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Service Learning and Citizenship: Creating “Habits of the Heart”?

In the aftermath of the terrorist acts of September 11, American citizens have shown a remarkable degree of national unity. This has manifested itself not only in patriotic displays, but in an outpouring of voluntary assistance for the victims of the

attacks, for their families, and for those involved in rescue and recovery efforts. Perhaps not since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 has a single event so stimulated Americans’ willingness to put aside their personal interests for the common good. We will now see whether this sense of self-sacrifice can be sustained, especially in a “war” of the difficult, protracted, and (very probably) secretive kind we must now wage.

Americans’ swift response to the attacks seemed quite natural. This may have surprised some observers because we have been hearing for years that American “social capital” is in a state of decline as Americans have retreated into their privacy (Putnam 2000). Declining interest in public affairs, and declining membership in organizations of all kinds, is especially evident among younger Americans, which has led to concerns for the future as well as the present state of American community. The basic lessons of Americans’ response to terrorism, I think, are that the ethic of service to the community remains strong but dormant, and that we as educators have not yet found the right way of calling it forth. “Service learning” has been promoted as one such method. I shall argue here that it is at best a partial answer to the problem of declining civic engagement among young Americans. This is so for two reasons. The first is the practical consideration that service learning programs, particularly at the university level, have little demonstrable value in increasing students’ engagement with or commitment to their communities. The second reason is that its

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advocates have misunderstood the relation of civil society to liberal institutions and commitments. I will discuss this with particular reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America*.

Despite Americans' comparatively high levels of civic engagement, in recent years scholars and public officials have become alarmed by growing indifference to public affairs. One commonly used index of this indifference is voting, which Americans do less and less each decade (Putnam 2000). More alarmingly, Putnam shows that group activities of *all* kinds are less and less frequent in the U.S. today than was the case forty years ago, and from this he infers a reduced commitment to the community. Service learning has been proposed as an antidote to this decline, and has indeed become very popular. At the university level alone more than 2 million American students took part in service learning projects in 1999 (Hepburn, et al., 2000). Noting this trend, a number of recent studies have examined university level service learning programs, in an attempt to discover whether they make students better citizens.

One measure of improved citizenship is improved understanding of politics and government. Do service learning programs actually help students learn about political institutions and practices? The results are mixed, but on the whole disappointing (Hepburn, et al., 2000; Walker 2000). In part, this is because many programs are not careful to distinguish between service learning and community service (Hepburn, et al., 2000: 618). Programs that carefully integrate course content with experience seem to have better results. It seems clear, however, that the best results occur in programs that are most like traditional internships (Astin, et al., 2000; Hepburn, et al.: 619). Hepburn, et al., quote a 1993 study, for example, which concludes that

“the academic payoffs are substantial when the service activity is integrated with traditional classroom instruction. ... the kinds of service activities in which students participate should be selected so that they will illustrate, affirm, extend, and challenge material presented in readings and lectures” (619; Astin 2000).

The three factors that appear to affect student learning in service learning programs are the clarity of the program's goals, the duration of the program, and the amount of reflection

the students are called upon to do (Hepburn, et al.: 618). That goals need to be clearly articulated would seem to go without saying. Equally unsurprising, perhaps, is the finding that the longest programs seem to be the ones that offer the greatest gains both in terms of knowledge and attitudes (Hepburn, et. al: 620). In fact it appears that as much as two years of community service might be required “to develop such attitude changes as increased concern about problems facing people in other countries and decreased racial prejudice.”¹ Most studies of service learning programs also agree that programs which include a significant proportion of reflection and discussion of the service are the most successful (Hepburn, et al., 2000; Erlich 1999). Students who are encouraged to take the time to draw out the lessons of their practice, to relate it to political and social institutions, will make greater academic and social gains (Soule 2001).

