

Students, Civic Engagement and Justice: Does Our Teaching Reinforce Apathy and Cynicism?

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In approaching the challenge of molding students into citizens committed to justice, we need to clarify two dimensions of commitment to justice. The first, perhaps more obvious aspect is the avoidance of directly unjust behavior. The self-discipline of eschewing opportunities for personal advantage or the feelings of superiority at the expense of others is a fundamental aspect of democratic character.¹

The second dimension is the engagement in efforts to change aspects of public policy and society that harbor injustice. We may have all the right attitudes, but do nothing about them. Engagement ranges from the obvious – exercising the right and obligation to vote, requiring considerations of justice on issues of taxation, foreign affairs, race relations, welfare, criminal justice, and so on – to participation in civic organizations, social movements, charities, etc.

At the risk of over-dramatizing the point, apathy in a world that has not been rid of injustice is a sin of omission. This is certainly a contentious position in that it privileges activism over inaction while some instances of activism against injustice, such as intervention in Iraq, are obviously controversial. In general, however, we would probably agree that the just citizen is committed to making a better world by taking action against injustice.

I will argue that in the United States, our major challenge is to *kindle engagement for justice*. This does not mean that we can disregard unjust behavior; it simply means that for the United States, in this era, the major obstacle to justice is disengagement rather than active injustice. Blatant prejudice, deliberate cruelty, and intentional exploitation have declined remarkably in the United States over the past half century. Yet more deeply rooted structural sources of economic and social injustice remain, both within our country and with respect to other countries. I am asserting that we have a crucial role to play in mobilizing students to address these injustices. This does not imply that we should radicalize our students – in many instances a sober, calculated approach to addressing injustice may be more effective. The crucial thing is the engagement.

How is this engagement to be nurtured? We can provide opportunities for community service to consolidate all those years of pre-college civics courses and other experiences of democratic socialization. We can provide courses on ethics. We can encourage student government to reward students for their engagement within our academic

¹ Much greater elaboration of the concept of democratic character can be found in the classic essay on this topic by Harold D. Lasswell, “Democratic Character.”

communities, in the hope that this will translate into engagement on the larger stage. I would imagine that other essays will emphasize these important strategies.

Yet I would like to draw attention to the *threats to engagement* that may rise out of how we educate our students. For the engaged, public engagement poses two dilemmas. First, how can citizens be engaged and yet responsible given the complexity of public issues and how easy it is to act with inadequate knowledge? Civic responsibility requires action, but only well-informed action. Without mastery over the substance of policy, people tend either to remain inactive, or to take policy positions to express their self images and emotional orientations.² In other words, they embrace positions that resonate emotionally and symbolically – but they may not be policies that contribute most to the public interest. And the uninformed, acting from the heart more than from reason, are often no match for narrow interests. Thus the threats to engagement are intellectual narrowness and cynicism, both ultimately leading to apathy. The intellectually narrow individual says “I can’t do it.” The cynic, especially one who tried to make a difference and comes to view his or her efforts as failures, says “Nothing can be done.”

Intellectual Narrowness

Modernization has long meant specialization and the increasing division of labor. It is very easy to fall prey to the sweet security of specialization – knowing more and more about less and less. Specialization *per se* cannot be faulted, but specialization and narrowness, justified on the grounds that being a specialist is a professional’s sole responsibility, is clearly problematic. If a consequence of specialization is an assumption that other specialties are beyond one’s ken, then passivity on the issues involving these other specialties is a likely result. The sociologist Robert King Merton argued that a form of “professional courtesy” exists in the United States, wherein professionals in one sphere do not question the professionals in another. Merton is certainly only partially correct, but there is much truth in the logic that specialists, to assert their dominion over their own specializations, may acknowledge the exclusive dominion of other experts over other areas. In homelier terms, if I question your expertise as a philosopher or architect, what is to prevent you from questioning my expertise as a political scientist? Why don’t we both pretend to be omniscient in our own specialties and ignorant of one another’s? Such intellectual narrowness would obviously restrict the scope of interest and action in the public sphere. If we take the position that those other fields out there defy our comprehension, passivity is the likely outcome with respect to any issue that hinges on the technicalities of fields beyond our own. Apathy can also be psychologically self-protective. The more complicated and intimidating the world seems, the more likely people are to try to privatize their lives. Our current affluence allows people - at least

