

An Unbalanced Crucible

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Long regarded by the vanguard of America's universities as antiquated and even dangerous, civic education is suddenly fashionable again. With the publication of *A Crucible Moment*, a long battle in the culture wars appears to be winding down.¹ Everyone supports civic education today, it seems.

Appearances, however, can be deceiving. For the past three decades, the ideal of civic education was the purview of the academic Right, a response to left-wing academic accusations against the West generally and America specifically for purported endorsement of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s especially, the Left largely held that the aim of education was a defense of “multiculturalism” and, increasingly, embracing and achieving “diversity.” Education was thought to move us beyond mere “civics,” and rather to be the avenue of liberation from what was considered at once a narrow emphasis upon American history and institutions and the dangerous endorsement of a set of shared national ideals.

Now that civics has largely been expelled from the academy, it appears that America's educational vanguard is suddenly eager to restore “civic education” to a place of pride within the universities. Yet this idea of civic education—certainly as articulated in *A Crucible Moment*—is neither civic

¹The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

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nor educative. Only when the ideal of *cives*—the “city,” that is, a particular place with a particular history and particular polity—was banished from college campuses could America’s educational leaders deem it safe to recommend civic education. Only when most substantive civic contestation was expelled from the academy could the word “education” be used to describe a set of otherwise contestable substantive ends. Only by first eliminating civic education in its traditional form could today’s educational vanguard endorse it, albeit wholly redefined and retooled for progressive purposes. Civic education is again in vogue, but only because it has ceased to be either.

Civic education, properly conceived, is an education in citizenship. Citizenship, as defined by Aristotle, entails an activity in which one “rules and is ruled in turn.”² That is, depending upon one’s regime, citizenship involves the activity of those who shape and make the laws in a polity, who exercise in common the office of self-governance. In a democracy, citizens are expected to make the laws to which they submit themselves. Aristotle does not define in advance what those laws are; rather, it is the activity of citizenship itself—self-governance—that determines the laws. In a democracy, citizens are expected to govern with a strong expectation of some degree of conflict and partisanship, but overarching such disagreement is a concern for, and aspiration to achieve, the common good.

This common good, Aristotle articulated, required the active exercise of citizenship within the bounded limits of the polity; only citizens, engaged in active self-governance, themselves properly constrained by the limits of human nature, could achieve together a shared conception of the common good.

In a liberal democratic polity, the boundaries of Aristotle’s *polis*, or city-state, have been expanded, and the exercise of citizenship is now mediated through the office of representatives. However, in the commendation of a bounded sphere and defined qualifications to citizenship, in the (indirect) exercise of self-governance in the shaping of laws to which citizens submit themselves, and in the Founders’ expectation of a virtuous citizenry, one can still discern a recognizable form of the ancient concept of citizenship. Liberal democracy, informed by the modern philosophy of natural right, puts limits and boundaries upon law, disallowing majorities from encroaching or disregarding

²Aristotle, *The Politics* 3.4.1277a.

the natural rights of citizens, among them, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Still, a wide latitude for prudence and judgment is available to citizens for ascertaining legitimate policy and promulgating law in accordance with its best understanding of the common weal.

Thus, historically, civic education was comprised of three major facets. First, a knowledge of one’s own history, at once a focus on the history of one’s nation and more broadly the long tradition from which one’s nation arose—in our case, America and the West. Second, civic education literally involved civics, an education in how laws are made, and how citizens can take part in the activity of self-governance. Third, civic education necessarily involved an inculcation of virtue: only a virtuous citizenry could responsibly and moderately exercise self-governance, that is, the capacity to limit both individual and national appetite and vice. For this reason, most of our nation’s colleges and universities were originally affiliated with a religious order or tradition. While not specifically civic per se, it was widely understood, as George Washington articulated in his farewell address, that “of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports....A volume could not trace all their connexions with private and public felicity.”³

Following the ancient teaching, among the nation’s Founders there was a widespread understanding that civic virtues were undergirded by “private” virtues, and thus, that there was a continuity between personal self-governance and political self-rule. Personal integrity—honesty and abiding by one’s word—were also essential for the civic weal. Attributes like modesty, moderation, continence, and frugality were not only held in high regard for individuals, but were understood as requisites for a healthy civic life. Courtesy, including manners and civility, as well as the willingness to listen and to accord respect to those with whom one spoke, were not only regarded as personal excellences, but (as the very word “civility” suggests) understood to be prerequisites for civil concord. Above all, the virtue of self-command was continuous between the individual and city: only a polity comprised of self-commanding citizens could in turn govern itself under laws that were observed not due to fear of arrest and punishment, but to willing submission to self-limitation.

³George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21/pdf/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21.pdf>.

What “civic education” did *not* purport to recommend were substantive policy preferences that ought, rather, be the very *outcome* of civic activity. Civic education sought to educate a citizenry in the history and nature of their regime, as well as inculcate a set of requisite virtues that necessarily undergirded a decent polity. Substantive political outcomes were the expected result of active self-governance by a well-formed citizenry within a well-ordered polity.

