

The Bloomington School and Civic Studies

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Peter Levine¹

“What should we do?”

That is the one really serious question for citizens, meaning people who intend to improve the world with others.

The question is what we should *do* because the point is not merely to talk but to change the world. Thinking is intrinsically connected to action. We don't think in focused and disciplined ways about the social world unless we are planning to act; and we don't think *well* unless we learn from our experience.

The question is what *we* should do, not what should be done. It's easy enough to say what should be done (enact a global tax on carbon, for instance).

¹ Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Service, Tisch College, Tufts University. Peter.Levine@tufts.edu. This text draws on Peter Levine "Seeing like a Citizen: The

The tough question is what we can actually achieve. That requires not only taking action but obtaining leverage over larger systems. Since our tools for leverage are mostly institutions, this question requires careful thought about real and possible institutional forms. It is also, by the way, not the question “What should I do?” Of course, that is also important, but I cannot achieve much alone and—worse—I cannot *know* on my own what I ought to aim for. I must collaborate in order to learn enough about what to do.

The question is what *should* we do, so it is intrinsically about values and principles. We are not asking “What do we want to do?” or “What biases and preferences do we bring to the topic?” *Should* implies a struggle to figure out what is right, quite apart from what we may prefer. It is about the best ends or goals and also the best means and strategies. (Or if not the best, at least acceptable ones.)

Finally, the question is *what* we should do, which implies an understanding of the options, their probabilities of happening, and their likely costs and

consequences. These are complex empirical matters, matters of fact and evidence.

Academia generally does not pose the question “What should we do?”

The *what* part is assigned to science and social science, but those disciplines don’t have much to say about the *should* or the *we*. Indeed, the scientific method intentionally suppresses the *should*. In general, philosophy and political theory ask “What should be done?” not “What should we do?” Many professional disciplines ask what specific kinds of professionals should do. But the *we* must be broader than any professional group.

In response to the question "What Should We Do?" a group of scholars and activists have joined to form the emerging academic field of "Civic Studies." It is the intellectual component of civic renewal, which is the movement to improve societies by engaging their citizens. The concept of "Civic Studies" was coined in 2007 in a statement by a group of scholars, including Elinor Ostrom.

When the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that Lin had won the

2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, Karol Soltan emailed me. “The first Nobel for Civic Studies!”

The manifesto of Civic Studies to which Lin contributed said:

The goal of civic studies is to develop ideas and ways of thinking helpful to citizens, understood as co-creators of their worlds. We do not define “citizens” as official members of nation-states or other political jurisdictions. Nor does this formula invoke the word “democracy.” One can be a co-creator in many settings, ranging from loose social networks and religious congregations to the globe. Not all of these venues are, or could be, democracies.

I have no complete theory of “Civic Studies” to offer, but here are six principles, drawn from various authors and from my own experience. In several

cases, my main source would not be Elinor or Vincent Ostrom, yet I think all these ideas are consonant with the main themes of the Bloomington School.

1. Learn from Collaboration

Our methods of analysis should be interactive and deliberative. *I* will not decide what *we* should do; *we* will. Deliberative democrats have a whole procedural theory: a diverse mix of affected people should sit together and decide what to do. That will not do, for two reasons. First, it does not specify the content of what deliberators should advocate. If I am seated at the table, I must decide what to advocate and how to weigh other people's ideas. A deliberative process creates the framework for our discussion, but we still need methods to guide our thinking. Second, we learn by making, not just talking. In fact, we can learn by making and maintaining things silently.

The Workshop has always worked and learned collaboratively. And it has contributed vastly to the empirical study *of* deliberation.

2. Be Humble

In deciding what to do, we should be conscious of intellectual limitations. This is what I take from conservative thought: a serious doubt that we will come up with a better plan than what our predecessors devised, what the community in question already does, or what emerges from uncoordinated individual action. That doubt can be overcome by excellent thought; but we must be reasonably cautious and humble about ourselves.

The heart of conservative thought is resistance to intellectual arrogance. A conservative is highly conscious of the limitations of human cognition and virtue.