² Harold Lasswell recognized his nearly seventy years ago:
“[t]he findings of personality research show that the individual is a poor judge of his own interest. The individual who chooses a political policy as a symbol of his wants is usually trying to relieve his own disorders by irrelevant palliatives. An examination of the total state of the person will frequently show that his theory of his own interests is far removed from the course of procedure which will give him a happy and well-adjusted life” (Lasswell, 194).

those enjoying the affluence - to buy distance from common societal problems. The gated community is perhaps the most vivid symbol of this. So too is the "Generation X" mentality that politics is for the middle-aged. Successful specialization - computer experts becoming multimillionaires from writing clever code - reinforces the temperament to ignore the broader societal issues.

There are disturbing signs that these effects occur both before and after graduation. First, even at excellent colleges and universities, the natural tendency of many students is to specialize to whatever degree that will maximize their credentialing as a specialist. Students rail against distributional requirements as if it is a punishment to have to take a wide variety of courses. Second, and relatedly, many very bright non-science majors decide to minimize the number, and sometimes the difficulty, of the science courses that they take. Science courses are seen as a hurdle rather than an opportunity for broadening. Because students often see science courses as a threat to the grade point average, they choose the easiest courses. They have already decided that their specialization entails turning their backs on other subjects.

Third, narrowness may have highly negative implications for citizenship and democracy, if professional narrowness translates into apathy toward politics and inefficacy in dealing with public policy issues. Recall Walter Lippman's analysis of the apathy and irrationality of America's body politic in the 1920s: insufficient education left the American public insufficiently sophisticated to understand public policy issues.(120) Therefore public reactions were based more on misconception, stereotypes, and emotion than on informed opinion. Public apathy and weak democratic participation, according to Lippman, emerged from a combination of disinterest and lack of efficacy growing out of this ignorance. Implicit in Lippman's diagnosis, however, was the optimism that erasing the educational deficit would create a more knowledgeable and engaged populace. In many respects this has not materialized. If Lippman were alive today, he would probably be horrified at the low election turnout statistics, the "Generation X" apathy, and the lack of engagement of so many Americans on crucial societal issues, ranging from the health care system to the welfare system. To be sure, public policy issues are complex, and perhaps are increasingly complex. Yet to a large degree, the disappointing progress in citizenship is due to attitudes rather than to ignorance or complexity. It seems clear that the vast progress in educating the American people has not eliminated the problems that preoccupied Lippman. Consider the issue of the U.S. healthcare system. We all know that millions of relatively low-income Americans are not covered by health insurance. A large proportion of these people are children. This is a very important issue of justice. A very common reaction to the complexity of the healthcare debate is to tune out.

The antidote for the intellectual narrowness and intellectual intimidation is simple in concept but obviously challenging to accomplish: cultivate our students as intellectuals. Let me first define what I mean by that term. The most insightful definition of intellectual is simply "an individual who accepts the responsibility to be competent over the broad range of human pursuits." So we are not speaking of the narrow literati who believe that quoting Foucault is sufficient, or of the narrow economist or political scientist, who does nothing beyond economics or political science. The intellectual is the person who knows that it is unacceptable to say, "I care about literature, therefore I

simply don't care about science or politics," or "Philosophy is for the cultural effete – I want to be a policy wonk and just concentrate on the important practical things." And most importantly, he or she should not say, in a more modest vein, "That is far beyond my area of expertise." The intellectual takes seriously the need to have an informed opinion and position on the issues that confront society and act upon them. Now, this does not mean that intellectuals believe themselves to be competent in everything; that would be the height of arrogance. Rather, intellectuals feel the *obligation to strive* to be intellectually engaged about everything. Insofar as this intellectual aspiration exists, apathy is simply unacceptable. And the dilemma of responsible action is minimized, as much as possible, by the imperative of keeping informed on all fronts. Thus I propose that *the crucial task of liberal education is to teach students to become and remain intellectuals*. Intellectuals in a decent society have some immunity against both apathy and cynicism.

