

Civic Studies

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Bringing Theory to Practice

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The Case for Civic Studies

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I AM GOING TO ASSUME THAT YOU ARE A CITIZEN. I do not mean someone who possesses legal rights and responsibilities in relation to a particular government, but rather a member of one or more communities that you want to improve. Your communities may range from a block of houses or a single church to the whole earth. You want to address these communities' problems and influence their directions, but more than that, you want to *make* them through your work, your thought, your passion. You want to be a co-creator of your worlds.

For you, scholarship—advanced intellectual work—ought to be a resource. With more than 300,000 different new books published in the United States every year (not to mention articles, websites, old books, and works from overseas), you can surely find valuable texts to read. And yet, overwhelmingly, scholarship is *not* addressed to you as a citizen.

On the whole, today's scholarship is most valuable as a source of facts. And you do need facts to be an active and responsible citizen. What causes the disease that is assaulting your community? What cures it? How much would the cure cost? If the government raised taxes to provide the cure, what would happen to the unemployment rate?

The social, behavioral, and medical sciences present themselves as providers of such empirical information, including both descriptive facts and causal facts. You can look up the results in scientific journals and books.

Almost all students of these disciplines are taught that truth is elusive because the observer has biases. One should work hard to overcome or minimize biases, using elaborate techniques for that purpose (conducting double-blind clinical trials, for example, or achieving agreement among many observers). But since such efforts will never fully succeed, social scientists are told to disclose and acknowledge their biases as limitations or caveats. They then present the facts as best they can.

Once they say what they believe is true, their readers are supposed to apply values to decide what ought to be done. For instance, unemployment is bad; it would be worth spending billions to lower unemployment. These two value propositions are not themselves results of social science. Citizens must bring

values into the discussion because social scientists do not claim special expertise about values.

Once we put facts together with values, we can make recommendations for society. And once we have recommendations, we can act effectively—or hope that someone else acts—to improve society.

That is the implicit, standard model. It is widely taught in graduate and professional schools. It explains how most scholars approach social issues and the division of labor in their disciplines. But the standard model presents a host of problems, some well known and some a little subtler.

First, purported facts are always imbued with norms. Education, for example, is related to employment—but what is education? The average number of years

that people spend in school looks like a hard number, an objective fact, but no one believes it's worth measuring unless it is a proxy for education, rightly understood. The real definition of education is some process that enhances human flourishing. Thus measuring education requires a theory of the human good. According to the standard model taught to social scientists, moral theories are just biases or opinions held by ordinary citizens that should be disclosed as biases if they influence scientists. But to call a theory of human flourishing a mere opinion or bias is to deny the difference between right and wrong. What we need is a *good* theory of the human good.

That brings me to the second criticism of the standard theory. It assumes that values are opinions,

tastes, preferences, or biases. But moral assertions can be right or wrong. I am sitting on a chair; I must not kill a random stranger for fun. Both statements are right. The methods we use to know right from wrong are controversial, but it's easy to see that some opinions about values are contemptibly wrong: not just Mussolini's or Chairman Mao's, but the opinions of everyday people who happily waste more than they create, burden society and the earth, and sow more sorrow than joy. To say that morality is a mere matter of opinion is to deny the existence of vice and evil.

We certainly do not experience making moral decisions as a matter of preferences or opinions, like choosing a flavor of ice cream. We feel that we are striving to make the right choices, to reach objectively the right conclusions, regardless of our own preferences and tastes. If that feeling is meaningful at all, then moral reflection must be some kind of inquiry into truth.

Third, empirical information influences norms. The fact that we can have reasonably stable democratic governments is an essential reason that we *ought* to have democratic governments. We have learned from experience, not only what works but what is important and attractive. If I thought we could revolutionize or abolish the family to enhance justice for children, I'd be interested in that idea, but I'd need a lot more examples of success before the pure philosophical argument

became attractive. Most people think that “ought implies can”: if there is a moral obligation to do something, that act must be possible. I would add that, sometimes, “can implies ought”: if something has been demonstrated to work well, we are obligated to do it. This is another way in which facts and values are intertwined.

Fourth, strategic considerations rightly influence norms. We might propose that everyone has a right to a job. I would agree with that. But then I owe an explanation of how everyone can be afforded a job without very bad effects on the economy, freedom, or work itself. And it's not enough to say that a government could enact a particular package of reforms that would achieve that end. I must also ask what would cause an actual government to act in helpful ways. My statement that “everyone has a right to a job” could help if it proved persuasive. Or my statement could be unhelpful. It might gain no traction, provoke a public backlash, divide an existing political coalition, or lead to a massive new government program that does not work. Depending on the situation, I might do better advocating a particular reform in the welfare system that has a real prospect of passage. Unless I have a plan for getting everyone a job, my statement that everyone has a right to a job may be worse than no theory at all.

