2007

Currents

Jaime Schillinger

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not seriously consider diversity run the risk of merely reaffirming pre-existing structures of injustice and exclusion (Stephan, Eby, Hopburn, Niemi and Chapman).

This essay thus engages the question of why diversity and civic engagement initiatives on college campuses often proceed on parallel tracks. I argue that this disconnect exists primarily because both diversity and civic engagement efforts are undergirded by thin or pluralist notions of democracy that emphasize adversarialism and rights—claims rather than a strong notion of democracy that encourages deliberation, collaboration and civic obligation (Barber). To the extent that civic engagement encourages students to work collaboratively, it is largely in voluntaristic ways that do not challenge underlying pluralist assumptions about what it means to be a citizen of the United States and the world.

In this article, I illustrate how both diversity and civic engagement efforts reinforce a thin view of democracy. I then review the empirical research to highlight the shortcomings of a thin approach to civic engagement and diversity practices. I conclude by advocating for a public work (Boyte, Everyday Politics) perspective as a means to linking diversity and civic engagement and discuss the implications for Lutheran higher education.

Thin vs. Strong Democracy

Both civic engagement and diversity have underlying socio-political assumptions that motivate their work. Guinier calls the process of constructing a freshman class at colleges and universities a public act that either challenges or reinforces current structures of power and oppression. Those engaged in diversity and civic engagement efforts are similarly engaging in political actions. While institutions differ in the actual practice of diversity and civic engagement, there are overarching trends that inform institutional efforts. I argue that, in general, both efforts are tied to a thin version of democracy.

Thin democracy is a term coined by Benjamin Barber to describe what he viewed as an individualistic and interest-based notion of citizenship and social relations. Barber argues that the Lockean tradition of the state as a guarantor of fundamental liberties through a contractual relationship with the citizen encourages a “thin” perspective on the individual’s role vis-à-vis government. Government in this instance is presumed to be in need of “watching” from an adversarial public. The extent of civic responsibility in thin democracy is to keep government from infringing upon the individual’s fundamental liberties. A thin democracy also reinforces pluralist notions of democracy. A pluralist perspective presumes individuals and groups in the political sphere present a neutral government with competing claims and allow government to abridge among them (Truman, Glendon). This refers to this tendency in American politics as a rights-talk culture that emphasizes “rights assertion over reason giving,” “individual demand vs. collective responsibility,” and “debate over dialogue.” A protective and pluralist view of democracy reinforces a “thin” (i.e., instrumental) notion of the individual’s obligation to his or her fellow citizens.

Barber argues that democratic states need vibrant civil societies that encourage a “strong citizenship” based on identifying shared problems, seeking common ground and working towards the common good. He emphasizes moving from a moralistic civic sphere where state and market make the majority of decisions, what he calls a “politics of zoo-keeping,” towards a politics of amantures “where every man is compelled to encounter every other man without the intermediary of expertise” (152). The emphasis in strong democracy is developing participatory habits by creating structures for citizen deliberation and decision-making.

The Decline in Political (not Civic) Engagement

The decline in democratic participation (thin or strong) is particularly acute among college-age youth. To the consternation of democratic theorists, there has been a steady decline in youth political engagement in the last three decades (Zukin). Despite the upswing in voting during the 2004 and 2006 election cycles, young people report significantly less interest in politics than either previous generations or their peers (Zukin). A 2001 study found that only 2.4% of 18-24 year olds reported following “government and public affairs most of the time” (Keeter et al.). Perhaps more alarming are the decreased levels of social trust among young people. The study found that 76% of 18-25 year olds agreed with the statement “most people look out for themselves,” compared to 42% of persons 65 and over (Keeter et al.). A majority (56%) agreed that “most people would take advantage of you” compared to 13% of persons over 65.

What is curious is that this decline in civic-mindedness is happening at the same time a “civic engagement” revolution is happening in U.S. high schools and colleges. In 2003, three out of four high school students and about two out of three (65%) of college students say that their school arrange or offers volunteering opportunities (Keeter et al.). Similarly, one out of five (19%) college seniors participated in service learning in 2004. This was up from one out of eight (12%) in 1999 (Kuh). This increase in civic engagement opportunities is driven by the documented effectiveness of service and experiential learning in enhancing student learning (Battistoni).

Not surprisingly, given the effort put forth by secondary and post-secondary institutions, young people report levels of volunteerism comparable to older cohorts. In 2006, 15-25 year olds reportedly volunteered equivalent to 3 billion hours in 2004 (Battistoni).

Here we are: this beautiful morning in March, at a nexus of three currents of life pulling us into their rhythms. First, it is spring in Minnesota, and we can feel the earth starting to stir, starting to grow and green. Second, as faculty, staff, and students we’re back from spring break heading into the final seven weeks of school. There is a lot of work to be done, and we may be uncertain about what the future holds, nevertheless, we know that the future will come, the end of the school year will be upon us before we know it, and we’ll be on our way even if we don’t know where we’ll be going. Third, for those of us who find strength and meaning in the church, we’re fresh from the joy and the drama of Holy Week and its passion—the crucifixion, the empty grave, and the resurrection. In this third rhythm, as with the rhythms of spring and the school year, we find ourselves asking “What is happening now? Where is this current pulling us?”