Many academic institutions not only serve the laudable purpose of cultivating the specializations that we require, but also discourage the aspirations of general competence. We who serve in institutions committed to the liberal arts frequently and vocally pride ourselves for keeping our students broad, but if we look carefully, this is not so clear. Most U.S. institutions of higher education, including liberal arts colleges and universities committed to liberal education, are staffed by specialists. We tend to believe that by requiring our students to take a broad range of courses, we are pushing them toward the diffuse competence that provides the confidence to be an intellectual. But it is not at all clear that their exposure to us – as experts – actually instills confidence that our graduates will have enough mastery – and confidence – to address the whole range of issues that citizens need to address.

Let me explain via an example. I teach a seminar course on “The Politics and Economics of Natural Resource Policy in Developing Countries.” My instincts are to demonstrate how wonderfully complicated this topic really is. It is not simply the economics of resource exploitation; it encompasses management problems, theories of corruption, bureaucratic politics, and the institutional weaknesses that encourage and permit government officials to abuse natural resources. However, the more I demonstrate the complexity of the topic – and have personal satisfaction of demonstrating my hard-earned knowledge – the greater the risk that I will send the wrong message: that this is a hopelessly arcane subject that the students will never really master. Then, when an issue of natural resources comes up – such as what, if anything, we should do about the Venezuelan oil crisis – they would cringe and step away. On the other hand, if I teach this course well, the students will understand that every situation is complex, but they will not lose their hope of understanding, and will be equipped to think through the implications of various policy alternatives.

Cynicism

The pull toward apathy is matched by a pull toward purely confrontational engagement, fueled by cynicism. In some societies, and at moments in U.S. history, pure confrontation may be necessary, but in relatively normal times public engagement is most

effective if it can be constructive, sustained, and fairly civil. Confrontational engagement may also lead to later apathy when it becomes clear that the intense activism of young adulthood does not transform the world.

The second dilemma is that public concern can sour into cynicism that undermines both loyalty and the willingness to engage constructively. By loyalty, I do not mean unquestioning acceptance of authority. However, constructive engagement in a democracy does require that citizens have an abiding commitment to the democratic process and, in this country, to the American experiment of having various groups go at one another within a framework of interest-group politics and checks-and-balances government. Cynicism undermines loyalty: cynical people come to believe that practically everyone else is corrupt or selfish. I have seen this sort of cynicism contribute to the destruction of democracy in several Latin American and Asian countries. There is a huge distance between skepticism - the unwillingness to take things for granted - and the cynicism of assuming the worst. The cynical are often politically destructive and even self destructive: inactive during long periods, then harshly vindictive in times of crisis.

Confrontational engagement is often anti-analytical; it is as if purely confrontational activists say, "We don't want to hear the reasons, we know what we want to condemn." A specific case will illustrate my concerns. Since 1999, protestors have disrupted the meetings of the International Trade Organization and the joint International Monetary Fund-World Bank meetings. In the case of the International Trade Organization, the disruption has impeded the organization's progress; in the case of the joint World Bank-IMF meetings, the disruptions probably had little impact. My concerns are not so much with these short-term consequences, but rather with the mindsets and the behavior of some protestors, and the potential long-term effects of these perspectives. Some of this has been pure street theater, perhaps evoking the spirit of the Viet Nam War protests and rekindling the spirit of public concern. Yet strong currents of cynicism toward both the officials of these organizations and of the governments involved, including the United States, were evident.

This cynicism was accompanied by an astonishing level of ignorance about these organizations: how they are governed and funded, what they really do, their function in the international system, and their impact on the incredibly complicated trends of globalization. One could – and in fact should – have lengthy discussions about whether on balance globalization should be encouraged or discouraged, and, even better, how to capitalize on the positive aspects and minimize the negative. So the problem is not skepticism toward these organizations, and toward the claims of globalization and its side effects, but rather it is the blanket condemnation of these organizations and globalization without any serious analysis or efforts to understand both sides of the issue. It presumes that leaders are not to be trusted and that these institutions only serve the interests of the rich and the powerful. Many of the protestors regard themselves as being motivated by altruism, but reject that anyone on the other side may be similarly motivated. Even leaving aside the anarchists who simply seized on these opportunities to wreak as much havoc as they could, the protestors revealed more cynicism and self-righteous close-mindedness than constructive skepticism. I know of one instance of a world-class expert

on international organizations who offered to attend a pre-protest meeting to provide information about these organizations and answer any questions. He was barred from the meeting on the grounds that he might “cloud the issue.” The message from many protestors was, “We don't really know what you are doing, but we're sure that it's heinous.”

