

The Capacity for Civic Engagement

Public and Private Worlds of the Self

DAVID P. LEVINE



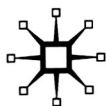
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First published in 2011 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-10283-5

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levine, David P., 1948–

The capacity for civic engagement: public and private worlds of the self /
David P. Levine.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-230-10283-5 (hardback)

1. Political participation. 2. Community activists. I. Title.

JF799.L48 2011

323'.042—dc22

2010035297

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: March 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT HOW WE know others and how we form connections with them. More specifically, it is a book about two ways of knowing others. One way we can know others is by seeing ourselves in them. When we know others in this way, we identify with them and sameness is the basis for knowing. A second way of knowing others treats them as differing from us so that to know them we must move outside ourselves. This means that we must come to know them through a process of discovery. We use the term *empathy* for this process.

Knowing through identification is immediate, visceral. It is to know without thinking. To borrow a phrase from Christopher Bollas, when we know in this way the known is unthought. Here, the connection implied in the term *knowing* is felt rather than spoken. Or, if it is spoken, it is in ways that simply assert, "You and I are the same." Used in this way, words assert, and in this sense demand acknowledgment of, the felt connection. Knowing through empathy requires thinking, and it requires articulation of meaning and understanding. Because of this, empathy forms a connection that is articulated in words and not simply felt.

As I have just suggested, the two ways of knowing shape two kinds of connection. Indeed, knowing can be considered a kind of connection, one implicated in other forms of connection as well. Thus the emotional connections of love and hate depend on what we know, or think we know, about the objects of our love and hate. Indeed, the emotional connection is also a form of knowing since it signals the significance and therefore the meaning the other has for us as, for example, a source of nurture or a threat to our well-being. We may "know" this about another on an emotional level before we "know" it on the level of thought and idea.

The way of knowing that respects difference is no simple or easy matter. It does not come naturally if by that we mean that we are born able to do it and need simply to decide that we will. We cannot exercise it simply

because others ask us to or insist that we must. Rather, our ability to know those who differ from us results from a complex process of development that might or might not take place, the goal of which may be achieved to a greater or lesser degree.

Where difference is in play and knowing others is not meant to require that we dismiss what is different about them, connection still implies the presence of common ground. Where there is only difference, there is neither connection with nor knowing of the other. To know we must recognize, and to recognize means to know again. For knowing others, then, we must call on a connection with what is already known. Here, discovery also means rediscovery. Put another way, all connection involves identification. But since identification overcomes or dismisses difference, how can we make a connection that preserves difference? Or how can we form an identification that is consistent with difference when identification refers to sameness? Considering how we can resolve this problem or redefine its terms in a way that overcomes the dilemma of connection and difference is my main concern in this book.

The different ways of knowing, and therefore ways of connecting, apply not only to intimate relationships but also to our connection to a larger world of being and relating that connects us to strangers. My specific concern here is with that world beyond the intimate setting we refer to as the public and with the forms of knowing and connecting relevant there. In making a connection to a public reality, the exercise of the capacity to know others is essential; at least it is essential as long as the public is a world inhabited by those who differ from us. Much, then, depends on whether we conceive the public in this way, as a world of relations among those who differ one from another.

In distinguishing different conceptions of the public, the idea of the self plays a decisive role. This is because how we understand the public depends on how we know self and other, and how we know self and other depends essentially on the judgment we form about the self, which is both the instrument and the object of our knowing. The judgment formed about the self is the foundation on which judgments are made of social institutions and of the shape and meaning of public life.

We might be tempted to assume that different judgments about the self clearly divide those who celebrate the self and insist that self-interest is the

alpha and omega of any well-designed social institution from those who think that self-interest is a destructive force from which the community must be protected. I do not, however, consider this division so clear cut as it is usually assumed to be. Much depends on how we understand self-interest, and therefore on how we understand the self that has and pursues its interests. As it turns out, the two opposing judgments about self-interest suffer from closely related flaws in the way they understand the self, and these flaws make it impossible for either to conceive a larger world of being and relating consistent with the idea that the self is both instrument and object of knowing. My primary concern here will be with the distrust of the self arising from the tendency to equate self-interest with indifference, and possibly harmful intent, toward others. When the self is understood in this way, it is also understood to have a corrosive effect on connection.

Long-standing concerns about the corrosive effects of self-interest have lately fueled an especially powerful movement to counter self-interest with an ethic of service. The call to service takes a variety of forms, but one of the most notable and interesting involves the idea of civic engagement. What is notable about this idea is the way it ties public service to the private world, seeing the latter as the place where capabilities and inclinations appropriate to overcoming self-interest can originate and flourish. This is, I think, an important idea since it draws our attention to the conditions within the world of self-interest that might reach beyond its limits. This means social integration need not require us to renounce self-interest. Rather, integration might require that we find in self-interest an impulse drawing us into forms of relating that take us beyond it.

