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Reflections on citizenship: Thinking about power as interaction¹

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by Leslie I. Hill

The steady decline of participation in many areas of public life suggests that we may be overlooking power as not only a source of the problem, but also as a critical part of the solution. In this article, Bates Political Science Professor Leslie Hill argues that to revive concepts of citizenship and democratic participation enshrined in the language of the nation's founding, we ought to rethink conventional ideas about power as control and domination and, in the alternative, view power as interaction. She also suggests that we need to adopt new approaches to civic education that include this concept of power as interactive politics. Underlying this argument, she asserts, is a fundamental tenet of democratic governance: that all parties in a democracy, not just those with superior wealth, status, or expertise, ought to be involved in initiating, responding to, and determining what the common good is and the most appropriate ways to achieve it.

Power forms an invisible blueprint for the political culture of this country. Often ignored or taken for granted in discussions of citizenship, it is, nevertheless, a defining feature of the process by which members of the American political community deliberate and make decisions about the common life.

Though "power" eludes precise definition, we recognize that it involves interaction between two or more persons. Politics is the process through which power relations are accomplished. Our beliefs, assumptions, and observations about the nature and exercise of power shape our decisions about whether and how to participate in public life.

Our views of power and politics are derived from observation and education, and generally reflect conventional beliefs about the nature of power. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has described one commonly held perception of how politics is practiced in America today:

We're organized into interest groups which compete with one another in a political arena that is like a marketplace with all kinds of competition and transactions. Some of the interest groups are able to amass a majority, get legislation passed and candidates elected because of their skill in manipulating the public and the media. The function of government is to adjudicate this competition and distribute resources as dictated by the outcomes. (Mathews 1988: 2).

Another view is suggested by Harry Boyte in his article, "Practical Politics - The Larger Lessons of Community Initiatives":

...a few elite institutions, mainly corporations, have the dominant power in communities; politicians (and to some extent other professionals) occupy intermediate "power positions"; and most citizens have little voice or say. (Boyte 1989: 17).

On its face, the former view appears to be more acceptable - more "democratic." But both views reflect widely held conceptions of power as control; that is, as a hierarchical, win-lose relationship between opposed individuals. In politics, power is perceived as a relationship of domination in which those with advantage are able to impose their interests on the agenda of government. This perspective limits the context of politics to the formal and elite institutions within which government policy is negotiated, formulated, and carried out.

Without access to the advantages of wealth, status, or expertise, many citizens see themselves as ineffectual, as merely objects in a relationship in which participation means defeat or corruption. Some may see opportunities for ordinary people to influence the political system by forming large groups of active citizens. Often, though, such glimmers of hope fade when people consider the complexities of working in heterogeneous groups of self-interested individuals.

Obviously, this concept of power in politics profoundly affects the skills required for public life. It erodes the will to participate in a political community. If politics is an arena of adversarial self-interest, then people who feel powerless and isolated will be excluded from and will not help to achieve a nation or community in which citizens with different needs operate in an environment of shared, not competing interests. If power is only a relation of domination, then citizens who perceive themselves as ineffectual surrender their capacity to imagine a different political community. Thinking is replaced by acquiescence; political judgment - the process of thinking through to a decision where there are no hard and fast rules - is abandoned. The practice of citizenship - the engagement of community members for the purpose of deliberating and acting upon a collective view of the common good - disintegrates and the establishment of democratic community becomes even more remote.

Students as powerless actors

There is no reason to assume that students hold views of power and politics that are substantially different from those of their parents, teachers, and other influential adults. Socialization and education are the agents through which prevailing notions about the political system are transmitted and reinforced. People for the American Way recently conducted a study of young men and women, ages 15 to 24, people who are just beginning to see themselves as members of the political community. Researchers found that "this generation is - by its own admission and in the eyes of teachers - markedly less involved and less interested in public life than previous generations" (Clinton and Bell 1989: 15). Less than half of the young people interviewed felt optimistic about America's future. Most were at least disappointed, if not alienated, by the actions of political leaders.

Students' experiences in colleges and universities are likely to reinforce prevailing views of power. Both the hierarchical structure of academic institutions and the content of curriculum and instructional approaches socialize students to prevailing political norms. In interactions with faculty and administrators, students are likely to perceive themselves as isolated, relatively

powerless actors, and to invest energy in one-to-one relations with individual faculty and for personal gain rather than in collective activities directed toward communal goals.

Academic disciplines, most notably political science, emphasize perspectives of power and politics that lend the authority of scientific credence to these popular notions. Robert Dahl, a noted political scientist, put forward a classic, and still current, definition of power in which one person has power over a second person to the extent that the first can influence the second to do something that individual would not otherwise do. The discipline also offers a definition of politics as "the authoritative allocation of values." This, too, infuses the political relationship with control, dominance, and top-down action.

Politics of the marginalized

Prevailing approaches to power focus on the political experience of a dominant few. Consequently, those with relatively less power - and by extension less influence, wealth, and status - are rendered virtually invisible. If they are seen at all, they are seen as objects in the political community, without power and without choice. Not only are such perspectives on power and politics corrosive to democratic practice, but they also obscure political experience that demonstrate alternative ways of thinking about and using power.

It is not at the center but at the margins - where people have less access and less authoritative claim to participation in the public's business - that we find alternative notions and uses of power. In challenging their exclusion, people who have been politically marginalized have provided innovative ways to understand power and to interact politically. The Civil Rights and Populist movements offer examples of this - examples of multiple and alternative ways to practice politics and to use power that may be especially instructive in the current period of heightened disaffection and alienation.

