

Why the Civic Engagement Movement Cannot Achieve Democratic and Justice Aims

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This article demonstrates how unknowing and/or unintentional commitments to neoliberal ideology adversely impact the advancement of the civic engagement movement. After considering the relevant literature on this topic, I outline how the grant-seeking process can be understood as one organizing technique that affirms structures produced by neoliberal ideology. The final section of the article encourages civic education scholars and practitioners to be more conscious of how ideology not only limits our movement's ability to achieve democratic and justice aims but also impacts other dimensions of civic engagement in higher education.

Many institutions of higher education have embraced a commitment to civic engagement, usually through service-learning courses or faculty community-engaged scholarship (Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009). However, our communities still confront many of the same injustices and inequalities that inspired the contemporary civic engagement movement. This raises an interesting question for civic engagement scholars: Given the degree to which the civic engagement field has been institutionalized in higher education, why has the field failed to achieve clearly defined democratic and justice aims?

This article examines how neoliberal ideology structures our society and higher education institutions, thereby providing a theoretically-informed response to this question. The article highlights how commitments to neoliberal ideology structures the context that limits the civic engagement movement's efforts to achieve democratic and justice aims. The first section contextualizes the problem neoliberalism poses for the field of civic engagement and defines relevant key terms. The second section considers the literature related to neoliberalism and community engagement. The third section uses the example of competitive grants to explain how neoliberal ideology obstructs the strategic aims of democracy and justice. The final section encourages civic education scholars and practitioners to be more conscious of the way ideology impacts civic engagement efforts.

The Problem of Neoliberalism for the Civic Engagement Movement

For purposes of this article, we use the Carnegie Foundation's definition for community engagement: "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/

state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Saltmarsh & Driscoll, 2012). In higher education, civic engagement represents an umbrella term capturing a range of public, community, democratic, social/economic, political, and moral engagements (Berger, 2011). Manifestations of the higher education civic engagement movement are often expressed through forms of engaged scholarship. (e.g. engaged research methods, service-learning pedagogies, university-community engaged outreach partnerships, etc.).

Neoliberalism is the theoretical concept used to describe the current ideological and economic structure of advanced capitalism. From a philosophical perspective, neoliberalism is an economic project spanning geo-political boundaries and emphasizing the role of economic markets in supporting conceptions of liberty. From a policy and legal perspective, neoliberalism is associated with supply-side economics, deregulation and reregulation of markets, privatization of the public sphere, the imposition of market principles in all aspects of social life, and a general suspicion of social and political welfare-regulatory programs originating from the state (Brown, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008). Neoliberalism provides the ideological context that allows advanced capitalism to approach the highest levels of sophistication and development. It is impossible to separate any aspect of today's human condition from the ideological context of neoliberalism.

The civic engagement movement struggles to gain traction because neoliberal ideology has changed the relationship between the market, civil society, and the state. Contrasted with a market-based economy, a market-based society shapes the social, political, and economic spheres using the ideological logic of neoliberalism. Market-based societies make it difficult to

determine where markets begin and end. Although neoliberal ideology has increased in scope and intensity, the civic engagement field has failed to account for the predominant structures of the paradigm.

In February 2008, a group of scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners associated with the study and practice of civic engagement convened in Dayton, Ohio for the annual Kettering Colloquium. The group was charged with determining the state of civic engagement in U.S. higher education. The discussion at the Colloquium was framed by the following question: “Why has the civic engagement movement in higher education stalled and what are the strategies needed to further advance institutional transformation aimed at generating democratic, community-based, knowledge-informed action?” (Saltmarsh, Hartley & Clayton, 2009, p. 3)?

In the resulting Democratic Engagement White Paper, Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton (2009) synthesize the results of the Kettering Colloquium to illuminate five major impediments limiting civic engagement in higher education: (a) higher education’s perceived obligation to develop civic agency is not high on the public’s agenda; (b) our [civic engagement movement’s] inadequate conception of what effective democratic education might look like is reflected in the imprecise and even conflicting language used by members of the movement; (c) the movement is highly fragmented and compartmentalized; (d) the movement has largely sidestepped the political dimension of civic engagement; and (e) the dominant epistemology of the academy runs counter to the civic engagement agenda (pp. 4-5).

All five of these points highlight key limitations to furthering the civic engagement movement in higher education. The Democratic Engagement White Paper then served as the inspiration for a book exploring in more depth the current state of democratic engagement (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). However, the White Paper and the book failed to consider the ways neoliberal ideology and the context of a market-based society are stalling the civic engagement field’s potential to transform our democracy.