Yet this connection is often missed in the rhetoric of social integration, which has always had difficulty conceiving the source of connection as an aspect of self-interest rather than as its negation. Without the idea of self-interest as the basis for social integration, however, we are led inevitably in the direction of self-repression as the basis for connection, which tends to make the rhetoric of social integration the enemy of the self. Self-repression as the basis for connection fits well with the method of knowing others that depends on primitive forms of identification with them. This is because when we repress the self, we also repress the source of difference and therefore the possibility of forming a connection that includes rather than suppressing difference.

How we know self and other takes on heightened significance because of the consequences different ways of knowing have for conflict and especially for the destructive forms of conflict that seem both symptom and cause of the failure of social institutions to secure well-being for those dependent on them. Indeed, the indictment of institutions organized around self-interest is that they foster conflict rather than cooperation, set individuals in opposition one to another, and allow and possibly encourage forms of abuse. It is hoped, then, that by negating the self we can at the same time, and by the same act, negate the impulses that lead to conflict and make it so destructive in intent and consequence.

Negating conflict is not, however, the only virtue presumed to be embedded in forms of knowing and relating that overcome differences rooted in acting for the self. Perhaps more important is the presumed virtue of integration considered as an end in itself. That is, by fostering ways of knowing associated with primitive forms of identification not only do we overcome destructive impulses; we also realize merger as an end. The most notable expression of this idea is in the notion of serving the good, especially the public or greater good. Serving the greater good is a way of sharing in it and therefore of becoming good. The good is, then, understood as selflessness, a condition that overcomes destructive impulses associated with the self and thus, paradoxically, turns a bad self good.

The problem with this strategy is, of course, that when the self becomes good through identification with the good, difference from the self becomes bad. The dilemma created by this strategy can only be overcome if the strategy can be altered in a way that makes the ideal of integration consistent with difference. Doing so, then, is the essential problem we must solve if we are to conceive self and other in a way that neither represses the self nor fosters destructive forms of conflict in which being a self and achieving its ends must damage others.

In this book, I take up the problem just briefly outlined with specific reference to the ideal of civic engagement. I argue that the ideal of civic engagement can be understood as having two divergent meanings with regard to the self. The first involves self-repression. Here, the self and its interests must be left behind if we are to make a connection of the kind suitable to citizenship, and to forming a world where we are not isolated from and in conflict with others but closely identified with them. The

second involves the development of a special kind of self-interest, one that not only is consistent with connection to public ideals and institutions but leads in that direction. An important purpose of this book is to suggest how we might understand the self and its interests in a way that does not require self-repression if connection with others and with the larger whole we refer to in the language of the public is to be secure.

To see in self-interest a basis for social integration requires that we conceive self-interest as something other than an essentially destructive force, more specifically as something more than a locus of greed. There is nothing new, of course, in the idea that the self might be conceived as something other than a center of rapacious and predatory desire. Many concerned with the matter of self-interest have sought to take into account our dependence on others in securing our interests and, thus, the way recognition of their interests must be made a part of our own. It is clear, nonetheless, that distrust of self-interest has made it a primary target in the attempt to account for some of the more destructive tendencies at work in contemporary societies. I think it is safe to say that much work needs to be done if we are to have a way of understanding the role of self-interest in social connection that can fully integrate self-interest with concern for others. The lack of an understanding of this kind is unfortunate, since, as I will argue, the tendency to see in self-interest the enemy of connection confuses the problem with its solution. This is because what inhibits connection with, and concern for, others is not our interest in our selves, but our inability to invest value in them and therefore to find them of interest. Once we understand that our capacity to take an interest in others depends on our capacity to value the self, we can begin to conceive a way of knowing and connecting that is based on respect for difference rather than insistence on sameness.

* * *

I am indebted to Michael Diamond, Burkard Sievers, and Howard Stein for comments on parts of the manuscript of this book; to Hazem Salem for research assistance; and to Pam Wolfe for editorial work. Material in Chapters 5 and 6 appeared previously in the *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2002) and *The American Review of Public Administration* 33, no. 3 (September 2003).

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INTRODUCTION

ON ELECTION NIGHT 2008, BARACK OBAMA DELIVERED a victory speech on an old theme in American politics: unity. Americans, he told his audience, “have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America.” But today these United States face the greatest challenges of our lifetime. To meet these challenges, what is needed will be “a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice” and therefore “a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other.” This service theme is then linked to the earlier theme of unity: “In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people.” This one nation, one people exists in its shared values: “self-reliance and individual liberty and national unity.” As those who share these values, “we are not enemies but friends. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.” And if we are committed to it, “our union can be perfected.” At this point, the president-elect strikes a new, though related, chord. He tells his audience that we can together make the changes that will create a perfect union. He looks back at history through the eyes of a 106-year-old African American woman and sees it as a narrative of progress toward that perfect union. And seeing history as progress toward a perfect union provides him with the evidence he needs to conclude that perfection is possible; it is within our grasp. Can we create that perfect union? “Yes, we can.”