Even with time for reflection, however, studies suggest that typical service learning programs are no better than other methods of instruction in enhancing students’ knowledge. Hunter and Brisbin (2000) discovered that service learning programs did not increase either students’ knowledge or their involvement with their communities. This was true despite the fact that the students “reported that the experience made what they learned in their classes more relevant.” Overall Hunter and Brisbin conclude that “service does not appear to bring about consistent and comprehensive changes in students’ general cognitive skills, attitudes, and political values” (626). They did note that “students who completed voluntary service scored much better, on average, on *both* [pre- and post-] tests [of political knowledge] than students who completed required service” (624, emphasis added). As we shall discuss later, this is consistent with other findings that show that students who are otherwise oriented toward community service are more likely to be knowledgeable about political issues.

Studies of university level service learning programs’ ability to increase students’ knowledge thus appear merely to produce the truism that students learn better when a variety of appropriate teaching strategies are employed, and that there is value in incorporating service projects in political science courses. The claim of service learning advocates, however, is that the real value of such programs lies not in what students know, but in their values and commitments to others. What do the studies tell us about this?

¹ Hepburn, et al.: 620, citing S. J. Myers-Lipton, “The Effects of Service-Learning on College Students’ Attitudes Toward Civic Responsibility, International Understanding, and Racial Prejudice,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1994.

Empirical studies of the effects of service learning programs on students' engagement with their communities also seem to offer disappointment to the proponents of service learning. This is not entirely clear, however, because those who advocate service learning have not articulated their criteria of improvement in this area with any precision. Some blur the distinction between service learning and charity (Robinson 2000: 607), and even speak in terms of "sacrifice" (Carter 2001: 46).² In general they seem to ask students to reflect on their "obligations to th[e] community," and presumably to think about what those obligations might be (Erlach, 1999: 245-46). If this type of reflection is the goal, the results are not good. Hunter and Brisbin report that "a decided majority of students indicated that the service experience did not affect their thinking about democracy or about their role as a citizen," nor did it lead students to define democracy in more "communitarian" ways (624-625; cf. Hepburn, et al.: 621). Erlach likewise reports that survey results of attitudes among his students were positive, but "not great" (1999: 249). Thus service learning programs served to make students marginally better analysts of public policy, and more connected with specific community groups, but overall not more inclined to put community interests ahead of their own (Hunter and Brisbin 2000, Walker 2000). That is, students did not overall become more inclined to inquire about or reflect upon their obligations to the community as a result of service learning.

Campbell (2000), however, implicitly suggests that this may be the wrong expectation. Following Putnam (2000), he argues that a better approach may be "promoting adherence to the norm of generalized reciprocity" (641). In a cautiously optimistic assessment of volunteer activity among young people, Campbell concludes that the data provide "*prima facie* evidence that community service among young people facilitates civic engagement generally and political activity specifically, both while individuals are young and when they become adults" (643). But Campbell here is speaking of *all* community service, not just that connected with school. Moreover, his conclusions are drawn from studies of people who are already engaged in their communities, and thus appear to produce the tautology that people who are more engaged in their communities are more engaged in their communities (2000: 644). Astin, et al. similarly found that "[t]he single most important factor associated with a positive service-

² Carter 2001: 46. In defining the end as "civility," Carter says: "civility ... is a kind of sacrifice. You might think of it as the sum of all the sacrifices we make for the sake of living a common life." Presumably civic education would then be characterized by reflection on these sacrifices.

learning experience appears to be the student's degree of interest in the subject matter," and the "second most significant factor in a positive service-learning experience is whether the professor encourages class discussion"(2000: 3). We noted before that students who had an interest in voluntary service received higher scores on tests of knowledge *both before and after* their service. These studies must lead us to question whether successful outcomes are the result of the service learning programs themselves, or of self-selection among those who volunteer for and staff them. Erlich raises the same question about his study: "there may have been a selection bias since most of the students probably came to the class with a higher level of civic engagement than the average student" (1999: 246).

Campbell's study is concerned exclusively with pre-university students, and implies that university students may be too old for service learning programs to have their desired effect. Does engaging students in service learning earlier in their schooling make a difference? Here again, the results are mixed, but it seems clear that, as at the university level, programs with clear objectives for civic outcomes, and a significant opportunity for reflection, can have a mild positive impact. Again, however, we must observe that the results do not show that service learning is clearly superior to other types of programs. These observations are supported by the results of studies of the "Learn and Serve" program and the "Project Citizen" program.

