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Youniss, James & Levine, Peter (Eds.) (2009). *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

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President Barack Obama's emphasis on the importance of an engaged and participatory body of American citizens reflects and contributes to the recent explosion of interest in civic engagement taking place in America. Youth civic engagement, in particular, is a hot topic across many academic disciplines such as political science, psychology, sociology, and education. The book reviewed here, edited by James Youniss and Peter Levine, assembles a group of scholars from various fields of youth civic engagement research to tackle an ambitious and important question: how can American society prepare young people for active citizenship given the political, economic, and social realities of the world at this moment in history? The goals of the book are twofold: to describe the current state of

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youth civic engagement in relation to societal institutions such as schools and government, and to make policy recommendations in line with the goal of engaging young people in civic life.

Addressing these goals offers a major contribution to the literature on youth civic engagement; however, the treatment of this subject does not seem complete without mentioning issues internal to youth themselves such as motivation or the ideological commitments that influence youth civic participation. The editors allude to this by noting a dichotomized way of viewing recent trends of youth civic disengagement as either inherent to youth character or as results of socializing forces (p. 4). Although they make clear their own emphasis on socializing forces, this book could be strengthened by some mention of, or perhaps a chapter devoted to, the issue of how factors internal to youth develop within and influence the institutions discussed in the book. However, given that the emphasis of the book is on socializing forces, the authors argue convincingly that institutional failures at various levels are responsible for current trends of youth civic disengagement and they provide solid suggestions, although at times overly idealistic, for how policy reforms can address these institutional failures.

This book offers a new way of thinking about the relationship between youth and society by framing the question of youth civic engagement as a feature and responsibility of society as a whole. The editors describe a transition in academia from thinking of youth as sources of problems (the dominant paradigm as recently as ten years ago) to youth as assets. Then, they present a dynamic and attractive view of youth as un-mined societal resources full of potential contributions who are waiting to be invited to participate in civic life by capable adult mentors and social institutions. This is not only a book about examining youth civic engagement; it is a call to action for American social institutions to reach out to young people and engage them in civic life. According to the convincing arguments of the editors and various essayists featured in this book, this will strengthen American social institutions, facilitate positive

youth development by offering young people a chance for meaningful civic participation, enhance political equality, and help sustain a vibrant democracy.

The book is organized into three sections, each focusing on a different level of institutional analyses with regards to how youth are engaged in civic life and how institutions should be doing more (and better) to engage them. Section one, “Youth and Schools,” examines the role of the school in promoting youth civic development. The focus is on the existing inequities of civic education and opportunity provision (Kahne & Middaugh), and the lack of school-structured opportunities for students to discuss controversial issues, such as social problems that need to be addressed (Hess). These are presented as two of the major failures of schools that are in need of redress. Policy recommendations from this section highlight a need for more analysis of equity issues in civic learning opportunities in school, a need for school partnerships with community based organizations, increased grant funding and teacher training in civic education, and incorporation of more controversial issues for discussion and debate in school courses.

In section two, “Political Environments: Neighborhoods, and Cities,” the focus is shifted to contexts outside of schools as key potential venues of youth civic engagement. The major argument from this section of the book is that non-school contexts should have the primary, or at least shared, responsibility for promoting and supporting youth civic engagement. This perspective challenges the widely held assumption that civic education is a problem for schools to handle. Authors of chapters in this section lament the existence of civic opportunity gaps for youth and suggest that there are barriers to youth civic development due to specific qualities of many urban neighborhoods such as poverty, child saturation (a high ratio of children to adults in a given area), racial/ethnic diversity, poor responsiveness of law enforcement, housing segregation, inadequate institutional funding, and lack of local political competition. This section addresses the potential role of local government in engaging youth by concluding with two case studies of city governments that have successfully invited and included

young people into decision making processes (Sirianni and Schor). Some useful policy recommendations suggest recognizing youth potential at high levels of community and local government, increasing financial and human support for well-run institutions in urban areas, improving local law enforcement, implementing housing reform, increasing local political competition, and reforming local partisan politics. A particularly interesting idea emerging from this section is articulated by Shea (p 182); he expresses the need for a “civic division of labor” between schools, media, and political parties which each should have different responsibilities and play different roles in fostering youth civic engagement.

Section three employs a comparative perspective on youth civic engagement policies by presenting models from several other countries (Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Canada) and assessing which policies are working well to engage young people and which policies fall short. Although this section strays at times from the stated purpose of this book, there is certainly merit in gleaning policy suggestions from the experience of other countries. The most relevant analyses from this section of the book are the specific policy recommendations made based on what has worked in other countries. For example, Milner suggests that political participation is easier, and in some cases more fair, in democratic countries other than the US through policies such as passive rather than active voter registration and through non-partisan election regulation groups. Hooghe and Claes suggest that an especially successful feature of civic education in the Netherlands is that teachers have a sense of ownership regarding civic curriculum. Based on successful practices in other countries, some productive policy recommendations for engaging youth in America are: creating non-partisan regulatory groups for elections and disseminating political information, targeting civic opportunities to potential school and political drop-outs more effectively, and providing better teacher training for civic education.

This book is for people concerned about how American youth are engaged in civic life and the implications of such

engagement for American democracy. It is not written for individual youth practitioners, though educators and practitioners alike can find evidence for inequities in youth citizenship preparation as well as inspiration for why youth civic engagement matters. Through the exclusive focus on how socializing institutions can facilitate youth civic engagement, an element missing from this book is a discussion of factors internal to youth. Such discussion would contribute to an understanding of how social institutions should recognize what motivates youth and drives their initial and sustained engagement with civic life.

The point that institutions need to invite young people into civic life is well taken, but questions remain regarding which youth will accept these invitations, why, what can be done to ensure their continued civic participation, and how policy can address these issues. Still, this book contributes solid evidence describing the current state of youth civic engagement in relation to societal institutions and makes useful policy recommendations in line with the goal of engaging young people in civic life. Despite the fact that policy recommendations in some chapters come across as unrealistic, although often inspirational, this seems to be consistent with the ambitious goal of the book to address not only positivistic but also the normative issues of youth civic engagement. Even so, it is useful when the less plausible policy reform suggestions from some chapters are brought into a realistic context in the conclusion as the editors reconcile idealistic suggestions with political reality.

The editors purport the value of ambitious reform suggestions while affirming the necessity of maintaining a broad and sustainable constituency if policy reform is to be effective. The editors conclude by offering a realistic and useful synthesis of the policy implications presented in this book that engenders a tempered hopefulness for the potential of youth civic engagement in America.

About the Reviewer

Parissa Jahromi is a PhD student in Psychological Studies of Education at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. She is interested in exploring developmental antecedents and consequences of various forms of youth civic engagement. Parissa is also interested in the role of cultural and political systems in youth civic development. She explored this interest as a Fulbright fellow in the Netherlands where she studied adolescent identity development as well as cultural influences on youth civic participation.



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