

Review Essay

Herb Brown

North Carolina State University

Levine, P. (2013). *We are the ones we have been waiting for: The promise of civic renewal in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Peter Levine's book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (2013), advocates for a return to deliberative democracy in America. He asserts that deliberation should be espoused in both collaboration and civic relationships to effectively address what he calls our society's "wicked problems...[which] interlock, so that each one can be seen as a symptom of another" (p.4). Levine reports broken and corrupt institutions, mass incarceration, climate change, inadequate access to health care, The Great Recession, and chronic unemployment as a non-exhaustive list of America's "wicked problems". Simultaneously, Levine notes that we have an enormous asset, a base of one million people actively engaged in civic renewal. Levine proposes that we move away from negotiation politics, where individuals and interest groups enter into discussions with predetermined goals and objectives. More often than not, those predetermined goals revolve around the fiduciary demands of stakeholders. "Deliberation, in contrast, means trying to decide what is right to do. Self-interest is relevant...but it is not the only factor" (p. 17). Effective deliberation, as Levine describes it, aims to gather diverse groups of citizens to discuss civic issues without the intent or assumption that any one conclusion will prevail over another. This review will present Levine's broad recommendations, the obstacles and limitations he identifies, and his call to action. This inspirational book is a noteworthy contribution to civic engagement literature.

Levine argues that a return to deliberative democracy requires iterative, pervasive, and overlapping circles of deliberating bodies. He recommends that deliberation be "embedded in relationships...and connected to [the] common work [of citizens]" (p. 39). This is also where Levine makes his case that any divorce of deliberation and collaboration is highly detrimental to either action's efficacy; by fostering the marriage of the two, we encourage the development of ethical and moral obligations among participants. The civic relationships created across cultures and other intersections of identity are asserted as invaluable to the cause of shifting the divisive climate of our society across a range of issues.

Further, he charges that "colleges and universities have great civic potential as producers of knowledge, sites of deliberation, and powerful nonprofit economic institutions, rooted in communities" (p.138). The engaged university, as he describes it, has a responsibility to recruit participants, set format and structure, and help define the purpose of deliberation. He argues that because institutions of higher learning are fixed physical structures that are not allowed to move, they have an inherent vested interest in the surrounding communities, whereas corporations, individuals, and businesses have the option of relocating to achieve desirable conditions. He refers to Lee Benson and colleagues' (2007) description of colleges and universities as powerful

anchors for improving the quality of life in American cities and communities. Through research and engagement, large numbers of universities and their students advocate for the progression of public dialogue through relational community organizing in addition to the protection and expansion of the commons. The text indicates that institutions of higher learning should feverishly solicit input from community members and create programming designed to promote community self-determination. Simultaneously, these institutional macro systems should identify key assets within the community and leverage those assets for sustainable growth. Levine charges institutions of higher learning to remain ever aware of their inherent role in “not just reflect[ing] class divisions; [but] defin[ing] them” (p. 138). Awareness of this role encourages deliberation that is focused on dismantling internal and external social-stratification. He continues by declaring academic institutions’ responsibility to advocate “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 nonacademics” (p.139).

The following three broad “wicked-problem reforms are recommended: (1) remove money from politics; (2) government transparency (including deliberative lawmaking); and (3) equitable and accessible voting systems that render concrete decisions. Levine admits that his assertions “cannot be proved with existing data, because the strategy... has not been tried in our era” (p. 162). Furthermore, he addresses several obstacles to overcome, including: our political system’s norm of favoring well-funded special interests over community deliberation; policies that are hostile towards active civic participation; the decline of voluntary associations’ relevance; inadequate civic education; and a lack of funding for deliberative and participatory processes. He also notes the inadequacy of using messaging and social media alone to solve our problems.

The state of American democracy is described as a shattered structure, riddled with the declining relevance of traditional newspaper outlets, labor unions, community-based work, and voluntary service. The author denies that this phenomenon was caused by the rise of information technology and social media. He asserts that the decline of civic engagement predates the rise of widespread virtual interaction. He goes on to discuss a shift from community work to paying dues to become and remain part of social or professional groups. Furthermore, Levine discusses the growing class divide and our current state of de facto segregation. In terms of fraternal and social organizations, Levine reveals a decline of class-diverse membership in certain groups and acknowledges the rise of homogenous geographic communities, although he neglects to mention white flight and discriminatory housing policies as key factors. He ends this section by stating:

...our current civil society looks deeply flawed. It does not promote deliberative talk by diverse people and especially not talk that leads to (or is entitled by) hands-on action. It does not favor or reward loyalty. It does not take a developmental approach, providing opportunities for individuals and communities to learn civic skills and values. And is deeply inequitable (Levine, p.102).

The author goes on to characterize the current state of our public institutions as “corrupt

in ways that discourage civic engagement” (p. 102). He depicts a gradual shift from landmark lawmaking to administrative governance through cabinet-level agencies and congressional subcommittees largely controlled by interest group lobbying and monetary negotiation.