A 1999 study examined the impact of the "Learn and Serve" program on students in 17 middle and high schools around the country (Brandeis, 1999). The nationwide "Learn and Serve" program was created by an Act of Congress and funded through government grants beginning in 1994. The surveys for the Brandeis study were conducted from 1995 to 1997. Students not only engaged in volunteer service, but most had regular opportunities to discuss and reflect upon their experiences. Some programs were integrated with classroom instruction, while others were separate from formal coursework. The Brandeis study concludes that the programs had a very small positive impact on students' commitment to their communities, showing "less than a 5% difference between participant and comparison group scores" on measures of civic attitudes (9). Further, the study concludes that "service-learning programs might best be understood as strengthening or reinforcing students' generally positive civic attitudes rather than building a positive set of attitudes from scratch"

(9). There were only small differences between the students engaged in service learning and the control groups in all types of programs, regardless of the program design.³

A different approach to civic engagement is exemplified in two programs of the Center for Civic Education, “We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution,” for high school students, and “We the People: Project Citizen” for students in middle school. The high school program takes place only in the U.S., while “Project Citizen” has also been adopted in some 30 other countries. The “Citizen and the Constitution” program is an academic program that does not incorporate community service. Studies of the program show that it does indeed increase students’ knowledge of American government significantly (Soule 2000). Yet the program also tended to reduce students’ cynicism about government and politics, and to make them more likely to vote, participate in politics, and work for a political campaign (16-17). It would appear from this finding that a properly focused academic curriculum, even without the addition of service learning, may accomplish some of the major objectives of service programs. It also appears that the results of participation in “The Citizen and the Constitution” persist over time, as a study of its alumni shows (Soule 2001). This stands in sharp contrast to the “Learn and Serve” program, which found that “[a] year after the end of the initial program experience, most of the impacts found at the end of the program had disappeared” (Brandeis 1999: 15).

The Project Citizen program for middle school students is designed to teach students how to become effective actors in public affairs. Because the program has been implemented in other countries, we also have the opportunity for a cross-cultural comparison of its effectiveness (Tolo 2000; Vontz, et al., 2000; Soule n.d.). Their findings show that in all countries Project Citizen has a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward and knowledge of political things. Tolo offers nine findings, among them: “(1) students using Project Citizen believe they can make a difference in their communities; (2) students *do* make a difference in their communities through Project Citizen; (3) students and teachers believe Project Citizen helps students develop a greater understanding of public policy; (4) students and teachers believe Project Citizen helps students ... [develop a] commitment to active citizenship and

³ This raises the possibility that these studies may be seeing something like the sociological equivalent of the placebo effect, i.e., the probability that some patients will improve regardless of the treatment. Thus, we might find that 5% of students will be more engaged as a result of a program in, say, square dancing – which would also be consistent with Putnam’s suggestion that the type of engagement is less important than the number of interactions.

governance” (2000: 4). The same conclusions have been made regarding the programs in Latvia, Lithuania, and Indiana (Vontz, et al., 2000: 4), and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Soule, n.d.: 20).

It deserves to be noted that Project Citizen is not a “service learning” project in the traditional sense, and the differences may be instructive. Project Citizen puts the civic perspective in the foreground; that is, students are asked to think as policy makers, and only secondarily are required to become advocates for the policy recommendations they make. This contrasts with service learning programs, which typically encourage students to identify with, and adopt the perspective of, the specific groups they are serving, and only afterward to try to generalize from that group to the community (Robinson 2000; Walker 2000; Hildreth 2000; Brandeis 1999; Erlich 1999). Perhaps this is more difficult for students to understand. As Hepburn, et al., note with respect to university age students, it takes some time – a year or more – before students can move from “considering individual cases [to] thinking in terms of societal needs” (2000: 620). Another difference from service learning is that Project Citizen, as an activity for an entire class, teaches students how to draw on the different strengths, temperaments, and talents within their group in order to solve problems. It thus implicitly teaches students the value of working cooperatively, with the classroom serving as a microcosm of the community, rather than engaging students in separate individual struggles with authority for which the class serves simply as a forum for presenting experiences (Walker 2000). Finally, Project Citizen explicitly teaches students about the political process and their role as citizens (individually and collectively) in that process.