From a conservative perspective, human arrogance may take several forms:

- the ambition to plan a society from the center;
- the willingness to scrap inherited norms and values in favor of ideas that have been conceived by theorists;

- the preference for any given social outcome over the aggregate choices of free individuals;
- the assertion that one may take property or rights away from another to serve any ideal; and/or
- the elevation of human reasoning over God's.

I would not call the Ostros or the Bloomington School conservatives, but I find in their work some ideas constant with conservatism: a powerful critique of arrogant modernist planning and centralization, and an appreciation—even a connoisseurship—of tradition methods and solutions.

In politics as in medicine: First, do not harm.

3. Think in terms of systems not root causes

The root cause metaphor (from Marxism and many other theories) holds that (a) problems have one fundamental cause or basis, and (b) the best strategy is to attack the root, the biggest and most fundamental aspect of a problem.

Problems are not typically like that. They are interrelated, with many feedback loops and cycles. There is no root. Sometimes the most effective interventions attack relatively superficial issues (symptoms rather than diseases, in a different and also problematic metaphor).

4. Keep the Ship Together

In deciding what we should do next, we should not turn our attention to ultimate ends, for example, to a theory of the good (let alone the ideal) society. First, the path toward the ideal is probably not direct, so knowing where you ultimately want to go may send you in the opposite direction if you look for a shorter path. Second, we should be just as concerned about avoiding evil as

achieving good. Third, our concept of the ideal will evolve, and we should have the humility to recognize that we do not believe what our successors will believe.

And fourth, we are a group that has value— the group may even give our lives the value they have. It is just as important to hold the group together as to move it forward rapidly toward the ideal state.

There's a great scene in the movie *Lincoln* when the president tells

Thaddeus Stevens:

A compass, I learnt when I was surveying, it'll—it'll point you True North from where you're standing, but it's got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you'll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what's the use of knowing True North?

I would actually push the point further. There is no end, no literal True North. As we move through time as a people, we keep deciding where we ought to go. Moving in the right direction is important, but so is holding ourselves together as a community so that we can keep deciding where to go. Sometimes, the imperative of maintaining our ability to govern ourselves is more important than forward motion.

In his fine book, *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic*, Stephen Elkin (another founder of Civic Studies) introduces this metaphor:

Those who wish to constitute a republican regime are like shipbuilding sailors on a partly uncharted sea who know the direction in which they sail, since the kinds of ports they prefer lie that way.

This much they can agree on. To attempt to agree on anything more specific will defeat them, their opinions on the matter differing significantly. They also know too little for substantive agreement to

be possible. ... It is clear that the relations among the shipbuilders are fundamental. Because they must build, rebuild, repair, and modify the vessel as they sail and learn—and because they must alter their course... — it matters whether the shipbuilders’ modes of association are such as to facilitate this learning and the decisions they must make. ... These modes of association are then at least as important as the ports toward which the shipbuilders sail.²

So it is with a republican regime, Elkin adds that the “essential problem is one of creating a design that provides the capabilities that are needed to keep the regime oriented in the right direction.”

5. Criticize from Within

² *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic: Constitutional Design After Madison*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) pp. 107-108. ,

Sources

Pure conservatism would preclude any criticism of existing institutions and norms. Just keeping the ship together would mean not rocking the boat. We do not critique and change. But our critique of the shortcomings of our society should be “immanent,” in the jargon of the Frankfurt School. Jürgen Habermas and his colleagues have long argued that we should make more explicit and try to improve the implicit (“immanent”) norms of a community rather than imagine that we can import a view from nowhere.

I would alter the idea of immanent critique in three ways. First, we can usefully introduce ideas from other contexts. Ostrom called for “a policy science that can inform decisions about the likely consequences of a multitude of ways of organizing human activities.” This science “abstracts from the richness of the empirical situation” to identify portable ideas.