The importance of developing a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and democratic engagement was highlighted by Benjamin Barber’s keynote speech delivered at the 2nd Annual Summer Research Institute on the “Future of Community Engagement.”¹ Barber (2012) discussed neoliberalism as a “...quiet ideology that washes over everything we do and makes our work so very difficult” (p. 4). Barber’s comments suggest that failing to recognize the effects of the ideological context of neoliberalism is a significant oversight for the civic engagement community.

There are many reasons why our field needs to rec-

ognize how neoliberalism shapes the context of civic engagement, though there are two that are most significant. First, if neoliberalism is not recognized and accounted for, it will continue to maintain and reproduce the existing ideological structures that preclude achieving the democratic and justice goals of the civic engagement movement—unjust levels of inequality, disengagement, and disempowerment. Second, if the civic engagement community cannot adequately respond to neoliberal ideology, we risk producing a type of citizen completely defined in relation to a market society, thereby precluding a robust form of democratic engagement in which citizens organize, cooperate, and act outside the bounds of market and economic activity. By maintaining a civic engagement movement that does not account for neoliberalism, we could potentially be undermining the very democratic sentiments and institutions that the movement attempts to revive. If invigorating democratic practice and moving toward commonly-shared understandings of justice is truly a goal, civic engagement scholars and practitioners need to be prepared to critically evaluate and respond to how the civic engagement movement is influenced by the larger ideological context of neoliberalism.

Literature Review

In the existing civic and community engagement literature, there have been only a few direct and indirect references to the relationship between neoliberal ideology and community engagement. Hyatt (2001) argued that the decline of the Keynesian welfare-regulatory state left many social needs unmet. Responsibilities abdicated from the neoliberal state, Hyatt argued, were being rearticulated within a regime of volunteerism and service. Given that, Hyatt highlighted the role service-learning had in filling gaps produced by the neoliberal ideology. She encouraged instructors to accept, in a very limited sense, the redefined boundary between civil society and the state because service-learning pedagogy has such robust learning outcomes.

The relationship between neoliberalism and higher education civic engagement is also referenced in Etienne’s (2012) book, *Pushing Back the Gates*, in which he asserts that elite universities’ growing interest in university-community partnerships might be explained by a general sense that inequality and other outcomes of neoliberal ideology threaten the long-term viability of their institutions. His critique of university-community partnerships suggests that one motivation for universities to engage comes from a position of *enlightened self-interest*, and that community-engaged partnerships are efforts to respond to the outcomes associated with neoliberal ideology.

Other scholars in the civic engagement arena have

considered how the ideological context of neoliberalism indirectly impacts forms of community engagement. For example, there has been an effort to explore how indirectly related elements of globalization define the distinction between critical and traditional forms of service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). It is impossible to have a form of critical service-learning that does not examine the larger ideological context in which the pedagogy is practiced. The applied expression of critical service-learning necessarily is positioned within and responds to the dominant ideology of neoliberalism. Keith (2005) considered service-learning practice at the intersection of neoliberalism and globalization. Her typology helps practitioners consider service-learning pedagogies across dimensions of *globalisms*. Her work did not intend to consider how neoliberal ideology structured larger elements of the civic engagement movement.

Neoliberalism not only structures typologies of service-learning but also informs the partnership process. Sandmann & Kliwer (2012) outline techniques and strategies to acknowledge how power differentials undermine reciprocal campus-community partnerships focused on social change. Roehlkepartain (2002) created a basic framework to produce effective partnerships based on equality.

Dennis (2009) provides an indirect analysis of the relationship between neoliberalism and service-learning pedagogies by demonstrating the ways in which neoliberal ideology was inadvertently influencing learning outcomes for students in courses that included a service-learning component. Barber (2012) discusses how conditions produced by elements of neoliberalism will challenge democratic engagement in the future. He identifies how neoliberalism, privatization, political polarization, and inequality pose unique challenges to the civic engagement field. All of the challenges Barber identifies contribute to the structural outcomes that are inconsistent with the practice of democracy and justice.

However, while all of the aforementioned authors either directly or indirectly make reference to the relationship between neoliberalism and aspects of the civic engagement movement, none describe the underlying theoretical process that limits civic engagement within the ideological context of neoliberalism. If the ideological context of neoliberalism is not acknowledged and addressed, the same structures that define community problems may also limit the civic engagement movement capacity to achieve democratic and justice aims.