Accounts of the experiences of Americans excluded from the mainstream of U.S. politics help us see them not as victims but as unique individuals, who respond in different ways to the structural and ideological barriers of a hierarchical society. Thinking about the public's business only in terms of power and powerlessness, domination and oppression, is indeed limited. It conceals the variety of ways in which oppressed and marginalized people respond to unequal power relationships.

The most oppressed are adept at using cultural resources, strategies, and alternative sources of identification and support that allow them to retain their human dignity and to deal with situations in which superior power is held by traditional wielders of power. Both individually and collectively, for example, African-Americans in slavery acted ceaselessly to modify, alter, and destroy that system. In particular, female slaves, whose labor and sexuality were both exploited, devised myriad strategies - escape, rebellion, sabotage, truancy, abortion, and birth control - to resist and limit the dehumanization of slavery. More recently, the Civil Rights movement's "citizenship schools" created opportunities for disenfranchised black citizens to work collectively to dismantle segregation while simultaneously engaging in public talk, learning about the meaning of citizenship, and acquiring the skills to practice it. Reviving notions of

citizenship and participation enshrined in the nation's founding means shifting from conventional ideas about power to an alternative view of power as interactive.

Interaction as power

Interactive power is accomplished within a community in ways that recognize the common ground shared by people from diverse cultures and with different needs and interests. It is dynamic, because people with diverse interests and backgrounds contest power, and they continuously shift the nature, terms, methods, resources, and terrain of the relationship. Interactive power is nonhierarchical and flows between actors in many directions. It exists in the formal, institutional, and autonomous public arenas, as well as in the realm of private, personal, and communal relations.

People engaged in a process of integrating diverse opinions of the common good transform the nature of the power relationship. Power becomes interactive and citizens "empower" themselves. Once people embark on the process of empowerment, they make different choices about whether and how to participate in, and to use the skills of, public life - thinking, judging, imagining, and acting - in ways, that will resuscitate the participatory community.

Historically, the locus of political action for disempowered groups has been the community. In every kind of community, citizens develop political identities and a sense of themselves as members of a society in which they possess certain rights and responsibilities. Communities provide people with language, behaviors, and ways of knowing. They are sources of information about politics and they generate opportunities for the young to learn about group deliberation and decision making. The content of key political concepts and values is supplied by communities in which people learn and live.

Recent scholarship on women demonstrates that women's most potent democratic initiatives arise from community action rather than from behavior located in formal institutions or processes such as electoral politics. In the women's movement, the consciousness-raising group helped women establish new political identities that gave political significance to the structures and events of their personal lives. These women then challenged the cultural and social interpretations of their experience as women.

These experiences demonstrate that it is possible to conceive of power and politics differently. Such experiences make possible the revival of the democratic vision of self-government, an active citizenry, and the enrichment of the meaning of citizenship practice. These form a critical part of public leadership and citizenship education.

Elements of basic civic education

What elements of an alternate construction of power ought to be a part of a basic civic education? First, an expanded notion of the individual as a political actor in a democratic system of government is essential. This means encouraging people to see themselves as political actors with connections to and relationships with others, not merely as persons in a self-interested

opposition. This is critical to redefining the nature of power as interactive rather than as dominating or controlling.

Second, we should "remythologize," or recreate the story of power. Our new story about power must connect with visible cultural, social, economic, and ideological elements of public life so that new ways of engaging each other politically can be discovered and understood.

Third, we must expand our political language to include the languages of cultures previously barred or discouraged from public discourse. This will help us recognize that we sometimes share different truths. We need to include those different truths in our understanding of politics so that we can practice effective citizenship.

Fourth, once we redefine our alternative notions of power, we will have to design an effective instructional approach for helping people to challenge old, limiting assumptions about power, and to learn new ways to think about it and practice it. We need to ask, for example, how do we teach today's students about power when they think that they have none? It is essential to engage students in thinking, acting and reflecting in ways that make them aware of their potential power, its possibilities, and the strategies necessary to effect it.

A crucial step in this latter process is the inclusion of multicultural historical materials to encompass the stories of a much larger cast of women and men than has up until now occupied the educational stage. Students' own stories are useful tools for engaging them in a reflective process that can relate their behavior to a larger political context.

Current efforts at public leadership education recognize the value of experiential learning, where students are expected to be involved in some aspect of civic life. These experiences often require students to interact in communities that are different from their own so that they can focus on ways to develop respect for and to incorporate alternatives into their approaches to engaging in civic life.

There is value, as well, in trying to use the interactive process inside the civic education classroom. An approach to learning in which students are expected to reflect, put into context, imagine, think, and judge in collective fashion, will help them develop a consciousness of personal power. As students engage each other, they can reflect on the processes that empower people and on the strategies for generating those processes.

The methods of civic education that enhance thinking and learning about alternative notions of power are a significant part of that process and so need careful thought and planning. Those engaged in this process must continue to ask: What kinds of experiences educate for effective citizenship? What methods are useful for challenging outworn assumptions about power and politics, for stimulating the capacity to imagine new approaches, and for taking some responsibility in seeking the common good?

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Endnotes:

1. A version of this article titled, "Reflections on power and citizenship" was originally published in the Charles F. Kettering Foundation publication, *Public Leadership Education: Skills for Democratic Leadership, Volume III*, published in 1990. We gratefully acknowledge permission from the author and the Kettering Foundation for permission to publish this edited version of that original article.

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