In the midst of these three currents, one might be forgiven for feeling somewhat overwhelmed! Spring, at least for me, is quite enough. It is difficult for me to concentrate. My senses are awakening after the longest slumber. I can smell the earth that has been dormant for too long coming back to life and hear the birds that have been absent. The cycle of birth and life is beginning again, and it makes me giddy.

Perhaps we might content ourselves with celebrating this rebirth of spring. Perhaps we ought to refuse attempts to synthesize its meaning with our own personal journeys, or the myths of a religious narrative. Maybe spring should be protected against a religious desire to baptize and control it’s untutored energy: ecumensism, for example, seems to urge this resistance when he writes to the earth:

Glendon refers to this tendency in American politics as a rights-talk culture that emphasizes “rights assertion over reason giving,” “individual demand vs. collective responsibility,” and “debate over dialogue.” A protective and pluralist view of democracy reinforces a “thin” (i.e., instrumental) notion of the individual’s obligation to his or her fellow citizens.

JAIME SCHILLINGER

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“how often have religions taken thee upon their scraggy knees squeezing and buffetting thee that thou mightst construe gods (but true to the incomparable sound of death thy rhythmic lover then answereth them only with spring)” (O sweet spontaneous)

Alternatively, if the brute naturalism of Cummings is unsatisfactory, we might try to connect spring with the rhythms of the Christian life, reading into its significance the innocence of the garden, as does Gerald Manley Hopkins when he wonders, what is all this juice and all this joy?

A stream of the earth’s sweet beginning
In Eden garden –
Have, get, before it slay
Before it cloud, Christ, land, and you with sinning
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy. (Spring)

But suppose you hesitate at this tug of spring; you might not find it so innocent. With Edna St. Vincent Millay, you might acknowledge that:

The smell of the earth is good
It is apparent that there is no death
And yet, as she does, you might require better answers, noting

But what does that signify?

Not only underground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots…
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,

Not only underground are the brains of men Eaten by maggots…

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JAIME SCHILLINGER is Assistant Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. This talk was presented on March 29, 2005.
I leave it to you to decide which current you feel most strongly today, whether you feel swept up by the pulse and eternal rhythm of nature, or can also feel the pull of career, academic, and religious narrative. Regardless, we find ourselves here together this morning in the midst of spring and the Easter season, being called into a future that is redolent with promises of unruly growth, graduation and vocation, a future that is coming but a future that we cannot predict or control.

And the passage from Scripture read this morning, I’d like to suggest, speaks beautifully to our situation. A fragment of a poem taken from the Songs of Songs, it offers another poetic voice to add to those I’ve mentioned. (Actually it offers two voices, two rather bold young lovers, a bride and a bridesmaid in the P.C. version.

The young woman imagines her beloved, and in her anticipa-
tion compares him to spring itself bursting forth in the land, a gazelle bounding over the hills, the very picture of exquisite desire. And in that bucolic setting, she tells us, she hears her beloved calling to her. He uses the occasion of the tempestuous promise of spring, to call:

Rise up, my darling; my fair one, come away. For see, the winter is past! ….

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To where is she being called? Why can’t he come to her where she is? And, if following our Jewish and Christian forbearers, we read ourselves into this fragment somehow, we must also ask: To where are we being called in the spring? And who is calling us? And if, we respond, we will be found?

With the right kind of imagination, I think, we ought to read ourselves and this spring morning into this biblical passage. Whether you manage to feel all three of the currents carrying us forward this morning or only one or two, I would like to suggest that at this very moment you are being stirred up to the rush and rhythm of something like love, provoked by a promise, called out of yourself by someone else.

Even if we were to focus only on the academic current, the language of love should hardly seem strange. The erotic attraction of truth and beauty and goodness has been an essential element of true liberal-arts learning since Plato penned dialogues like the Symposium and the Phaedrus. You may not realize it, but when you sit down to contemplate that end of the semester like the Symposium and the Phaedrus. You may not realize it, but when you sit down to contemplate that end of the semester...

JOSÉ MARICHAL

Why Diversity and Civic Engagement Don’t Talk to Each Other on College Campuses: The Need for Public Work

Unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together. MILLIKEN v. BRADLEY 1974

THURGOOD MARSHALL’S ONE SIMPLE SENTENCE captures a vexing problem for American higher education: how do we educate for a multicultural society in a way that recog-
nizes our need to address common problems? This task requires striking a balance between recognizing and affirming difference (learning together as learning from each other) and encouraging commonality and collaboration (living together).

These two tasks are presumably carried out through univer-
sity diversity and university civic engagement initiatives. Both of these efforts are socially and politically fashionable on college campuses. On the one hand, universities (and other social institutions) purport to be engaged in creating “diverse learning environments” that reflect the complexity and pluralism of the society in which we live. On the other, public universities are increasingly justifying public funding by emphasizing their civic missions. Many campus efforts are designed to foster a culture of “civic engagement” where young people come to recognize their linked fate (Dawson) and get involved in their communi-
ties to solve common problems.

Despite the obvious interdependencies between these two efforts, they are often conceptually detached from one another in practice on college campuses. Civic engagement and its prog-
ency—service learning, community service, and university-commu-
ity partnerships—often proceed without serious re-
tection that ends at the classroom bell or when the mandatory

JOSÉ MARICHAL is assistant professor of political science at California Lutheran University.

12 | Intersections | Spring 2007

13