Outside the civic engagement literature, one finds authors discussing neoliberalism and its various aspects in ways that have implications for the civic engagement movement. Perhaps the best example is Foucault, who gives the field of civic engagement a

theoretical entry point to consider how power is channeled in relation to neoliberal ideology. According to him, traditional understandings of power assume that oppressive forces are applied top-down and in one direction upon a disempowered victim. But, he argues, we do not fully grasp how power is produced in a market-based, neoliberal society:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1977, p. 194)

Neoliberal ideology *produces* a very specific governing and organizing regime that makes democratic and justice aims difficult to achieve. Individuals are produced and produce themselves while moving through structures defined and limited by neoliberal ideology.

Further, Foucault's understanding of government or governmentality gives the civic engagement field a way to understand how neoliberal ideology organizes civic engagement practice. For him, government not only covers

the legitimately construed forms of political and economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. (1982, p. 221)

In other words, neoliberal ideology generates a very specific type of governing logic.

Recognizing structural governance or organizing mechanisms of neoliberal ideology can help civic education scholars and practitioners understand mechanisms that have the effect of limiting the movement's efforts to achieve democratic and justice aims.

To see how neoliberal ideology limits the community engagement field, an example would be useful. AmeriCorps VISTA is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service which aims to provide an institutional framework for Americans interested in making a commitment to volunteerism and community engagement. At many universities, AmeriCorps VISTA members serve in a civic engagement capacity supporting programs that attempt to alleviate persistent poverty.² The work that Corps members perform often has a positive impact on individuals living in the grips of poverty. However, the boundaries established by the Corporation, which are influenced by a neoliberal ideology, limit what is considered to be a legitimate

project for Corps members—that they do not work on, disrupt, or critically examine the root causes of persistent poverty.

All this happens in a sub rosa way, often unbeknownst to grant recipients. The federal funding requirements that guide VISTA-type programs obscure the way neoliberal ideology bounds the possibilities for civic engagement projects and limits the movement from achieving democratic and justice aims. Addressing systemic issues associated with the social and political sphere are not a concern of the neoliberal state and therefore of the government-funded AmeriCorps/VISTA program. The contextual features that inform the decision to accept AmeriCorps VISTA grant money demands that civic engagement practitioners develop their programs within the context of neoliberalism.

Beyond limiting the parameters of what is and is not acceptable in these programs, the act of accepting grant money itself tacitly though often unknowingly affirms and legitimizes the neoliberal ideology. Grant programs, designed to fill in for responsibilities abdicated by the neoliberal state, are a disciplining technique, or political tool, used to maintain the ideological configuration of neoliberalism. Of course VISTA-type programs can and have had some tactical successes addressing local needs and reducing suffering associated with poverty. However, a robust civic engagement practice must address the structural causes of social, political, and economic problems at their core. Externally grant funded civic engagement programs necessarily make a tradeoff between achieving tactical victories and making strategic community changes that have the potential of achieving robust democratic and justice aims.

Competitive Grants as One Device of Neoliberalism

If a successful democratic-inspired civic engagement movement is to succeed, it is paramount that it identifies how neoliberal ideology reclaims, redefines, and ultimately limits the field. This section examines the competitive grant-seeking process as one device that affirms, perpetuates, and legitimates neoliberal ideology.

In the current climate in higher education, funds acquired through campus and external grant processes are essential for many underfunded civic, community, and public engagement initiatives. One example of an external grant opportunity comes from the Allstate Foundation.³ One of the Allstate grant categories focuses on addressing the issue of domestic violence. The prevalence of domestic violence is extremely shocking and represents one of the most severe human rights violations in the United States.

Ending this cycle of violence ought to be one of the most pressing concerns of our society. In fact, eliminating domestic violence is just the type of critical issue that higher education civic engagement initiatives might be addressing.

In the sections below, we discuss how Allstate's grant guidelines demarcate strategies to address social problems, delineate models for university approaches to civic engagement, and blur the demarcation between public and private sector concerns, all of which affirm the larger organizing structure of neoliberal ideology.

Demarcating Strategies to Address Social Problems

The guidelines of the Allstate Foundation grant require applicants to demonstrate how their program will address the problem of domestic violence through financial empowerment, insurance education, and financial literacy. There are three ways this implicitly accepts and is informed by a neoliberal ideology. First, the grant guideline privileges programs that address the issue of domestic violence from the economic sphere; programs that employ a holistic approach, recognizing how social and political factors also contribute to the issue of domestic violence, are therefore less competitive because they do not focus only on economic issues. In other words, the guideline bounds the possibility of how grantees define their response to the issue of domestic violence. Second, while financial security surely plays an important role in breaking the cycle of domestic violence, focusing on the economic sphere to remedy domestic violence not only advances Allstate's (self-serving) business goals, products, and services but also portrays the victims of domestic violence as potential consumers and limits this very complex issue to only being an issue of market access. Attempting to create a view of domestic violence victims as potential consumers is an example of how a market-based, neoliberal ideology permeates all spaces of the human condition. Third, the grant structure implicitly disacknowledges how forms of individual empowerment in the social and political spheres can also address the issue of domestic violence. The underlying assumption of this grant is that any civic engagement practice be bound within the economic sphere, a hallmark of the neoliberal ideology, and nullifies the possibility for individuals to mobilize for political and social action. The grant guidelines constrain how domestic violence is perceived and how university civic engagement initiatives might address it.

