Civic Innovation: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Carmen Sirianni

Making Public Policy: Participatory Bureaucracy in American Democracy. By Susan Moffitt. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 274p. $88.00.

Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies and the Future of Governing. By Beth Simone Noveck. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 368p. $29.95.

Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America. By Hollie Russon Gilman. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016. 200p. $28.00.

Over the past several decades, scholars across a variety of social science disciplines have turned their attention to civic innovation that might have the potential to enrich democracy and revitalize civic life. These studies have generally been anchored in democratic theory,[1] but have primarily been driven by empirical cases appearing in many kinds of settings: neighborhood revitalization, environmental justice, community policing, congregation-based organizing, healthy community initiatives, youth engagement in city governance, collaborative planning and ecosystem management, deliberative forums to address any number of policy choices, and much more. In some cases, empirical findings have been set in the context of longer-term developments, such as the decline of multi-tiered civic associations, the erosion in traditional forms of social capital, the displacement of robust traditions of public work within aggrieved populism, or deficits in plebiscitary innovations inherited from the Progressive era.[2]

Some of these studies of civic innovation have contributed enormously to expanding our sense of relevant normative questions, analytic variations, and to the sense of democratic possibility when so much in our polarized politics, technocratic practices, and neoliberal premises have tended to undermine our faith in democratic and participatory resilience. Not only do they provide new insights into how publics can deliberate more effectively and fairly, but also how they can build trust amidst persistent conflict and learn to co-produce knowledge and public goods. In the American context, which is the focus of the three main books under consideration, Berry, Portney, and Thomson have provided a rigorous comparative study of citywide systems of neighborhood empowerment where all neighborhoods[3]—and not just some especially well-positioned—achieved recognition, resources, and regular voice in aspects of neighborhood governance and development, especially land use, with outcomes that were quite robust in terms of effectiveness and equity, as well as in terms of fostering multiple linkages to networks of other civic associations. Fung examined two institutional systems in Chicago[4] that introduced "accountable autonomy," in the sense of delegating initiative downwards, but within a policy design of collaboration with and accountability to appropriate public agencies for deliberative problem solving, with investments in tools and training for professionals and citizens to better enable success, and recognized as successful in white and black neighborhoods alike in the area of community policing, though less so in Latino ones.[5] Would that the city had maintained consistent investments in one of the most innovative forms of community policing in the nation in the light of today's challenges.

Corburn has provided deep insight into how communities of color in Brooklyn, challenged with multiple forms of environmental injustice, can not only mobilize their local knowledge in protest, but also find ways to meld it with professional science in new forms of "street science" that have enhanced effectiveness and legitimacy with community actors and institutions alike. Corburn, shifting his focus to San Francisco, also has shown how

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major public agencies, such as the city's planning and health departments, can enable a broad range of community groups and institutions to collaborate in developing heath assessment tools and healthy community strategies to improve health outcomes for some of the city's most vulnerable populations.[6] Examining the model of "grassroots ecosystem management" that has proliferated in the western U.S.—and that has become increasingly relevant under the complexities and uncertainties of climate change not only on western lands but in eastern estuaries facing sea-level rise—Weber has provided close comparative studies and rigorous theoretical grounding to help us understand how multi-stakeholder policy designs can enable environmentalists and commodity interests alike to make improvements to land and watershed management, as well as to confront the very tricky theoretical issues of democratic accountability (to communities, states, the federal government) when bureaucratic form is modified in favor of network form.[7]

My own work examines how, in several policy fields, we might think of such civic innovations as part of long-term policy learning, however imperfect, and how we need to integrate "investing in democracy" by state actors as an essential component of civic revitalization; indeed, that policy feedback studies need to better integrate collaborative governance designs as key components of "bringing the state back in" to our understanding of the democratic possibilities of federal policy design and administrative practice, as some programs within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency show.[8] To the extent that adaptation to climate change—no matter how well we tackle mitigation in the near to medium term—will provide enormous challenges not only to communities, but also to federal agencies such as EPA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, and many more agencies charged with working on some aspect of adaptation with threatened communities and state and city governments, the more such innovative policy designs at the interface of civil society and the federal state will be required.