Second, we should not only look for contradictions and hypocrisies in the norms underlying social and political discourse. Holding contradictory ideas is a sign of maturity and complexity, not an embarrassment. And if you look for

contradictions in order to advance your own view, then you are not actually practicing immanent critique. You're hoping to score debating points in favor of a position external to the community. The immanent critique I recommend is subtler and more respectful than that.

Third, critique should not always be directed at communities, whether geospatial, ethnic, or political. Sometimes it is directed at practices and fields. In fact, I see special value in intellectual engagement with fields of practice whose expressed aims are appealing but which need help with the details.

Ostrom has contributed to Civic Studies by conducting research that is meant to *help certain good practices work*. She and other scholars of Common Pool Resources study how communities manage common property, such as fisheries and forests. The purpose is not only to assess whether, when, and why Common Property Regimes work, but also to derive design principles that will make them work better.

I think this form of social science is invisible but widely practiced. To name two other examples, scholars who study Positive Youth Development assess programs that give young people opportunities to contribute to their communities.³ Scholars of Deliberative Democracy investigate the impacts on citizens, communities, and policies when people talk about public issues in structured settings.⁴

These are empirical research efforts, committed to facts and truth. They do not seek to celebrate, but to critically evaluate, their research subjects. Nevertheless, an obvious goal is to make the practical work succeed by identifying and demonstrating positive impacts and by helping to sort out the effective strategies from the ineffective ones. When results of particular evaluations are

³ E.g., Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, eds., *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, a report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth (National Academies Press, 2002)

⁴ E.g., Archon Fung, "Survey Article: Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and their Consequences," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 11, no 3 (2003), pp. 338-367.

negative, researchers suggest improvements rather than looking for entirely different strategies. Ostrom, for example, shared advice with practical people as diverse as Indianapolis law enforcement officials and Nepalese foresters.

Underlying all these intellectual efforts is some kind of *hope* that the practical programs, when done well, succeed. Another underlying value is *loyalty* to a field of practice. Such motives are largely hidden, because positivist social science cannot handle value-commitments on the part of researchers; it treats them as biases to be minimized and disclosed if they prove impossible to eliminate. Often the search for motives is critical and suspicious: one tries to show that a given research project is biased by some value-judgment, cultural assumption, or self-interest on the scholars' part. But we can look for motives in an appreciative spirit, believing that an empirical research program in the social sciences is only as good as its core values.

Immanent critique as practiced by the Bloomington School does not say "Gotcha!" but rather, "This might help."

6. Be Accountable for Values and the Reasons for Them

Note that it is not at all obvious why we *should* hope that Common Property Resource Management and the other fields of practice mentioned above are successful. It might be easier to turn all resources into private or state property than to encourage communities to manage resources as common property. And it would be easier for professionals to govern schools and cities than to share their authority with overlapping boards, panels, and associations in “polycentric” governance. So why do scholars evidently hope that good common property regimes produce more sustainable and efficient economic outcomes than expert management, and that decentralized public participation generates more legitimate and fair policies than governments do?

The most explicit answer that Ostrom offered was simply that things were not going very well in the world: public goods and common-pool resources were not being generated, protected, and sustained. Because these things are defined as “goods” or “resources,” we should want them to be available. She and

colleagues sought alternative institutions that might work better (more efficiently or sustainably, with less corruption and waste) than the mainstream ones. But if that were her only motivation, she would have spent more time investigating alternatives to Common Property Resource regimes, such as centralized management, with an equal interest in documenting their successes and making them work better. She obviously prefers something about the participatory forms, and her preference resembles the commitment of many other engaged social scientists to their favored fields of practice.

Ultimately, such research is anchored in normative commitments. Scholars hope that they will find their favored strategy successful—or that they can help to *make* it work—because it embodies principles that they endorse. Explicitness is helpful because it promotes discursive accountability. If you say what you value and why, you must entertain objections and tradeoffs.

Lin Ostrom was less explicit than I would like about her values. Avoiding collective-action problems sounds good, but it isn't always. Think of organized

crime. Or firms colluding to set prices. Indeed, a competitive market is a “tragedy” for sellers because they all have to bid down, and that’s what buyers want. So sometimes it is better to create than to solve collective-action “problems.”