The lesson of all of these data seems to be that the effects of service learning are not as significant as its proponents have hoped. Indeed, the studies of the “We the People” programs suggest that other kinds of programs are as effective, or more effective, in increasing knowledge and civic engagement among young Americans. Thus far, we have examined contemporary political science accounts. We may conclude that empirical political science gives at best equivocal support to service learning, saying in effect that it does no harm and may incidentally do some good. But as an economist might ask, even though it does not work in practice, might service learning be *in theory* the answer to declining civic engagement?

Some of the most prominent advocates of service learning ground their advocacy in a critique of liberal democracy as it is practiced in the United States. The critique holds that liberalism,

by making “an ideology of radical individualism,” systematically undermines the community spirit that makes any community worth living in.⁴ In arguing that Americans today are less community minded, critics of liberalism must then locate a time when Americans were *more* community oriented, and – presumably *therefore* – less committed to liberal individualism.⁵ This is a difficult case to establish, even on the evidence provided by the most-quoted observer of American community, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville shows, to be sure, that when Locke’s individualism was imported into America it was transformed by the existing practices and habits of the Americans. But the synthesis did not in fact add up to the kind of “communitarian” civic virtue that Barber and others are seeking. Americans were no more concerned than Locke with seeking virtue for its own sake. They did, however, praise it as useful, Tocqueville says. Virtue is useful in public life because it makes it possible for people to live together in harmony. Modern constitutional states exist to allow citizens to *pursue* happiness, and leave it to each citizen to define happiness in his own way. But if these states do not define virtue, they none the less depend on their citizens’ exercising the virtues in order to survive and flourish – that is, in order to continue to provide the conditions of happiness. Tocqueville was the first to see that American citizenship is distinctive for the utilitarian grounding of its conception of civic virtue.

In the title of his chapter on this issue Tocqueville says that the Americans “combat individualism by the doctrine of self-interest well understood.”⁶ This idea arises when people understand that their own well being is connected with the well being of the community, and that they are responsible for helping to promote the community’s interests. Self interest well understood leads Americans to realize that sometimes they must sacrifice some of their interests in order to advance others. It encourages them to break out of the isolation into which the pursuit of private satisfactions might otherwise persuade them to retreat, and join with others to undertake specific projects. When they do this, they find that not only have they accomplished important things for the community, but that the cooperative labor is itself a source of deep satisfaction. Alone, the individual feels insignificant, no matter how satisfied he may be in his private life. Together, citizens can feel that they count for something in their

⁴ Barber 1984: 110. There are many treatments of this issue; among the most thoughtful is Sandel (1996).

⁵ The search for a non-liberal past has spawned a large literature as well, beginning with the historical treatment of the American Revolution in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and those who have come after. See the thorough analysis of Bailyn’s and others’ work in Steven M. Dworkin, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Duke University Press, 1990).

⁶ The discussion is in Volume 2, Part 2, chapter 8 (Tocqueville 2000: 500ff.).

communities. The civic education that Americans get from these habits of association and collective action convinces them that their citizenship matters.

The idea of self-interest well understood describes the basic principle of civic virtue in America. Even though it reflects no ethical principle grander (or harder to explain) than self-interest, the result is a nation of citizens who are just, moderate, and concerned with the well-being of their fellow citizens. Tocqueville says:

The principle of self interest well understood is not a lofty one, but it is clear and sure. ... The principle of self interest well understood produces no great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial. By itself it cannot suffice to make a man virtuous; but it disciplines a number of persons in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command ... (2000: 502).

The civic virtue based on self-interest is obviously different from moral virtue, because it is not only compatible with selfishness, but is grounded in it. Tocqueville's Americans *do not* arrive at their duties by putting the interests of others, or the community, first. Their ethic is more like Putnam's "generalized reciprocity" than Carter's "sacrifice."