While such studies have received the kind of criticisms one rightfully expects in robust scholarly discourse, a new line of critique has emerged in the last several years that is far more sweeping, even though some of the critics recognize the need to further improve such civic innovation. At the risk of oversimplifying some of these important works, the broad strokes of the critique go as follows.[9] Such civic innovation, or what they tend to call "the new public participation," has occurred during an era of dramatically rising inequality, hence in an institutional context that is nothing like Habermas' ideal speech situation. Not only has such participation legitimated inequality and corporate power when they have been specifically designed by corporate consultants fighting popular resistance, such as a giant box store, but they perform the very same functions even when, indeed *especially* when, they are well designed to include multiple stakeholders, greater equality of voice, and have facilitators skilled in deliberative practice in settings not tied to the corporate world.

While these critics argue that this is the result of many factors, depending on the community context and policy field, the reasons for such undemocratic outcomes that, in effect, "democratize inequalities," is that they are initiated by elites—including elected public officials and administrators charged with working with publics, whose associations may have demanded them—and are facilitated by nonprofit and other professional consultants who have formed an "industry" to ply their trade. Their participatory designs almost invariably channel, deflect, and coopt mass resistance, thereby domesticating social movement forms that would otherwise emerge to insist on more general policies in the interests of the broad public good. Instead of nurturing grander forms of social solidarity, the new forms of public participation settle for focusing on public problem solving where citizens and communities may disagree (program budgets, city planning choices, safer neighborhoods, community development).

Some interests are simply irreconcilable, the critics argue, and better to focus on these, with all the weapons and repertoires of contentious social movements. Civic innovation obscures questions of justice across the wide array of arenas and helps civil society to migrate to the state and other elite institutions. "*The end result of all these little steps to empowerment is, unfortunately, not a long journey to social justice but a tightening spiral of resignation and retreat from public life.*"[10]

This stark formulation is unfortunate, since most of the scholars of civic innovation recognize multiple forms of public engagement, suitable for some public challenges and not others, and not excluding agonistic forms completely in favor of deliberative, collaborative, or trust-building ones—and since, to my knowledge, no social movement scholars or actors have yet offered credible forms and strategies of public engagement that can systematically and sustainably reduce some of the larger forms of social and economic inequality that we face today. In contrast, the three books that are the subject of this review essay take different approaches that are all worthy of consideration as part of the larger democratic toolbox. To some extent they are in dialogue with each other, as well as with some of the works already cited. Let me examine them one by one and then return to some general considerations for academic scholars, professional practitioners, and civic activists.

The core concept that Susan Moffitt proposes is that of "participatory bureaucracy," especially as manifest in the vast network of more than one thousand federal advisory committees that have been either mandated or authorized

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by law over the past half-century, in response to the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972, albeit having emerged as a sprawling patchwork in prior decades. Such committees, which require "balanced" participation from independent experts, citizen and industry groups, and the like, can, under certain conditions, hold in fruitful tension the core values of expert bureaucratic administration and democratic accountability, with advantages to both, rather than zero-sum tradeoffs. This runs counter to critiques of such committees that they are either invariably captured or heavily tilted to powerful industry groups, which was generally the case before the 1970s with such committees as the Industrial Pollution Control Council, or are simply irrelevant.

The conditions under which advisory committees enhance democracy are specific to the nature of task implementation under the purview of a particular agency or office. Thus, Moffitt's is a theory of "pragmatic participatory bureaucracy" (236), much in line with the broad contours of other theories that seek to expand democratic parameters in ways that remain anchored to pragmatic learning.[11] Where task implementation is fundamentally interdependent, where expertise is contingent and emergent, and where—following John Dewey's famous metaphor—knowledge is "liquefied" and thus flows multi-directionally, then it is quite rational for bureaucratic actors to seek genuine input from multiple actors, including grassroots groups and everyday practitioners that may have different kinds of expertise than scientific and industry experts. Who is rightfully considered expert depends on the task; and the co-production of expertise (as in Corburn, but at a different scale) can not only yield more effective and implementable decisions, but ones that enhance bureaucratic legitimacy and reputations, thus enabling public administrators to avoid visible failure. Bureaucracies, counter to Weber's premise of protecting secrecy, can open doors and facilitate very complex reasoning, learning *from* and *in* public—with transcripts, media coverage, multidirectional communication within and outside the meeting rooms—even if the formal advisory process is structured and managed within parameters that do not fit the most open criteria of some versions of participatory democracy.

Various long-term changes in information technologies make such conditions of interdependent task implementation and liquefied knowledge ever more prevalent, and hence make participatory bureaucracy increasingly relevant as a key component of democratic accountability. Interdependent task implementation—involving tens and even hundreds of thousands of potential task implementers, whose interdependent tasks are themselves continually evolving within open organizational systems—poses challenges that "exceed the scope of the agency's hierarchical reach" (226) and often leave agencies on the relatively uninformed side of information asymmetries.