In light of these traditional understandings of civic education, what is altogether striking about *A Crucible Moment* is how radically it departs from all of these traditional desiderata of civic education—indeed, how very little it actually addresses any of these aspects of civic education, properly understood. With its strong emphasis upon globalism and its studied neglect of any particular national setting, it ignores the very existence of a defined civic sphere. With its emphasis upon “toleration” and “diversity,” it avoids any real effort to discuss the kinds of virtues and practices that might be recommended—potentially against others that might be discouraged (can one be truly “tolerant” and “diverse” at the same time? what of those diverse traditions that are intolerant?). And, perhaps most worrying, in its stated set of forceful endorsements of particular outcomes, the report would forestall the actual activity of civic life by importing substantive goals into the educational process, with the expected result of uniform political opinion. Rather than seeking robust civic discourse—even disagreement—it smuggles substantive commitments into its “educational” activities, thereby effectively seeking to forestall actual civic activity.

Perhaps most notably, *A Crucible Moment* posits a set of political issues that its authors regard as paramount and requiring a major focus of civic commitment, not contestation. Among other issues, they list inequality, climate change, health care, environmentalism, and the ongoing effects of racism in America. It does not exaggerate to observe that these are some of the main political objectives of the Left. Nor does it exaggerate to imagine that a report written by partisans on the right might have come up with a very different set of political concerns, including the breakdown of family structures, entitlement reform, economic growth, high rates of abortion, tax reform, structural debt, and terrorism and national security.

What these differing sets of issues suggest is that civic education is not appropriately the assertion of an inventory of concerns (by Left or Right), but the shared and contested effort to articulate national priorities, ends as well as means. Civic education cannot, in the first instance, assert what those priorities should be; rather, it should consist foremost of the effort to educate

young people about the nature of civic life and foster the attendant personal and civic virtues that are requisite in political debate and civic responsibility. *A Crucible Moment* insistently, uncritically, and unself-consciously recommends the formal adoption of a set of substantive political ends—funded at least in part by taxpayer dollars—that would have the effect of giving government and university sanction to a set of partisan political positions. This is not civic education; it is the effort to institutionalize, fund, and advance a partisan platform.

What is perhaps most striking about the report is the absence of any real reflection on the potential shortcomings of our universities—as they are currently constituted—as purveyors of “civic education.”

Nearly every available study shows that today’s universities are dominated by a single political party and dominant progressive worldview. Serious engagement with civic education at the university level would have to begin with serious and sustained reflection on the dangers attendant upon a monolithic political worldview in such a key institution. However, absent a substantial set of contrasting voices, the authors of *A Crucible Moment* are largely unaware that their commitments are worthy of debate. They have lost the very first requirement of civic education: the capacity to understand the contestability of their position, and to educate a citizenry toward the goal of exercising responsible and moderate civic discourse on those very policies they have already conclusively regarded as being settled.

A true civic engagement at the university level would, in the first instance, open the conversation to a consideration of the baleful civic effects of university education today. Given their monolithic political character, universities tend to foster a lopsided political worldview, one that contributes to the heightened political partisanship in American political life. Universities have become a major contributor to what Robert Reich once called “the secession of the successful,” the growing concentration of the successful 10 percent in a small number of urban centers around the nation and the world, a phenomenon that has been the subject of studies by such authors as Bill Bishop in *The Big Sort*, Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and, most recently, Charles Murray in *Coming Apart*.⁴ Graduates of top

⁴Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); and Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), which is reviewed in the Summer 2012 *Academic Questions* by Russell K. Nieli.

universities are drawn from, and increasingly concentrate in, a defined class and a limited number of geographic areas, ensuring that they are exposed throughout their lives to a monolithic political worldview.

There is very little “civic discourse” that takes place as a regular practice among the denizens of today’s universities. Indeed, the extensive set of “progressive” political assumptions evinced by *A Crucible Moment*—including its emphasis on “globalization” and near disregard of an American-centered form of civic education—perfectly and chillingly reflects the political monoculture of which our universities are a piece.

The report’s conviction that it advances a neutral approach to “civic education,” when in fact it advances a set of substantive policy goals, arises from widespread and unexamined convictions held by those who now almost exclusively populate institutions of higher education, who rarely, if ever, confront sustained counterarguments. In the absence of such truly civic discourse, its claim to represent the path to “civic education” is not only risible, but it undermines and could irreparably damage the prospects for true civic education.

In such an environment, the task of civic education should first be effected *on*, and not *by*, today’s universities. Without such a consideration, *A Crucible Moment* misses an opportunity for true civic dialogue, and stands as a symptom of our political pathologies, rather than as a cure for the profound absence of civic life that defines America today. Should its recommendations be adopted, *A Crucible Moment* would worsen, rather than improve, our national civic life.

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