Fifth, strategy and values influence empirical evidence. For instance, how do we get the employment statistics that we have? They are not generated automatically. People struggled to persuade government agencies to collect certain job-related data. Those agencies defined “unemployment” so that you are unemployed if you once held a full-time job, were laid off, and are actively seeking employment, but not if you left high school to help raise your young sister. The definition of unemployment reflects choices that people struggle over—not only in their heads and on paper, but by taking political action to change what is measured. Meanwhile, other information is not available at all. In short, our values and strategic actions influence even the data we possess.

A citizen needs knowledge of rights and wrongs, facts and explanations, *and* strategies. The citizen should be accountable for all of that: explaining what she believes and why. Her strategies must include the citizen herself. For example, it is not a strategy to say that the government should provide vaccines for everyone. That is a wish. A strategy would explain how we—you and I—can get the government to provide those vaccines. It is also essential that the vaccines *work* (that is the factual part) and that they make human lives *better* (the values). Again, all three strands must be integrated, because there is just one fundamental question: What should you and I do?

I wrote “you and I” instead of just “I” because purely individual actions are usually ineffective, and also for a deeper reason—because the good life is lived in common. Toddlers demonstrate “parallel play,” sitting side-by-side but doing their own thing. With maturity comes the ability to play together, to decide together what to play, to learn from the other players, to bring new players into the game, and to make up new games. That is what we do when we are co-creators of a common world. Not only are the results better, but we lead deeper and richer lives when we strive together.

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Scholarship is not well organized to serve people who see themselves as citizens, meaning co-creators of their common worlds. The disciplines that assume there may be a real difference between right and wrong (philosophy, political theory, theology, and some other portions of the humanities) are rigidly separated from the disciplines that deal with purported facts. The professional schools teach strategies to prospective business leaders, lawyers, and doctors, but no department teaches strategies for citizens. Philosophy addresses the nature of justice but not what actions available to you and to me might make the world more just. According to the official definition of the American Political Science Association, “Political science is the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior.”¹ It is not an investigation of what you and I should do together. That question was a traditional topic for “civics” class, but civics was always restricted to K-12 schools and is now being replaced even there by courses that mimic college-level political science. The proportion of American high school students who take a government class has been essentially flat since 1915, whereas courses labeled “civics” or “problems of democracy,” once common, are now almost gone.²

Meanwhile, scholars often hold a peculiar stance toward practice. Consider the example of an educational strategy, such as asking students to conduct community service as part of their courses. This practice, known as “service learning,” may be especially familiar to readers of the Civic Series, but the same analysis would apply to medical treatments or welfare programs—to any body or field of practice that involves human beings. The standard scholarly stance is to determine whether the practice “works” by collecting and analyzing evidence of impact. If the practice does work, the scholarly findings can arm practitioners with favorable evidence, persuade policymakers to invest in it, and contribute to general knowledge. If the practice doesn’t work, the scholarship implies that it should stop. Scholarly authors do not disclose their feelings of hope, satisfaction, or disappointment when they publish their results.

But if service learning “works,” why is that so? Surely because dedicated practitioners stuck with the idea even in the face of evidence that it was *not* successful in the early attempts and improved their methods. For them, service learning was not a hypothesis to be tested and rejected if proved wrong. It was a practice that embodied empirical, strategic, and value assumptions. Perhaps the practitioners hoped to engage students in service because they were communitarians who believe that the good life requires close and caring interactions. Or perhaps they sought economic equality and hoped to boost the job prospects of disadvantaged youth by engaging them in service. No doubt, their commitments varied, but they built a community of practitioners with some loyalty to each other, whose actual methods have evolved. Their commitments and the community they produced are fundamental; the methods and outcomes constantly shift.

Scholars of service learning can be understood as part of the same community. Like the practitioners, the scholars are motivated by core beliefs. They have not randomly selected service learning as an “intervention” to assess; they *hope* that it will work because it reflects their commitments. They study it in order to

build a case for it while also providing constructive feedback to the practitioners, with whom they have formed working relationships. When they get negative results, their loyalty keeps them looking for solutions. All of this is perfectly healthy, except that the scholars’ hope, loyalty, and other emotions and values are not considered scientific, so they leave them out of their professional writing. Most research on service learning makes it sound like a laboratory experiment.

The authors of this volume see civic studies as a strategy for reorienting academic scholarship so that it does address citizens—and learns from them in turn. In fact, it treats scholars *as* citizens, engaged with others in creating their worlds. Civic studies integrates facts, values, and strategies. Those who practice this nascent discipline are accountable to the public for what they believe to be true, to be good, and to work. They are accountable for the actual results of their thoughts and not just the ideas themselves.

