

## Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

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C. David Lisman. (1998). *Toward a Civil Society: Civic Literacy and Service Learning*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey. Pages: 192. Price: \$19.95 US (paperback); \$55.00 US (hardcover).

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Though colleges and universities were established in part to assure the civic education of the young, the drive for technological progress and for economic and social development particularly in North America has overshadowed this intent. The need to provide for skilled workers, technicians, business leaders, and professionals has preoccupied institutions of higher learning, notwithstanding other institutional expectations related to citizenship. Veysey (1965) elaborates on this expectation as follows:

Higher education, it was hoped, might affect the conduct of public affairs in at least three ways: First, the university would make each of its graduates into a force for civic virtue. Second, it would train a group of political leaders who would take a knightly plunge into real life and clean it up. Finally, through scientifically oriented scholarship, rational substitutes could be found for political procedures subject to personal influence. (p. 72)

Societal problems, which plague our contemporary society dominated by the ethos of individualism (Bellah, et al., 1985), have brought citizenship education back to prominence again, not only in public

consciousness, but also in institutions of higher learning. A noticeable feature of this public revival is its orientation toward societal or common, rather individual, good; in education, it is marked not only by its call for civic education through the academic curriculum, but also through service learning in school and the community. As Barber (1998) observes, "The extraordinary rise in American interest in community service has inspired widespread participation by the nation's young in service programs" (p. 237).

C. David Lisman's *Toward a Civil Society* addresses community service as service learning in educational institutions on the basis of a sociopolitical theory which justifies a particular vision of citizenship. Adverting to a civic crisis in Chapter 1, he sees his book as a contribution to the clarion call for the development of a participatory form of democracy in order to promote a more civil society (p. 8). The book aims at contributing toward this goal by helping to clarify how the use of service learning as a pedagogy in higher education can promote a more civil society. It contributes further by providing an in-depth analysis of civic literacy, which draws from critical pedagogy and liberal communitarian theory.

In Chapter 2, Lisman analyzes the concept of a civic society and points out that it is one which consists of individuals who "understand their identity in terms of the good of all" (p. 14) and who "function as effective citizens committed to public values and purposes" (p. 15). In order to identify social good and public values and purposes, and to ascertain the competencies and virtues needed by the citizens to contribute toward their attainment, an understanding of the nature of democracy is important. Lisman contrasts two visions of democracy — weak or strong democracy. The former, which may take the neoconservative, instrumentalist, traditionalist, or social justice forms, "relegates the democratic process to that of serving utilitarian individual interests, that is, maximizing aggregate individual preferences" (p. 18). The latter is founded on liberal communitarianism, which "sees the democratic process as providing a mechanism not only to protect individual rights but to constrain individual rights in the interest of the common good" (p. 19).

Convinced that service learning can promote civic virtues necessary to create a more civil society, Lisman defines it in Chapter 3 as a form of learning in which students engage in community service as part of academic course work. He insists that we are now in the midst of a service learning reform movement in which 520 higher institutions, 5,000 faculty members, and 500,000 students are involved. He also shows why so many are now involved, in the light of the value of service learning as a pedagogy and its value for students, faculty members, educational institutions, and the community.

What forms service learning should take, and why institutions of higher learning should implement them will emerge only after we have arrived at a defensible vision of society and its socio-political arrangements. Thus Lisman devotes the next four chapters to an evaluation of competing sociopolitical views. Chapter 4 analyzes and assesses the neo-conservative version of the weak democratic view of society. Wedded to the market economy, less government, and more freedom — personal and economic — the neoconservative view privileges the individual and economic values at the expense of society. This view gives rise to volunteerism as the typical model, in which individuals volunteer direct service to the community without having the volunteer work integrated it into the curriculum of students and, thus, without promoting civic literacy on their part. Chapter 5 centres on the consumerist theory of weak democracy, in which the public is regarded as “little more than a loose collection of individuals and groups, each with their own opinions, interests and positions that must be reconciled in a way that does not unfairly disadvantage anyone” (p. 59). However, though it allows for consultation with the public, it concentrates on getting to solutions quickly through leaders who are thought to provide the best decisions. For Lisman, the consequence is that, coupled with limited governmental controls in the weak democracy model, undue concentration of wealth and power increases in favour of the already privileged in society. Civic literacy, fostered by education, becomes nothing more than the understanding of how government works and going to the polls, indeed a very limited conception of citizenship. Chapter 6 deals with the justice perspective, which appears as a radical view stressing social transformation. This position advocates equality,

fighters discrimination, and tries to mobilize citizens against the forces of corporate capitalism. Unfortunately, though its goals are valid, it shares with other weak democracy perspectives their foundational belief in the supremacy of individual autonomy and individual good. Thus, it fails to pursue a community development model of service learning and perpetuates a type of education which reinforces the formation of privatized individuals who are primarily intent on maximizing their self-interest.