Surprisingly, perhaps, civic virtue, as Tocqueville describes its American version, is not the "thin" or impoverished thing we might expect of something grounded in selfishness. It is more than voting and obeying the law, and more even than standing for and holding political office; it appears in such a variety of guises that ultimately it cannot be defined with great precision. Civic virtue is an array of skills, knowledge, habits, and dispositions that are mutually reinforcing. Above all, civic virtue both relies on and reinforces a feeling that one's contributions to the community make a difference, both for oneself and for others. (This may be why Americans always seem so pushy to non-Americans: they all think they have an important contribution to make.) Such public spirited citizens have a sense of their own self-worth and human dignity. Part of what dignifies American citizenship, to Tocqueville, is that its obligations are freely chosen, even if chosen for reasons that are, at bottom, selfish. If Tocqueville is correct about this, then in spite of its unsatisfying foundation American citizenship may offer the possibility of a more complete realization of human dignity than a narrowly communitarian doctrine might allow. By connecting the political and the economic,

or the public and the private, aspects of human nature, American citizenship offers a “third way” to a human fulfillment that is more complete than either could be by itself.

Their common agreement on the utility of virtue explains why Americans are able to cooperate with one another in spite of the plurality of their definitions of happiness, that is, their individualism. Americans, Tocqueville says, are constantly thinking of ways to make their society better. And they are constantly acting together to do these things, without the assistance (or interference) of government. The Americans Tocqueville observed were “constantly forming associations” to do this or that – from volunteer fire companies to library associations to organizations to oppose alcoholism. Americans did not understand the role of the citizen to be that of petitioning an official or merely waiting for the authorities to act. In a democracy, the citizens *are* the government, and an act of citizens working together is just as democratic as an action by elected democratic representatives. Perhaps it is even more democratic. In the ideal democracy all citizens would spontaneously act to advance the good of all, so no government would be necessary. In this sense, American democracy remains very much resistant to the idea of “the state” as the embodiment of the popular will. Indeed, there is to this day no concept in the American political vocabulary that corresponds to “state” as Europeans use that term. American society, as Tocqueville observed it, was thoroughly politicized but only lightly touched by government. This was possible because Americans learned to trust each other through working together, and this trust created a foundation for further common action. Liberal individualism not only is not hostile to civil society, but may be an essential condition for promoting it.

As they present their goals, advocates of service learning in schools and universities appear to aim to encourage something that resembles the ethic of citizenship praised by Tocqueville. Service learning will promote civic virtue, according to Erlich:

“Civic learning involves students coming to understand the democratic processes of a community, the problems it faces, the richness of its diversity, the need for individual commitments of time and energy to enhance community life, and, most of all, the importance of working collaboratively to resolve community concerns” (1999: 246).

In differing mixtures, service learning courses emphasize academic knowledge and social, moral, and civic lessons. As we have seen, studies show that service learning can help somewhat to fulfill the academic goal of increasing students’ knowledge. Hildreth suggests a

mechanism by which this may work when he points out that “students’ struggles to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences constitute critical pedagogical moments.... Effective service learning programs make explicit the assumptions, experiences, and academic content” relevant for helping students to understand the world around them (2000: 631). This is to say that it makes them more sophisticated as social observers, or in Hildreth’s terms it encourages students to “theorize.”

Hildreth’s account of the value of service learning as an exercise in “theorizing,” however, helps us to understand the distance we have traveled from Tocqueville. Tocqueville’s Americans did not engage in theorizing; indeed he devotes an entire chapter of *Democracy in America* to Americans’ distaste for “speculative studies.”⁷ Americans’ good citizenship does not arise from their habits of mind, Tocqueville says, but from their “habits of the heart,” which are informed most powerfully by the principle of self interest rightly understood. Americans approach “theorizing” only in matters of religion, which provides support for moral duties.⁸ Hildreth and others are vague on the origins of our obligations to the community, but to the extent that they understand these obligations as derived from a theorized or abstract moral duty, service learning programs may represent attempts to secularize something which cannot be secularized. This would seem to be the case with programs that identify service learning with charity, for example. Moreover, when secularized duties owed to the community may reveal dogmatic or even tyrannical implications that are at odds with Americans’ commitment to liberal individualism, implications that these same obligations do not reveal when understood as commands of religion. Tocqueville says that although the great majority of Americans share the same religious convictions, they also – paradoxically – retain the belief that they have freely chosen their convictions.⁹ If to secularize those convictions is to give them the authority of the community, the majority, or the state, it fundamentally changes their nature. They become commands, rather than aspirations, and expressions of power rather than love.