It does not diminish the significance of this speech to note that there is nothing new in it. Not only had Obama struck the themes before but so also had any number of presidents and candidates for the presidency.¹

Neither does it diminish the significance of the themes to take note of the element of political expediency in them, driven as they were by the need to govern a divided nation in a time of significant distress. Finally, it does not diminish the themes to acknowledge that they are not a policy and indeed have little if anything in them that could be thought to guide policy. On the contrary, this quality of the speech only serves to highlight its real purpose, which is to articulate a collective wish, the wish that out of the many there will be one, that we can remain independent and self-reliant while at the same time sacrificing ourselves to, and in that sense losing ourselves in, the service of the greater good. This is the wish for the diverse community. That it insists on linking unity with difference, self-sacrifice with self-reliance lends the diverse community its great appeal and also suggests how deeply problematic it must be.

The idea of unity in difference raises important questions that the president-elect does not choose to address: What force holds together people with sharply divergent and strongly opposed ideas about the nature of the community in which they would live? Is the notion of a nation considered without regard to any particular ideals of the good life sufficient to overcome the sharp differences in those ideals? Is that notion somehow more important than matters of religious conviction, ideology, and identification with particular groups based on race, gender, ethnicity, and so on? Is unity the most plausible and even desirable goal, or is it possible to conceive people living together not because they experience a feeling of oneness but because they tolerate the absence of that feeling, which would make tolerance of difference rather than unity our goal? These are all questions about the nature of the human connection that links individuals and groups into a larger unit. At its core, the problem of the diverse community is this problem of connection, of how we are and can be connected with others and with the larger whole in which we are no longer self and other but one.

This problem of connection is the subject of this book, which explores how we are connected to others and to the larger world of relatedness and meaning within which the particular relations to others and to groups of others are embedded. The particular aspect of the problem that prompted me to write this book is the matter of the connection of the individual to a public sphere, a connection expressed in the language, for example,

of civic engagement, public service, and commitment to the public good somehow defined. Here, I will use the term *civic engagement* to refer to the activities that express our emotional connection to the ideals and institutions of public life. By emotional connection I have in mind the experienced meaning those ideals and institutions have for us.

Before proceeding, let me comment briefly on whether this use of the term civic engagement diverges too sharply from the meaning usually attributed to it by those concerned with matters of civic competence, political participation, and involvement in voluntary groups and associations.² The central issue, I think, is whether we consider civic engagement as involvement with the ideals and institutions of public life or consider it more broadly as pertaining to all involvement in group and associational life whether that directly engages public institutions and ideals or not. Thus, if we take the civic in civic engagement to refer specifically to what pertains to citizens and in their capacity as citizens, then civic engagement only applies to political life, so joining a nonpolitical association, while it may or may not encourage civic engagement, is not in itself an example of it. Civic engagement interpreted in this way would include only those activities undertaken on the part of citizens and intended to influence government action and policy making.³

The broad hypothesis that leads some to extend the notion of civic engagement beyond the political sphere is that involvement in group life, whether political or not, tends to promote social cohesion, which might be taken as an end in itself or valued because it fosters a commitment to ends that transcend those associated with self-interest narrowly conceived. A main part of this hypothesis has been the claim that it is involvement and participation in group life that counters the purely private orientation and leads toward a commitment to a public rather than a private good.⁴ This commitment, then, translates not only into political engagement but into a kind of political engagement in which the goal is not to use the public to advance partial or private ends, but to advance a public good *sui generis*. The broader notion of civic engagement tends to define it not so much in relationship to public institutions as to public ends, which are understood to be those ends that transcend self-interest narrowly conceived. In this usage, public is what transcends the private, and civic engagement is our engagement with the public.

Consistent with this line of thought, Robert Putnam uses the term civic engagement “to refer to people’s connections with the life of their communities” (1995: 665). For Putnam, civic engagement means connection. More specifically, it refers to the presence of dense systems of social relations of the kind that foster trust among otherwise separate persons and thus overcome their isolation. Less clear is how or what kind of engagement sustains trust or, indeed, when interaction fosters trust and when it does not. If there is an answer to this question, it would seem to rest heavily on the condition that connections must be mutual and reciprocal: “Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action” (Putnam 2000: 21). According to Putnam, increased social contact widens “our awareness of the many ways in which we are linked” and “increases tolerance and empathy” (2000: 288). Yet how awareness of connection implies tolerance is less clear. There is, then, a missing piece in this construction, which is an account of how tolerance develops in the individual or, indeed, what exactly it is to be tolerant and what we must develop the capacity to tolerate.