The psychology of this seems rather straightforward. Ignorance breeds simplistic assessment of the actions of others; these simplistic assessments often lead to cynicism, due to a lack of appreciation of the constraints and the legitimate though different values and considerations of others. Without understanding why others oppose one's own honorable position, these others seem dishonorable. To a certain degree, this accounts for the cynicism that many environmentalists and cultural preservationists hold toward any initiative of economic development. It may even be that the true complexity of these issues is itself a source of anxiety for those who want to take action, but realize, on some level, that they have not mastered the complexity. They may manage this anxiety internally by willfully ignoring the complexity, and even by labeling those who emphasize complexity as do-nothings hiding behind a blur of irrelevant detail.

Cultivating the student as intellectual is also important because it squelches the cynicism that arises from narrow perspectives. Cynicism can arise from education and societal messages that interpret political and economic action too narrowly in terms of selfish interests, without giving due to either the genius of institutional arrangements that make self interested actions serve the public good in both the economic and political spheres, or the acts of public spiritedness that can also be found in any public initiative.

But let us not lose sight of the fact that intellectuals can also be cynical. Cynicism reflects a world view that attributes human action to selfishness. More knowledge about the wide range of considerations may help, but it is difficult to overcome the tendency to attribute the actions of others to self-centeredness, *if* this is regarded as the sophisticated antidote to naiveté. The media often imply that the self interest, whether economic or political, is a sufficient explanation for political and policy decisions, as if the commentators would be naïve if they did not uncover the considerations of political gain behind every position and decision by a government leader or political group. We academics often do the same thing. The so-called “rational choice” approach in political science and related social sciences glories in being able to account for action in terms of the individual's own gains. This often leads to a sense that government never acts to fulfill its responsibilities, but rather is simply calculating political advantage. The fact that doing the right thing and gaining political support can coincide – and according to democratic theory ought to coincide is often overlooked (Easton).

Yet the most fundamental principle of the sustainability of behavioral and belief patterns is the *mutual* reinforcement of id, ego, and superego. People suffer less psychological pain not when they are simply selfish, but rather when their beliefs and behaviors are consistent with raw impulse, reason, and conscience at the same time³. So cynicism

³ This has been labeled the “triple appeal principle” (Lasswell, 523-38).

regarding the motives of political and economic actors is truly more simplistic than sophisticated – yet this message is not getting across in many classrooms.

How can our colleges and universities counter the tendencies toward narrowness? How can we instill healthy realism rather than cynicism?

First, we need to teach in ways that convey that relevant knowledge is complex but accessible. I would maintain that it is essentially a matter of managing how students perceive what we teach them, in particular how complex and arcane the subject matter seems to be. The trick is to instill confidence that even complex reality can be understood sufficiently well to generate reasonable positions.

Second, we need to demonstrate that we ourselves are intellectuals rather than narrow specialists, without minimizing the true challenges of understanding the broad range of human affairs. Do not shy away from digressing from your technical topic to introduce a discussion on norms.

Third, in explaining the choices of political and social actors, we must learn how to present the logics of the actors, even if we disagree with them and do not wish to endorse them as necessarily ethical or morally justifiable.

Fourth, we need to have a much more refined understanding of interdisciplinary studies and the impact of exposure to different interdisciplinary fields on breadth of education. A terribly interesting but as yet unresolved question is whether interdisciplinary faculty and courses integrate the relevant fields, thereby broadening the focus, or emphasize the intersection of specialties, and are therefore narrowing. The answer varies from field to field, but it is disturbing that we tend to lump these together under the same rubric of interdisciplinary studies.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, we need to instill in our students the capacity and confidence to continue to learn across a broad range of spheres even after their formal education. The three main purposes of education – learning things, learning how to learn, and learning to want to learn – are all key to engagement.

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