

Book Review: *Civic studies: Approaches to the emerging field*

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Author Note

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For faculty and staff in colleges and universities who labor to fulfill higher education's civic purpose and mission, two challenges generally dominate the discussion on what it will take to create a culture where the civic mission flourishes: 1) institutional support to develop and maintain robust civic relationships and student learning outcomes; and 2) an intellectual shift among departments and disciplines regarding the nature and understanding of scholarship. Institutional support for civic engagement rises and falls with changes in administration and the occasional realignment of priorities. The precarious nature of federal and state funding is not insignificant either. The second challenge—academic departments that eschew non-traditional methods, products, and outputs as inferior and unworthy of tenure and promotion—is more complex and pervasive, though equally frustrating for those faculty and staff who work to align scholarship with public engagement. As a result, the narrative of the institutionalization of university-public engagement is generally negative in tone and less optimistic than pessimistic. The walls of the ivory tower seem impenetrable to new forms of scholarship, especially those that espouse a civic purpose.

The contributors to *Civic Studies: Approaches to the Emerging Field* reframe the discussion in an important and refreshing way. The project began in 2007 when a group of scholars met to plan the Tufts Summer Institute, and they coined the term “civic studies” to describe the motivation and purpose of the course that has brought together over one hundred students, scholars, and practitioners since then. The seminar has a strong focus on theory, and editors Peter Levine and Karol Edward Soltan bring together the leading thinkers for this third volume of the Civic Series published by Bringing Theory to Practice, a program of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Levine and Soltan each contribute a framing chapter to the book's first of four sections. In “The Case for Civic Studies,” Levine says that in the standard model of scholarship, scholars and citizens have distinct roles. Scholars discover facts related to problems in society. Citizens add values to the discussion, and then scholars make recommendations on what actions society should take. Levine points out the obvious challenges that exist with the traditional model (e.g. facts always reflect norms, which are not value-free) and asserts that citizens desire and deserve more from scholars. “Scholarship is not well organized to serve people who see themselves as citizens, meaning co-creators of their common worlds,” he writes (5). Civic studies, however, assumes a different orientation, one where

scholars are citizens who are co-creating their worlds with others. Facts, values, and strategies are integrated together, not parsed apart, and scholars “are accountable for the actual results of their thoughts and not just the ideas themselves” (7).

Sołtan suggests in his framing chapter, “The Emerging Field of a New Civics,” that the goal of “the new civics” is to “develop ideas and ways of thinking that are helpful to citizens understood as co-creators of their world” (9). Scholars study human co-creation by participating in it, though that does not mean that all products of scholarship must address the public directly. The field will be ripe with complex and abstract theories, all of which contribute to the co-creation of society. Identifying the sources of difficulty in the enterprise is paramount, and Sołtan points to Elinor Ostrom and Jurgen Habermas as canonical thinkers in this regard, while at the same time identifying human moral limits and the difficulty of preserving continuity as key challenges to the process of human creation. The new discipline of civic studies will look like other traditional disciplines, but “its most serious goal is intellectual: to unsettle modern culture by the ideas we produce, making it more supportive of human efforts to co-create our worlds—and our world” (18).

The remaining seven chapters of the book are divided into three parts: The Art and Science of Association: The Bloomington School; Deliberative Participation; and Public Work. Filippo Sabetti discusses the historical context of “civic artisanship,” focusing on practices of self-governance that expose a rich heritage for civic studies. The work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom is the subject of Paul Dragos Aligica’s article, and he argues that the Ostroms’ emphasis on political competence and citizenship has largely been ignored but is quite relevant to civic studies. As a part of the canon, the Ostroms provide “a well-rounded perspective that encompasses an epistemological position, a political and institutional theory, a normative political economy, and even an ontology” (43).

Part Three of the book contains two articles on the topic of deliberative participation. Tina Nabatchi and Greg Munno define and describe deliberative civic engagement as “processes that enable citizens, civic leaders, and government officials to come together in public spaces where they can engage in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues” (50). The authors acknowledge that there are many approaches to the practice, but they do a nice job of describing deliberation in ways that will make sense to unfamiliar readers.

Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao discuss “The Challenge of Promoting Civic Participation in Poor Countries.” They outline the modalities of induced and organic participation, reflecting on these forms of participation in light of their review of monitoring and evaluation systems in participatory projects funded by the World Bank over an eight-year period. Their recommendations are essential for students and practitioners of development programs.

The fourth and final part of the book, *Public Work*, contains three chapters. Harry C. Boyte and Blase Scarnati discuss the civic politics of public work, defined as “self-organized efforts by a mix of people who create goods, material or symbolic, whose civic value is determined through an ongoing process of deliberation” (78). This chapter includes rich case studies from Augsburg College, Northern Arizona University, and the successful youth empowerment initiative Public Achievement. Stephen F. Schram provides a call to action for citizen-centered research that is both driven by citizen-identified issues and locates citizens as agents of change. He is hopeful that the social sciences are in the midst of a shift that will return the discipline of political science back to its founding characteristic, the fusion of science and democracy. Philip Nyden rounds out the fourth part and final chapter on public sociology, which narrates the discipline’s relatively recent turn toward the public and its role in a new civic studies.

Anthologies are notoriously difficult to summarize and review, since each chapter has a different focus, audience, strengths, and weaknesses. As a whole, the volume stands as an indicator that Civic Studies is an emerging field, hopefully here to stay, one that is both a mile wide and a mile deep. “Our goal is to create a discipline—an institutionalized intellectual community with a journal, conferences, a professional organization, and a place in the university,” Sołtan writes in his framing chapter (18). That’s one way to affect change in higher education, though some might argue that the project’s success could be its undoing, creating another institutional silo that will focus most of its energy toward its own institutional defense instead of using that energy to create relational pathways with a co-creating public. So while this is an incredibly compelling volume of essays, its lack of a dissonant voice is a weakness, one that denotes the challenges of “disciplining” and alternative models of institutional change. But as the editors note, this volume is just the beginning of a conversation that will continue into the future. For anyone concerned with the development of a citizen-centric society and the ability of

humans to act innovatively and creatively for the common good, the volume is a breath of fresh air and a reminder that their work is not in vain.

Author Biography



Dr. Mark Wilson is Director of Civic Learning Initiatives in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. Originally from Saraland, Alabama, he holds degrees from the University of Mobile (B.A.), McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University (M.Div.) and Auburn University (Ph.D.). He currently teaches the Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement Course and a practicum that includes a living-learning experience in an Appalachian community. He is an Appalachian Teaching Fellow with the Appalachian Regional Commission. He coordinates research and action projects with partners (Kettering Foundation, David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Appalachian Regional Commission) and communities around the state. He is the author of several articles and the book *William Owen Carver's Controversies in the Baptist South*, published by Mercer University Press. Wilson serves as the secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and lives in Auburn with his wife and two children.