Putnam, along with many concerned with civic engagement, tends to adopt the assumption that interaction will in itself foster trust and thus connection; in other words, the experience of connection fosters connection. Even if our interest were simply in connection *per se*, this assumption would pose some significant difficulties, but connection *per se* is not Putnam’s concern. Rather, his concern is with the kind of connection that creates a larger world of civic life. In moving from connection in general to the specific connection to public life, we also move from the capacity for connection in general to the capacity for civic engagement.

Putnam formulates the latter in the language of learning the rules and procedures of organized groups and public affairs. Thus, for example, when he considers how those involved in church affairs develop their capacity and inclination for civic engagement, he looks to the way in which participation leads to learning how “to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibilities” (2000: 66). Yet this focus on learning rules and skills seems to move away from the idea that the connections available in dense networks of

mutual relatedness foster trust and that trust is what civic engagement is all about. Trust, after all, is not simply following rules but also involves a shaping of our sense of self and other, and of the emotional meaning embedded in interaction.

The matter of what exactly fosters trust, and thus the capacity for civic engagement, is something that tends to get lost when civic engagement is too closely associated with political participation. While Putnam does not equate the two, and encourages us to consider civil society more widely as a system of reciprocity, whether political or not, he also tends to emphasize political participation, as when he moves toward a notion of civic virtue linking civic engagement to recognition of the public good and transcendence of private ends, or when he follows Tocqueville in defining self-interest in connection to broader public ends (Putnam 1993: 87, 89). In doing so, he tends to identify trust with moving beyond the self, so that trust, implicitly at least, means recognition of the other. This, then, also links trust to “enlightened” self-interest, or self-interest illuminated by the recognition that our ends cannot be achieved, or perhaps even well shaped, unless we take into account the intrinsic value to the self of its connection with others. At this point, I think, it becomes clear that the element of reciprocity mentioned above can play an important role in linking connection, trust, and the movement toward an involvement in public life, the ends of which transcend self-interest narrowly conceived.

While Putnam emphasizes the link to civic virtues and public life, that link is muted by his emphasis on matters of trust, reciprocity, and connection considered as ends in themselves. By contrast, Theda Skocpol tends to narrow the focus of discussion to, or at least place greater emphasis on, political participation, and especially on democracy rather than connection *per se* as the virtue of engagement, with an important consequence for the way we think about civic engagement: “Democracy, after all, grew up historically out of century-long struggles among social groups and between state authorities and their subjects. In a very real sense, first liberal-parliamentary regimes and then democracies were a product of organized conflict and distrust. . . . After much struggle, institutions were fashioned to guarantee civil rights, allowing people to organize and speak out” (Putnam 2000: 24). The focus on democracy and struggle places emphasis on the conflictual element in civic engagement. For Skocpol,

“Quests for moral influence and political power were always the rule, not the exception, in American civic life” (2003: 223). This means that the term *civic* is both more narrowly and more broadly defined. It is defined more narrowly because it requires a focus on moral and political ends; it is more broadly defined because it does not exclude conflict and struggle, two qualities that would seem to take us in a different direction than a conception of civic engagement in which trust is a central feature.

Having said this, however, we need to consider how Skocpol connects civic engagement to qualities of civic life that move beyond struggle over political agendas narrowly defined by focusing attention not on partial ends of interest groups but on the shaping of a larger public good. Thus, for Skocpol, membership federations were *civic* in that they “promoted the culture of republican citizenship.” In their “rituals, pledges, and programs, voluntary federations celebrated basic civic values of charity, community, and good citizenship.” These associations all “celebrated ‘American’ identity, republican governance, and service to the nation” (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999: 68).

I suspect that it is her emphasis on democracy and political participation that leads Skocpol, to a much greater extent than Putnam, to identify civic engagement with learning rules and procedures and the inculcation of values:

Inside the clubs or lodges or posts, millions of people learned about group operations and collective debate and decision making. They learned the “constitutional rules” that governed membership, dues-paying, and representation; they learned the rules of legislation and adjudication in their associations. Because mimicry of U.S. rules of taxpaying and representative governance was so central to group procedures, members gained knowledge very relevant to what they needed to know as American citizens. People acquired and practiced organizational skills too. . . . At work, people in routine jobs may not have many chances to gain or practice leadership and organizational skills, so an associational world that offers such opportunities across class lines can be vital for democracy.” (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999: 68)

Beyond providing a setting for learning rules, associations “inculcated the core values underpinning republican citizenship. In their rituals and programs, virtually all voluntary federations stressed basic values of charity,