Delineating Models for University Approaches to Civic Engagement

Neoliberalism tends to concentrate wealth and resources into privileged spaces, organizations, and

institutions (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Pestre, 2009). This appears to hold true for institutions of higher education, too—those colleges and universities that reflect the neoliberal ideology are more likely to receive larger allocations of funds distributed through market-like mechanisms such as grants (Tallacchini, 2009). The grant acquisition successes, in turn, are likely to have a significant influence in defining a university's overall parameters for civic and community engagement. This disciplines scholars and practitioners to produce a civic engagement practice that fits within the ideological structure of neoliberalism. After all, if an externally-funded organization supports a particular approach to civic engagement, that approach is validated and may serve as a model for the entire university's approach to civic engagement. And by a ripple effect, these successful civic engagement institutions then serve as models for how other universities ought to address civic engagement at their respective institutions.

Higher education institutions are left with the choice of either unwittingly strengthening the ideological structures of neoliberalism or not being seriously considered for competitive grants whose guidelines implicitly embrace a neoliberal worldview. The application process and assessment structure of the Allstate grant naturalizes the outcomes and economic rationality reflected in a neoliberal ideology. These are the structural aspects of neoliberal ideology that not only produce economic meaning around the civic engagement field but also bound the field to fit within a sphere that does not challenge the larger structure of neoliberalism. Legitimate civic engagement projects that promote democratic and justice aims, and draw upon a balance between social, political, and economic concerns, are not given the same considerations under any grant guidelines informed by a neoliberal ideology.

Blurring the Demarcation between Public and Private Sector Concerns

The relationship between the social, political, and economic spheres is intimately connected to how neoliberal ideology defines private and public spaces. For this part of the analysis, we draw on Bozeman (2007), who created the concept *publicness* to more accurately categorize public and private organizations. According to Bozeman, in many cases, contemporary organizations are very rarely completely private or completely public. For example, most major universities include multiple legal entities that perform a range of nonprofit, not-for-profit, and for-profit activities. The same is true with some hospitals, emergency services, and charter schools. Bozeman's model accounts for varying levels of publicness in public organizations. Organizations with high levels of publicness

have accountability mechanisms tied to political systems and are maintained by public authority, e.g., the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, social welfare programs run by the state and federal government, and public schools managed by local governments. On the other hand, organizations with low levels of publicness are tied to private or semi-private funds, and are generally accountable to higher levels of private authority and market mechanisms, e.g., private military security firms and private corporations that partner with local governments to provide social services. Non-governmental organizations, nonprofits, and civil associations occupy the middle ground between completely private and public organizations. Bozeman's model of publicness demonstrates how responsibilities historically considered to be public are shifted, by neoliberal ideology, to the private sphere.

For example, higher education institutions, campus-community partnerships, and community-based organizations that acquire private funds from organizations managed by private boards are legitimizing a neoliberal ideology in two ways: (a) by tacitly accepting the state's underfunding of what has been historically considered the province of the public/government, such as public schools, and (b) becoming less accountable to public authority and the public interest.

Referring again to the Allstate Foundation Grant example, actively pursuing grant money legitimates the minimalist role of the neoliberal state. Accepting private grant money to address a public issue, in this case domestic violence, embraces an ideology that assigns responsibilities typically associated with the state to the market and the private sector. The emergence and reliance on grant programs, such as the Allstate Foundation, affirms the ideological organization that the public issue of domestic violence should now be primarily considered a private matter. Neoliberal ideology redefines the responsibility traditionally assigned to the state in the image of markets and the private sphere.

The grant process affirms and legitimizes the neoliberal state's decision to recast issues of public concern as being primarily a matter of economic and private concern. Grant guidelines that include the logic of neoliberal ideology subvert the potential of critical social analysis and dilute the ability of democratic citizens to act. The commodification and privatization of social and political problems are a manifestation of a market-based society (Sandel, 2012). Critics of the Keynesian welfare-regulatory state use the logic of neoliberal ideology, embedded within a market-based society, to dilute commitments to collective responsibility or general notions of a public interest. If the civic engagement movement is truly working toward transforming society into a more just form, the governing logics of neoliberalism and mar-

ket-based society need not only be recognized, but actively disrupted. In other words, to maintain robust levels of community engagement in the direction of social justice, the civic engagement field needs to recognize and challenge the structures of a neoliberal ideology.