In Chapter 7, Lisman unfolds his favoured view, which is variously called strong democracy, commonwealth tradition, or participatory democracy which draws from civic republicanism or liberal communitarianism. With a long tradition in the United States and Canada (Ajzenstat & Smith, 1995; Sandel, 1996) participatory democracy calls not only for civic skills and an understanding of the political processes for effective participation, but also for the development of civic conscience. The latter requires the formation of the moral point of view on the part of citizens who realize their self-interest in collective decisions, who have a sense of the public and public good, and who have commitment to the creation of commonwealth. For institutions of higher learning, strong democracy requires extensive effort at service learning and, thus, deep involvement with the community. In Lisman's view, a community-development approach to service learning is required for cultivating the students' civic skills and civic conscience by engaging in projects devised through participatory decision making processes involving learning institutions and the community.

Having established the conceptual and philosophical foundations of the community-development approach to service learning, Lisman discusses, in Chapter 8, some productive service strategies associated with his model. In Chapter 9, he presents some emerging best practices principles governing campus and community partnerships and elaborates on some examples which illustrate his model in such states as Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Colorado. In Chapter 10, Lisman suggests that we need a paradigm shift in our thinking: that we view the community — not the university — as the engine for social reform or transformation. This implies that we should take the civic republican tradition very seriously, that we should enlist the resources of the university in strengthening the

local civic structure, and that we should work with local community-based organizations in developing projects to improve community life. In the end, Lisman says:

...I am firmly convinced that if we shift our attention from educational reform to community reform through participatory democratic processes, we shall see educational reform as a consequence of community reform. (p. 161)

At first blush, *Toward a Civil Society* does not appear to be an engaging book. Poorly edited, it contains, for example, missing, misplaced, and wrong words or expressions, and wrong grammar. Also, some content is redundant or repetitive. Thus both the author and the publisher should share much embarrassment in allowing the book to come out of the press in its present form. Nonetheless those who can set editorial shortcomings aside will find the book valuable and thought-provoking.

Lisman is to be credited for working on a volume that not only provides a comprehensive picture of the community development model of service learning, but also tries to justify its use by institutions of higher learning. His attempt to show the deficiencies of other models deriving from various problematic versions of the weak democracy view and his argumentation to justify his adoption of strong democracy, which is grounded on civic republicanism, should resonate with at least those who realize that classical liberalism has not been conducive to the strengthening of the social fabric. Lisman's call for a new perspective supporting strong democracy, namely, the liberal communitarianism advocated by many contemporary socio-political and legal theorists, deserves attention. Also, Lisman does a creditable job of showing that the strong democracy perspective calls for civic literacy through the community-development service learning model which he espouses.

Needless to say, despite the encouraging numbers of institutions, students, and faculty who are involved in service learning, so much more needs to be done to enlist academics in this endeavour. While Lisman makes a strong case both for strong democracy and liberal communitarianism, contrary theoretical viewpoints obtain in higher education no less than in the political arena. And while community development service learning under the sponsorship of universities and colleges sounds

promising, thoughtful academics may wonder about the degree to which the intent and coverage of their university courses may be compromised as a result of the participatory decision making process called for by the model. It may also be that, while Lisman's volume discusses the principles governing the participatory involvement between higher learning institutions and communities, as well as what and how projects may be undertaken, he does not discuss the principles to be taken into account by academics in making a decision on whether to enlist their courses or programs in the name of service learning. Neither does he show how academics are to ensure that students develop the skills for critical thinking called for by critical theory before and after projects are undertaken.

Lisman and those who share his perspective have further thinking and writing to do to convince skeptics — and there are many of them — that strong democracy, liberal communitarianism, civic literacy, and community-development service learning should be the thrust of the future for institutions of higher learning. However, Lisman has a viable and justifiable case, and it deserves a wider hearing.

## References

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