Moffitt tests this approach through comparative case studies—utilizing historical sources over a sixty-year period, as well as statistical methods—across fifteen federal advisory committees within two federal agencies, the Federal Drug Administration's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, where participation in pharmaceutical regulation is discretionary and imposed by bureaucrats, not mandated by Congress, and in the Department of Education's National Assessment Governing Board, where there exists a mandate. She supplements the latter with a close look at the Advisory Council on Education Statistics. The FDA's range of task implementers includes, among other parties, drug companies, research scientists, physicians, consumers, and groups organized around specific medical conditions, whereas those within the Department of Education include state departments of education, school districts, teachers, parents, students, and higher education significantly impacted by the development of assessment tools, especially the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Moffitt also places these comparative cases within the broader sweep of federal advisory committees over time, and she considers the wider scope across many other agencies.

Moffitt's book is a tour de force conceptually and in the way that she executes her empirical strategy. She is deft in showing how, after a century of sidelining the task of educational assessment within the original federal department and then shifting offices of education in the face of so many sources of opposition at the local, state, and professional association levels, commissioner Frank Keppel within HEW in 1962 began a process to first seek support outside the federal government with an exploratory committee supported by a major foundation, the Carnegie Corporation—and only then, thorough careful design focused on task implementation, invited in thousands of educational practitioners and laypeople, including potential opponents, while asking all participants to identify the groups that might persist in opposition in their communities. While imperfect in design and based upon significant concessions to resistant states, the original process set the stage for further learning with fluid information among publics and strengthening *future* democratic accountability. This strategy was superior both as a bureaucratic strategy among the competing alternatives—evidence of pragmatic realism—as well as a viable one to enhance public participation that did not exist before in such matters.

The FDA challenge was different, to be sure, since perceptions of industry dominance or scientific exclusivity required a greater role for FACA than had been necessary to trigger innovation on educational statistics. The FDA lacked the capacity to command safe drug use, since this depended on a complex interplay of drug firm research, clinical trials, manufacturing, and advertising with the everyday practices of hundreds of thousands of

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physicians and millions of patients. Here Moffitt employs comparative case studies of advisory committees on specific drugs with more and less novelty, breadth, and diversity of populations, thereby varying the degree of implementation interdependence.

Beth Noveck's *Smart Citizens, Smarter State* begins with some of the lessons and limits of the Open Government Initiative introduced by the Obama administration, whose principles of transparent, participatory, and collaborative government were outlined quite elegantly in his first presidential memorandum issued on his first full day in office. Noveck was a key player in getting this off the ground, and so her book has the voice of wisdom of both the scholar and the reflective practitioner. While she rightly argues that the initiative had some clear successes and also helped to trigger the Open Government Partnership internationally, she understands how it was constrained by the crowded policy agenda at a time of economic crisis, as well as by admittedly naïve notions that transparency itself would bring innovation to core institutional systems.

Having been involved myself as chair of the collaborative governance workgroup in the campaign's urban policy committee, and then having worked with various federal agencies, White House offices, and environmental justice and community leaders to try to figure out how to leverage some of their innovative programs and civic innovations in ways that complemented the more data-driven initiatives of transparency, I would add that the Obama effort was further hampered by turf issues among civic groups that wanted to "own" the new stress on active citizen organizing and problem solving (e.g., national service versus collaborative governance versus an independent organizing group that would inherit the Organizing For Obama [OFA] mantle and networks), as well as by the absence of an authoritative voice higher up in the administrative structure (say, at the Office of Management and Budget) that could have induced a more fruitful melding of various approaches. There are certainly many further lessons here for a future administration that would place renewed stress on open and participatory governance, or for any effort of a nonprofit initiative by a retired president who wished to carry forward this legacy, clearly dear to his heart.

Noveck's approach, however, is to go much further beyond some of the premises of this early wave of online transparency and petitioning platforms, and indeed beyond what she recognizes as valuable but still not nimble enough in Moffitt's participatory bureaucracy of the advisory committee system—although the FDA has recently begun to experiment further on regulatory review of medical devices. Noveck offers a compelling critique of some forms of deliberative democracy, especially those that remain largely confined to generating *talk*, but hardly if at all emphasize *performance,* either of resulting policy or actual problem solving within systems, whether these be public agencies, institutional fields, or local neighborhoods. Building upon studies of tacit knowledge and multiple intelligences, her approach is to outline the core challenges of building the kinds of platforms that would democratize the process of matching widely and surprisingly distributed skills—within, across, and outside formal bureaucracies and institutions—to actual problem solving and co-creation that serves citizens, communities, and public agencies.