⁷ Volume 2, Part 1, chapter 1: “On the Philosophic Method of the Americans” (Tocqueville 2000: 403).

⁸ (Tocqueville 2000: 406). It should be noted, however, that Tocqueville later comments that “Not only do Americans follow their religion out of interest, but they often place in this world the interest that one can have in following it [i.e., the religion]. ... it is often difficult to know ... if the principal object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the other world or well-being in this one” (505-506 [Volume 2, Part 2, chapter 9]). Ultimately religion itself may be subject to the principle of self interest well understood.

⁹ Tocqueville discusses religion in several places. These observations draw on his comments in Volume 1, part 2, chapter 9, and Volume II, part 1 chapters 2 and 5.

As we have seen, Tocqueville's Americans take part in their community because it benefits themselves, even if sometimes the benefits are indirect. Contemporary service learning programs, however, encourage students to think about what is good for the community; that is, they encourage students to adopt the frame of reference of the community and its good as the primary end to be served. They invite students to make "sacrifices ... for the sake of living a common life" (Carter 2001: 46). This "communitarian" objective appears to be the driving force behind many service learning programs. It also seems to be the most frequent source of disappointment: more than one program reports that "participating students did not perceive a relationship between service and citizenship or civic responsibility" (Hepburn, et al., 621; see also Hunter and Brisbin; Brandeis).

Tocqueville's account of American citizenship should lead us to wonder if service learning has somehow aimed too high. Putnam (2000) and Campbell (2000) speak of "reciprocity" as one of the ingredients of "social capital," and this language brings us somewhat closer to Tocqueville's perspective. What remains unclear about service learning programs, and the studies that examine them, is whether they aim to foster a sense of reciprocity or simply to encourage altruism or even "sacrifice" (cf. Robinson 2000: 607). Most of the studies do not distinguish between these outcomes, even though they would appear to be quite different. The most obvious difference, of course, is that there is a self-interested aspect to reciprocity that is absent from altruism. Most service learning programs appear to be uncomfortable with the idea of self interest in any form. As Walker describes it, many programs encourage students to think of service as an *alternative* to politics, and a "morally superior" one at that (2000: 647). Thus it may be no surprise that students could engage in an altruism-oriented program of service learning and fail to discern a connection between service and the political process.

Any discussion of contemporary American citizenship is complicated by the fact that government is simply a far greater part of Americans' lives than it was in the 1830s. Tocqueville's citizens acted in a great public space that was left by a government purposely kept small. Civic action could be spontaneous and effective because government was, for many purposes, irrelevant. Today, civic action more often takes the form of petitioning government, and many service learning programs involve a model of civic action that requires intervention with and by government (Hildreth 2000; Tolo 2000; Vontz, et al., 2000; Erlich 1999; Walker 2000). Some advocates of service learning are comfortable with the idea that

overcoming individualism requires an enhanced role for the state, which was one of Tocqueville's great fears for the future of democracy. This is a complicated issue, and requires a thorough exploration of the nature of modern government. In exploring it, we need to be wary of guiding our policy by ideological commitments to community or to privacy, or by nostalgia for a bygone age.

This review of the literature suggests that neither theory nor practice supports the claim that service learning by itself is an effective antidote to declining civic engagement among young Americans. It would seem that the "radical individualism" of which Barber and others complain can be better checked by other methods. Part of the search for these methods must, then be empirical, as Owen (2000) has recommended. We need to ask, what will work to make Americans better citizens? Yet these empirical studies must be grounded in better, or at least clearer, theories about the kind of citizenship we seek. Tocqueville cautions us that in developing these theories we should be cautious about aiming too high. Americans have shown their heroism when called upon to risk their lives for one another; as educators we must find better ways of keeping that spirit awake.

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