

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Craig A. Rimmerman. *The New Citizenship: Unconventional Politics, Activism, And Service*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997. xiv + 154 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2266-7; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-2267-4.

Reviewed by Francis Carleton (University of Wisconsin at Green Bay)
Published on H-Teachpol (June, 1997)



Craig Rimmerman's excellent new book on participatory democracy at the local level would make an excellent addition to an introductory course on American government, an upper level course on democratic theory, or as a common reading for students participating in an internship program.

This slim volume (113 pages if one is not including glossary, references, and appendices) contains a spirited, theoretically informed, and practical defense of participatory democracy as we careen towards the twenty-first century. Rimmerman advances a broad conception of citizenship in a democracy and promotes grassroots citizen participation in the building of diverse, progressive, and equitable communities. His endorsement of what Benjamin Barber has called "strong democracy" (1984) finds expression in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, an example of participatory democracy that is the model for what the author calls the "New Citizenship." More specifically, he wishes to extend "the participatory democratic vision articulated in the 1960s" by those involved in the grassroots struggle for fundamental civil rights (p. 5).

Rimmerman decries the modern rise of political apathy and, perhaps relatedly, violent hate groups on the right. He finds in these developments the decline of a healthy civic culture. He is especially concerned about the tendency of young people in particular to be "largely apathetic, uninterested, indifferent, and disengaged when it comes to politics" (p. 40). Rimmerman notes, for example, that according to a study conducted in 1994, only sixteen percent of freshman college students said "they frequently 'discuss politics'" (p. 41). This from a high of nearly thirty percent in 1968. He also laments the propensity of young people to conceptualize polit-

ical participation as a purely individual activity that is unlikely to have any significant impact on politics. In short, the author identifies a crisis in civic virtue, and seeks to provide a remedy via participatory democracy at the grassroots level.

Rimmerman offers the reader a positive prescription for the future of democracy in America. He argues that citizens "can overcome participation obstacles if they perceive that their participation may have a meaningful effect" (p. 45). Rimmerman recognizes the relative inaccessibility of various national political forums, and so advocates instead active participation in one's local community as a more efficacious form of political involvement for ordinary citizens. He specifically rejects the violent and disruptive tactics employed by such groups as ACT UP, Earth First!, Operation Rescue, and various militia groups. He recommends instead citizen involvement in community groups that employ the same sorts of nonviolent disobedience used by participants in the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The "New Citizenship" of the book's title embraces "grassroots mobilization and community participation, service learning, and the Internet" (p. 75). Rimmerman then provides examples from each of these three categories of citizenship. Community groups that epitomize his conception of local, participatory democracy include Baltimore United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a predominately black organization designed to enhance that city's "quality of life as measured by jobs, education, and cultural infrastructure" (p. 82), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a group that works with "low and moderate income families" to achieve "political and economic justice" (p. 80),

and the Labor/Community Strategy Center, an organization dedicated to promoting the needs of the “labor movement, workers, and communities of color” (p. 85).

Rimmerman also discusses at some length those student groups committed to service learning, including Campus Green Vote, an organization dedicated to environmental issues, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), which promotes and supports student-initiated service programs, and Lead or Leave, which deals primarily with budget deficit-related issues.

Finally, Rimmerman champions the Internet as central to the “New Citizenship.” He believes that this medium’s ability to facilitate the flow of information, along with its communications capacities, makes it imperative that citizens develop the skills necessary to access this emerging technology.

The final chapter in Craig Rimmerman’s book is entitled “Service Learning and the New Citizenship.” It contains the author’s reflections on President Clinton’s National Service Act and, more importantly, the role of community service in the modern university’s curriculum. Rimmerman believes that universities should provide critical education for citizenship. By this he means, among other things, that students should be exposed to a critical interpretation of American democracy, a broad conception of citizenship and its critical importance in a democracy, the significance of race, class and gender for politics, and the history of democratic movements in America. Such an education, he believes, prepares students for a more meaningful community service experience. And integrating community service into the college curriculum provides for students the invaluable chance to learn by doing. No amount of classroom work, Rimmerman argues, can ever duplicate the value of experiential education.