Civic studies is a large river fed by tributaries of scholars and practitioners who share commitments to particular forms of civic action in the world.

For many centuries, people have been successfully managing common resources such as forests and fish stocks, even though a simplistic theory of human interaction would suggest that people will act in their individual self-interest and use them up. The late Elinor and Vincent Ostrom and their students, often known as the “Bloomington School,” studied how citizens successfully manage common goods. They learned from practical experience and contributed sophisticated political theory and formal modeling of human interactions; indeed, Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in economics. They developed practical guidance for citizens who try to manage common goods. They had an implicit moral framework in which good citizenship meant overcoming collective-action problems. In this volume, the chapters by Filippo Sabetti and Paul Aligica describe and develop this first stream of work.

For as long as they have been managing common resources, people have been deliberating about public issues. Deliberative democracy is a field of practice that encourages such discussions, strives to make them fair and equal, and connects the outcomes to government decisions. Tina Nabatchi and Greg Munno exemplify scholars who study and practice public deliberation. Governments can also promote and encourage deliberative input by citizens, and Ghazala Mansur and Vijayendra Rao devote a chapter to that kind of public participation as a field of practice and research.

Public work can be introduced as a partial critique of deliberative democracy. It insists that citizens should not only talk and render judgments but actually work and make things as part of their citizenship. Put a different way, it views work sites and work identities as central to citizenship. Another stream of practice and research, it is represented in this volume by Harry Boyte and Blase Scarnati.

The Danish planning professor Bent Flyvbjerg shook up social science when he argued that the search for general, predictive rules was a “wasteful dead end.”³ Instead, social scientists should display “practical reason” (*phronesis*) in collaboration with laypeople. Sanford Schram’s chapter in this volume is a defense of social science as *phronesis*, another stream that feeds civic studies. Not

too different is public sociology as described by Philip Nyden, who is also a leading practitioner of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR).

Common-pool resource management, deliberation, public participation, public work, social science as *phronesis*, public sociology, and CBPR—these are fruitfully different and even opposed on certain issues. But they all take the perspective of the citizen, draw on and enrich practical experience, and aim for a combination of facts, values, and strategies. Out of these streams, civic studies is forming.

NOTES

1. “What is Political Science?,” American Political Science Association, accessed October 7, 2013, https://www.apsanet.org/content_9181.cfm. For context, see James W. Ceasar, *The Role of Political Science and Political Scientists in Civic Education* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2013), http://www.aei.org/files/2013/08/07/-the-role-of-political-science-and-political-scientists-in-civic-education_161230853228.pdf.
2. Richard G. Niemi and Julia Smith, “Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing Both Citizenship and Political Science Training?,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 2 (2001): 282. For updated data, see Mark Hugo Lopez, Karlo Barrios Marcelo, and Peter Levine, *Getting Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum After NCLB*, (Medford, MA: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2008), www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Narrowing_Curriculum.pdf.
3. Bent Flyvbjerg, “Social Science that Matters,” *Foresight Europe* (October/March 2006): 38.

The Emerging Field of a New Civics

Karol Edward Sothan

CIVIC STUDIES (or “the new civics,” as I will sometimes call it) is an emerging field whose goal is to develop ideas and ways of thinking that are helpful to citizens understood as co-creators of their worlds. This much is broadly agreed. Explaining some of the possible meanings of this goal would be a good way to introduce the new field. But before I do that, let me suggest a second goal, namely, to make a significant intellectual contribution to those outside this intellectual community, to unsettle and transform the wider culture in order to make it more supportive of human beings as co-creators. What larger culture? The new civics ought not to be provincial, so the larger culture we may hope to change is most broadly the global modern culture in its various embodiments around the world.

The term “citizen” can mean a variety of things. In one context it refers to a form of membership in a group, with its associated rights and duties. More narrowly it refers to membership in a state. There is a large literature on citizenship understood in this state-centered way, but it is not the literature of civic studies (although there is an overlap). The rights and duties of citizenship is not our subject, except incidentally. So what is?

Consider the simple exercise of dropping the word “citizen” entirely from the goal of this emerging field. Civic studies, we could say, aims to develop ideas and ways of thinking helpful to human beings in their capacity as co-creators of their worlds. I think that would be a good start. To co-create is jointly to bring something into existence. But this can happen over time and in stages. We help create something when we modify it. But only certain kinds of modification count, not destruction or damage. We help create something when we improve it. On some days, I am convinced that all human creation really is creation together and that, in that sense, our subject simply is human creation. But I will not insist on this. The creativity of great individual geniuses certainly is distinctive, even if they work on material created by others, and are deeply dependent on such material.

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