Implications of Neoliberalism for the Civic Engagement Field

The previous section highlighted how the competitive grant process can be one device that maintains the structures of a neoliberal, market-based society. This analysis serves as a cautionary tale to civic engagement scholars and practitioners interested in advancing the democratic and justice aims of the field. There needs to be an extensive consideration of how neoliberal ideology shapes the civic engagement movement. By no means, however, is the grant-seeking process the only vehicle in which neoliberal ideology influences the civic engagement movement. Currently, there are many examples across higher education that, upon close examination, align with neoliberal ideology.

Global LEAD is one such example. It is an example of an international service-learning and community engagement experience that seems to be embracing the basic ideology of neoliberalism at the expense of its potential to achieve democratic and justice aims. According to their Website Global LEAD "...is an innovative, purpose-drive organization, focused on leading transformative experiences at home and abroad. Rather than abiding by the status quo, we believe that students should be able to combine the benefits of studying abroad, international service trips, and backpacking adventures into a holistic experience that truly changes their lives." (Global LEAD Website, 2013). The Website focuses on picturesque photos from exotic locales, personal testimonies, and an organizational narrative that defines success in terms of how Global LEAD's programs have increased in student demand. Overall, the Global LEAD program highlights levels of consumer satisfaction in the experience they provide instead of highlighting and measuring the positive impact students make in international partner communities. There are no references to democratic or justice aims of the program. The Global LEAD program represents the theoretical concern that neoliberal ideology can dilute the efficacy of a civic engagement field that aims to promote democratic and justice aims.⁴

If the first wave of the contemporary civic and community engagement movement was about institutionalizing engaged practice within the university (Sandmann, 2009), the second wave will be to determine how universities can insulate civic engagement

efforts from neoliberal ideology. Perhaps the civic engagement movement can create structures and spaces that more explicitly insulate its work from neoliberal ideology, much in the same way Women's Studies programs responded to ideologies that privilege masculinity or how Queer Studies programs have responded to heteronormative ideology.⁵

The success or failure of producing a successful civic engagement movement is intimately tied to maintaining a public good regime that attempts to operate outside the space of a neoliberal ideology. Redefining community and public engagement as an object of study and channeling engaged scholarship within academic affairs, as advocated by such civic engagement leaders as Butin, may give the field an entry point for enabling this work, thereby potentially ensuring that democratic and justice aims are not thwarted by structures of neoliberal ideology.⁶

Conclusion

Some of the factors impeding civic engagement efforts in higher education have been identified elsewhere. What I have done in this article is to assert that there is another factor that has been overlooked by community engagement scholars: the role of neoliberal ideology. My position is that the epistemological basis of neoliberal ideology bounds the conduct of the civic engagement movement and the potential for democratic and justice aims that are its hallmark. Civic engagement educators are urged to consider, with their colleagues, how fundamental structures and perspectives associated with neoliberal ideology impact how the civic engagement movement is produced on their respective campuses. While this article's theoretical analysis focused on how seemingly innocuous acts of applying for grants can affirm, naturalize, and legitimize a variety of components of the neoliberal project, this analysis can be applied to other aspects of the civic engagement field.

Recognizing neoliberal ideology places civic engagement scholars and practitioners in an empowered position to produce a practice that can achieve democratic and justice aims. The first step to meaningful change is recognizing the way neoliberalism is impacting the field of civic engagement. This post-modern realization will give civic engagement scholars and practitioners a way to articulate a vision of civic engagement that currently exists only at the fringes of possibility.

Notes

¹ The 2nd Annual Summer Research Institute on the Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education was a three-day conference highlighting a variety of strategies to support, expand, and institutionalize civic and community

engagement through academic programming and degree programs. More information on the Institute may be found at https://characterclearinghouse.fsu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=695

² More information on AmeriCorps VISTA may be found at <http://www.americorps.gov/about/programs/vista.asp>

³ More information on this grant and other grants provided by the Allstate Foundation may be found at www.Allstatefoundation.org/funding-guidelines.

⁴ More information on Global LEAD may be found at <http://www.globalleadprogram.org/>

⁵ Dan Butin (2010) more fully develops this analogy.

⁶ Again, I refer interested readers to Dan Butin (2010) and the Annual Summer Research Institute on the Future of Community Engagement for a more complete justification and explanation of the benefits of producing civic and community engagement as an academic discipline.

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