arenas as well as in their everyday environments. The concept of public is much more useful than community in accomplishing such reflection. It prompts recognition of the radically different interests, values, and trajectories through which people learn to engage the public world in their distinctive styles. The notion of the public arena also draws attention to a "commonwealth" – an exchange of reciprocal public obligations and public goods. Practical politics in a public vein has the potential to deepen mutual respect and realization of shared fate because of what might be called the law of unintended political consequences: mutual respect, discovery of commonality, and even "civic virtue" are most often products of action which has far different aims. □