Service learning, whatever its merits, also suffers from some potential defects. Students, for example, may not recognize the political dimensions of the issue they are dealing with, and so they may learn relatively little from their community service. Rimmerman fears that for such students their work may be a “relatively empty way of tackling the complex structural issues that arise out of the conditions that prompt service activity in the first place” (p. 105). Similarly, some worry that community service internships may simply reinforce existing inequalities and keep clients (of such nonprofit organizations as the Salvation Army, domestic violence shelters, etc.) on the margins by perpetuating the limited American welfare state. Those of a libertarian bent, con-

versely, worry that students may be coerced into performing community service, and hence lose their individual freedom and liberty.

Craig Rimmerman believes these critiques are worth taking seriously, but is convinced that if students are adequately prepared for their internship experience—if, that is, they are provided the necessary conceptual tools to contextualize their community service—then such experiential education can constitute an invaluable part of the liberal arts curriculum.

The author’s own experiences with service learning in an upper-level political science course on “Community, Politics, and Service,” taught with a colleague, indicate the relative value of such education (p. 106). He has found that most students used their internships to learn more about those on the margins of society, empower themselves as citizens in a democracy, and reflect on the meaning of citizenship in the United States. He also acknowledges forthrightly the inevitable shortcomings of service learning, including the failure of some students to make the critical connection between their experiences and the politics of inequality in America. He decides, nonetheless, that service learning, warts and all, can and does play a crucial role in providing students with a more experiential and democratic education.

I have not yet used Craig Rimmerman’s book in any of my courses, although I plan to require it of students who do an internship under my tutelage beginning in the fall of 1997. I will have these students meet three or four times during the semester to discuss the ideas articulated by Rimmerman and the application of these ideas to their own experiences.

I am currently an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay (UWGB), where I teach in three departments: The Departments of Political Science, Social Change & Development (SCD), and Women’s Studies. Most of my internship students are SCD students who work with such Green Bay organizations as Ethan House (a halfway house for troubled male juveniles), the Salvation Army, and the Family Violence Center. SCD is, in brief, an interdisciplinary, problem-focused social science program that is staffed by anthropologists, historians, political scientists, a sociologist, and an economist. We provide for students an aggressively critical, historical, and comparative education that essentially provides the critical education for citizenship espoused by Craig Rimmerman. It is clear that his book on the New Citizenship will dovetail nicely with the grassroots internship program that we have developed

for SCD.

Some comments from students who did internships in the spring of 1997 confirm some of Rimmerman's hopes and fears regarding community service as part of an undergraduate curriculum. One student wrote that "[m]y training at Ethan [House] led to personal exploration ... and continues to give me an in-depth look at the many problems that plague our youth in society ... Reading it in a book can not compare to the emotional experiences that actual situations present. Situations like these [an attempted suicide by a client], albeit sad, do happen, and give me a deeper understanding of the depth of my work ... Most of all, it gave me the chance to make a difference in a troubled child's life, which is part of what society as a whole should experience." Another student, referring to her work at a sexual assault center, noted that "[m]y internship ... has been an educating experience for me and has provided me with knowledge that I could never learn from sitting in a classroom ... I understand why so many victims keep the assault a secret: retelling their story over and over again to strangers (who are often male) can be horrifyingly embarrassing ... the Social Change and Development and Women's Studies courses that I have taken at UWGB have helped me to be more critical ... The fact that police officers in Brown County are not trained about sexual assault, the \$125 fee for a child abuse restraining order, and the length of time it takes for some cases to be processed are all things I will look at further in my internship paper." Finally, a frus-

trated student who worked in the Brown County Prosecutor's Office pointed out that "given the repetition of certain defendants and their family members in court for various misdemeanor crimes, my old and overcome (so I thought) prejudices came roaring back. That wasn't what I was there to accomplish. If anything, this internship served to push me further away from the practice of 'rebellious law' and further toward the right."

It seems clear that carving out some space for community service within the university is essential for a high-quality, democratic, educational experience. Furthermore, critical education must precede and accompany community service if it is to make a meaningful contribution to a student's university education. It is also clear, at least to me, that faculty cannot control what students learn from their experience. Some may even learn that they don't really care much for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship, or that certain groups seem deserving of the stereotypes attached to them. I believe, however, as does Craig Rimmerman, that providing students with the opportunity to engage in community service as an integrated part of a university education represents the leap of democratic faith that seems essential in a society such as ours.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol>

Citation: Francis Carleton. Review of Rimmerman, Craig A., *The New Citizenship: Unconventional Politics, Activism, And Service*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1047>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.