She analyzes four key challenges. The first is *making expertise visible* through various kinds of identifying technologies and talent platforms, and doing so in ways that motivate people from expected and unexpected corners alike to offer their time and skills, broadly defined. An example would be Pulse Point, which permits quick identification of bystanders with CPR certification in emergency situations. For this to be effective, the markers of expertise must go beyond resumes and transcripts to include varied experiences and interests, accompanied by ways that certify trust—as in Airbnb rentals. The second challenge is to be able to *cull and collate information manually or automatically to create useful profiles.* While self-reports and automatic mining scraped from third-party reports have their problems, various kinds of scientific, nonprofit, and corporate institutions have implemented these in ways that help connect skilled and motivated people to challenges they might not otherwise have undertaken, or even known about.

The third challenge is to implement *badging beyond the exclusive or even predominant use of certification by universities.* This is also now being done by platforms such as Code Academy and represents the capacity of the Internet to put "Boy Scout badges on steroids by enabling almost any online or offline community to *award and certify* a credential indelibly" (121, emphasis original). Badges can be stacked and profiled in various ways, thus potentially yielding a more fine-grained and searchable view of skills and knowledge than through a course listing on a transcript, and at a much lower price, thus further democratizing acquisition and utilization of relevant skills that a community or agency might need, as well as motivating after-school clubs and nonprofits to offer such badging. The fourth challenge is to *quantify expertise differently and diversely,* translating a kind of Google Scholar tool to capture frequency of use, reputation, leadership roles, and strength of ties in a network.

While drawing—quite impressively and richly—many of her examples form commercial, professional, programmer, and similar sites, Noveck is acutely aware of the need to experiment further to generate the kinds of expertise measures that are most useful for public engagement, as well as to identify perverse incentives, system-gaming practices, and unintended consequences. In addition, she identifies barriers in FACA (1972), the Administrative Procedure Act (1946), and the Paperwork Reduction Act

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(1980) to some of the more robust ways in which agencies can identify, select, and utilize smart citizens, and thus weave co-creative activity by citizens and professionals into the fabric of the administrative state. Linking these new forms of information and communication to legacy civic associations would further add power to Noveck's important arguments, especially among younger citizens.[12]

Hollie Russon Gilman's *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America* provides the first in-depth look at the rise of participatory budgeting (PB) in the United States. She provides a solid grounding of this in the larger literature on civic innovation in the United States, as well as in international literature on Brazil and other Latin American countries that have institutionalized it for several decades, as well as diffusion through the World Bank. Her empirical work is also nicely rooted in the theoretical work on deliberative democracy, as well as empirical analyses of the deficit in trust in American government. She is keenly aware of the limits of a study that examines an early phase of such innovation, especially the pilot year of its introduction in New York City; but the spread of PB across a variety of major U.S. cities certainly warrants such a close look.

PB was first introduced in 2009 by Chicago alderman Joe Moore, with support from the nonprofit intermediary, the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), which helped with design, as well as thinking through needed revisions after the initial implementation, and then further assisting with diffusion to other cities. The launch was quite refreshing, in the sense that neighborhood assemblies convened and could map potential projects to be funded from a menu of six categories: streets, transportation, public safety, traffic safety, parks and environment, and art and other projects. Residents could compare these with projects that had previously been funded through the alderman's discretionary budget—the latter a feature in Chicago and other cities subject to much opacity and unaccountable discretion (and sometimes corruption). Gilman notes how bicycle lanes and racks were fairly high on the projects that neighborhoods prioritized, which for me raises further lines of research for Chicago and several other cities that have PB: the relative strength of citywide bicycle associations, as well as their outreach to communities of color, and recent or simultaneous processes of climate planning, where such associations have made their presence felt, often in strong alliance with other urban sustainability groups. PB may thus not only become a key part of sustainability strategies, but may lead to analysis that links local neighborhood associations and meetings with citywide and regional associations—not quite the classic multitiered association stressed by Skocpol, but with creative tiering of associational relationships nonetheless.[13]