Values: not so clear.

It is not clear whether her core normative commitments were utilitarian (common property regimes produce more goods at lower cost than other systems), Kantian (participants display and develop rational autonomy by managing their own resources), communitarian (the social bonds and trust that develop among participants are intrinsically good), liberal (common property regimes protect against state tyranny), anarchistic (common pool resources are free from domination), Burkean (common resource regimes are traditional, pre-modern, and deserve respect), or perhaps a hybrid like that of Sen’s “capabilities

approach” (people should have the maximum feasible *capabilities* to conduct certain human activities).

My favorite normative commitment from Ostrom’s work is this sentence from *Governing the Commons*: “As long as people are described as prisoners [as in the Prisoner’s Dilemma], policy prescriptions will address this metaphor. I would rather address the question how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes other than remorseless tragedy.”

Note the personal commitment, “I would rather ...” and the key value terms: “capabilities,” “tragedies.” This was a moral position but not as fully elaborated as I would like. Habermas, another influence on Civic Studies, offers complementary strengths and weaknesses. He provides much less persuasive strategic guidance than the Bloomington School and makes civic engagement too mental and discursive, to the exclusion of work. But he provides a more detailed normative position and an argument in favor of normative deliberation as an

essential civic act. The following table may help to orient readers to the

differences:

	Ostrom	Habermas
Fundamental problem	Tragedies of the commons.	People manipulating other people by influencing their opinions and goals.
Characteristic symptom of the problem	We destroy an environmental asset by failing to work together.	Government or corporate propaganda distorts our authentic values.
Characteristic starting point	People know what they want but can't get it.	People don't know what they want or want the wrong things.
Essential behavior of a citizen	Working together to make or preserve something.	Talking and listening about controversial values.
Instead of <i>homo economicus</i> (the individual who maximizes material self-interest) we need ...	<i>Homo faber</i> (the person as a maker)	<i>Homo sapiens</i> (the person as a reasoner) or <i>homo politicus</i> (the participant in public assemblies).
Role of the state	It is a set of nested and overlapping associations, not fundamentally different from other associations (firms, nonprofits, etc.).	Citizens form public opinion, which should guide the state, which makes law. The state should be radically distinct from other sectors.

Modernity is ...	A threat to local and traditional ways of cooperating, but <i>wecould</i> use science to assist people in solving their own problems.	A process of enlightenment that liberates people, but it goes wrong when states and markets “colonize” the private domain.
Main interdisciplinary combination	Game theory plus observations of indigenous problem-solving.	Normative philosophy (mainly achieved through critical readings of past philosophers) plus system-level sociology.

If you ask me who is *right* about any of the issues in this table, I am inclined to say: both.

The presiding spirit of Ostrom’s Indiana Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis is Alexis de Tocqueville, whose portrait hangs prominently there. It is worth remembering that Tocqueville was not only an acute observer and trenchant theorist of democracy in America (and France), but also a moralist who held distinctive views about virtue and vice, both public and private. Vincent Ostrom has interpreted Tocqueville’s project as an effort to support “citizen sovereigns” who govern (in Hamilton’s phrase) by “reflection and choice” not “accident and force.” Vincent Ostrom writes, “When citizens are sovereign,

political scientists confront the task of civic education reaching toward knowledgeable enlightenment and working collegiality in shared communities of sympathy and understanding. This is our intellectual challenge in political science as we extend patterns of association and political authority from the local to the global in the next millennium.”⁵ Note the half dozen explicitly moral words in these two sentences. I suspect that Elinor Ostrom shares these moral objectives, and her reluctance to spell them out may reflect a lingering positivism. If she combined her grasp of facts and strategies with explicitly defended values, she would make an even more comprehensive contribution to Civic Studies.

⁵ Vincent Ostrom, “Citizen-Sovereigns: The Source of Contestability, the Rule of Law, and the Conduct of Public Entrepreneurship” *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2006), pp. 13, 16.