The limitations of governance by expertise, ideology, and economic markets are also explored within the volume. Although he highly values expertise, Levine cautions that governance by expertise and empirical data alone has the three crucial drawbacks. One: “...professions cannot be trusted to make decisions for the public... unless they are forced to justify... conclusions in frequent, detailed open discussions with laypeople, corruption is inevitable” (p. 66). The FBI Counterintelligence Program could be used as a prominent example of such corruption. Two: the questions of value that cannot be explained solely by evidence of causation or correlation. He provides gentrification as an example of effective aesthetic and economic restoration of impoverished geographic areas while observing that such methods lack equitable civil values as indigenous residents of the low-income area are marginalized and pushed out of their community. Three: the limitations of categorical thinking, by which we classify and recommend best practices. This can often lead to experts ignoring both the individual uniqueness of the human condition, and the value-based perspective of laypeople. As an example, Levine notes that medical doctors have begun to understand the limitations of an evidence-based-only medical practice when emphasizing holistic approaches to patient care.

In terms of ideology, Levine points out the propensity for ideological governance to select favorable evidence, exaggerate arguments, and ignore complications. Ideologies can also be sources of marginalization and persecution against those who do not conform to the social structure. Levine insists that ideology can still be helpful as long as “intellectual reflection follows practical experimentation, not the reverse” (p. 77). He also acknowledges and explains the contradictory nature of a market-controlled democratic system. In summation, Levine confirms the fact that our constitutional checks and balances have been circumvented by the “power of the purse”.

This well-written evaluation of American civic engagement concludes on a promising note and a call to action. Giving hope to a “disempowered and divided citizenry, and a shattered civic infrastructure” (p.189) by recognizing that “at least one million Americans, against the odds, are working on sophisticated, demanding, and locally effective forms of civic engagement” (p. 3). His call to action begins with an emphasis on strengthening the relationships between organizations, expanding existing civic coalitions, and creating new ones. He then proposes three vital functions for those coalitions: iterative debate rooted in passionate impartiality; targeted and tailored communication aimed at the one million already civically-engaged citizens; and intense advocacy for the expressed interests of people at the local, state, national, and international levels. Levine concludes his call to action and this volume by choosing ten uppermost urgencies for America’s civic infrastructure. The first step of this Ten Point Plan is “choos[ing] one grave national issue and us[ing] federal policy to support participatory, deliberative solutions...for example...the failure of policing” (p. 183). Levine believes that intense investment in deliberation around a single issue could provide a grand model for increasing active civic participation by the citizens and

developing sustainable replication when applied to other problems.

Levine's action plan is comprehensive and rooted in equity. He advocates for "crucial struggles for civic engagement in universities, nonprofit service agencies, professional associations [and other]...important venues outside of government" (p.188). His analysis and perspectives reveal much concerning his character and shows his enormous personal investment in American civic renewal. In his concluding note, Levine refers to President Barack Obama's use of the phrase "We are the ones we have been waiting for" as motivation for the title of this book. He is thoughtful in his choice of practical examples for reform. Levine embraces engaged scholarship as a foundational principle in his proposed overlapping restructuring efforts. His overall goal is stated as a concise and powerful statement, "to replace a vicious cycle of citizens' disempowerment and public corruption with a virtuous cycle of reengagement and reform" (p.189).

This book was a true inspiration to me on several fronts. Chiefly, the book instills optimism and hope regarding our civic infrastructure. The practical examples for change provide a framework for advocacy and application of the deliberative process within academia in particular. The idea that institutions of higher learning should serve as monuments of deliberation in their respective geographic communities is truly uplifting and inspiring. Levine's framework of deliberation is one that encourages a reciprocal exchange of ideas and perspectives with the intent of reaching synergetic solutions to our nation's "wicked" problems. This ideal is parallel to Paulo Freire's description of "critical transformation" (1968). As such, this book is an enormous contribution to the body of knowledge pertaining to civic renewal. While reading this book, I often found myself stopping to ponder the implications, reflect on past and present experiences, and deliberate with colleagues around the subject of engaged scholarship and the future of its application and implementation. I will continue recommending this book as an excellent resource to my friends, family, and colleagues.

References

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Author

Herb Brown, now a United States Army Veteran, served as an Information Systems Analyst from 2004 to 2008, including one Combat Support tour in Northern Kuwait, receiving a host of awards including two Army Commendation Medals, National Defense Service Medal, and Global War on Terror Expeditionary Medal. After Honorable separation from military service, Herb went on to receive a Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration from the University of Phoenix. Herb is currently a 2016 Master's of Social Work candidate at North Carolina State University. He is a member in good standing of the National Association of Social Workers, Collegiate 100 Black Men of America, American Civil Liberties Union, University Graduate Student Association, and founding President of Justice Together at NCSU one of over 300 University chapters of Justice Together, an anti-brutality, police-accountability Organization; along with several other university organizations and Caucuses.

In *We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For*, Levine catalogues all the ways our institutional systems discourage engagement among citizens. But he finds and lifts up a million people doing civic work for a better world, and asks us to join and harness that energy for real change. It's clear-eyed and a clarion call--and a must read whether you're a full time advocate or 'just' a citizen hoping to make a difference." - Myles Rapoport, President, Demos. "We know what it means to get better leaders. But how are we supposed to produce better citizens? That's t Levine explores successful efforts from communities across America as well as from democracies overseas. He shows how cities like Bridgeport, CT and Allentown, PA have bounced back from the devastating loss of manufacturing jobs by drawing on robust civic networks. The next step is for the participants in these local efforts to change policies that frustrate civic engagement nationally. Filled with trenchant analysis and strategies for reform, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* analyzes and advocates a new citizen-centered politics capable of tackling problems that cannot be fixed in any...Â But how are we supposed to produce better citizens? That's the question Peter Levine brings into focus.