New York's PB grew more systematically from council reform efforts led by the Citizens Union and spread from four districts in 2011 to twenty-four in 2014; it now has the support of the president of the city council and mayor Bill de Blasio as well. Community Voices Heard, a strong multiracial organization in one of the initial districts, as well as partners (Pratt Institute, Project for Public Spaces) with a good deal of experience in participatory planning projects over the years, have brought additional capacity to the local processes, as has PBP which is based in the city. While the process has significant normative challenges, as Gilman analyzes in her astutely executed fieldwork, given the relatively small number that turn out to vote for the final projects, it has nonetheless expanded engagement by local residents, including in her category of "new citizens" drawn into engagement for the first time, and other stakeholders who work or go to school in the districts.

In contrast, Seattle's city council, which began its neighborhood planning in the 1990s, insisted on local stakeholder analyses and other criteria to establish reasonable criteria for representativeness of those still relatively few who tend to turn out for these types of meetings; but the democratic legitimacy of the process then generated citywide support for bond issues to fund projects that neighborhood planning groups had prioritized.[14] This suggests, as does Gilman's bounded focus on PB in three cities (including Boston's youth PB), that there are multiple pathways to citizens getting more direct control over budgets that can make their neighborhoods more livable, equitable, and sustainable. Her own expansive view links these innovations to others and thus opens the door to seeing many kinds of mutually supportive linkages, although also potentially competing ones in the ecology of organizations that may be promoting them in any given city.

Gilman's research, as well as that of Moffitt and Noveck, is far richer than a review essay can capture. So let me conclude with a few final reflections on civic innovation. The first is the pressing need to conceptually link engagement by grassroots actors to professionals who can act in ways that have expansive civic and democratic potential. Some theorists have called this "civic professionalism," others "democratic professionalism."[15] Today virtually all forms of civic innovation occur in institutional and policy fields where professionals of various sorts and in various types of institutions play prominent roles by necessity. In the sustainable cities field, for instance, grassroots actors have challenged growth machines and highway projects since the 1960s, but eventually began to build much greater framing and policy capacity as they were joined by architects, planners, green builders, and transportation engineers who not only began to think in terms of sustainability, but whose professional associations also helped develop deliberative and information tools that enabled community groups to exercise voice and expertise.

Second, as I argued in an earlier book, and as Peter Levine has more recently argued compellingly, many

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forms of innovation can and should be woven together with a greater sense building a "civic renewal movement."[16] This does not have to flatten out the tensions among various approaches, nor ignore the limits of some. Thus, robust debate and critique must play a role. But we live in dangerous times, when angry populist mobilization can take very nasty and destructive forms and further undermine our faith in government. We also live in the era of climate change, when creative civic and professional collaboration will not only be needed on an unprecedented scale, but when we will also need to nurture movements that can appropriately balance the emotions of hope and fear, as well as nurture faith in the capacity of government and institutions more broadly.

Third, we *do* need to critique innovations that remain insular, coopted, and unable to see their role in broader strategies of equity. However, there is nothing that inherently separates strategies for equitable tax reform or stronger financial regulation to prevent banking crises and loss of wealth among middle class families, or that seeks more robust strategies for building assets among African American families that have suffered from systematic policies hampering wealth creation for generations, from strategies that build upon innovations, such as community policing, healthy communities, sustainable community development, and collaborative environmental justice. The Democratic Party, in particular, needs to be able to bundle and effectively communicate a range of policy designs that are appropriately regulatory and redistributive, and that incentivize sustainable business strategies,[17] while also enabling innovative civic engagement at the level of communities and ecosystems, scaled across networks and platforms that target and utilize expertise of all sorts, and layered into the federal state as an enabler of constructive and pragmatic democracy.

Notes

1 Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012.
2 Skocpol 2003, Putnam 2000, Boyte and Kari 1996, Fishkin 1993.
3 Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993.
4 Fung 2004.
5 Skogan 2006.
6 Corburn 2005, 2009.
7 Weber 2003.
8 Sirianni and Friedland 2001, Siriani 2009, 2014.
9 Lee, MacQuarrie, and Walker 2015; Lee 2015.
10 Lee 2015, 26; emphasis original.
11 Ansell 2011, Briggs 2008.
12 Wells 2015.
13 Skocpol 2003.
14 Sirianni 2009.
15 Sullivan 2005, Dzur 2008.
16 Sirianni and Friedland 2001, Levine 2013.
17 Henderson, Gulati, and Tushman, 2015.

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