"Pure Futility and Waste": Academic Political Science and Civic Education

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In the September 1998 issue of *PS*, the APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the Next Century (TFCE) urged members of the discipline to renew their commitment to civic education. In the same issue, Professor Hindy Lauer Schacter published an essay identifying a number of obstacles to such a renewal, drawing her lessons from the experiences of a number of past APSA committees that had also addressed the problem of civic education in the discipline. The sad truth, as Schacter noted, is that academic political science has had few successful civic education initiatives, and none of the earlier APSA committees encouraging a commitment to civic education were able to wring any long-lasting changes out of the guild. But in apparent agreement with the TFCE, Schacter urged these failures to be taken as "a goad to spur us on to one more try" (1998, 635).

I think most political scientists may be sympathetic to the ideal of civic education and, thus, with the TFCE's efforts. Moreover, much of what Schacter and the TFCE say about *how* civic education might be revitalized makes good sense. But sympathy and well-crafted plans will not carry the day in the absence of compelling reasons for acting on these sentiments and implementing these plans. Unfortunately, neither Schacter nor the TFCE provide compelling reasons for action, mainly because they do not have a suitably robust account of *why* similar efforts have failed in the past, and *why they are likely to fail today.*

In response to the TFCE's invitation for "reactions and contributions," I want to suggest that the most significant obstacle to the revitalization of civic education in academic political science is that—sympathies notwithstanding—such efforts are likely to be considered by many, if not most, political scientists, as "pure futility and waste." This was how William Bennett Munro characterized the discipline's civic education efforts in his APSA Presidential Address back in 1927. Sadly, his words may still find all-too-much resonance today, even if for reasons Munro himself may have found quite surprising.

Knowing how we got to this point is perhaps key to understanding why we might not be able to make good our civic education commitments. To this end, I will follow Schacter in examining how the reflections of the several APSA committees on instruction help us understand the situation we face. My analysis and conclusions, however, are somewhat different from hers, and this makes me less sanguine about the TFCE's initiative. If I had to summarize my argument in a question, it might be this: How far will excellence in civic education get you when you are trying to get hired, tenured, or promoted?

Political Science and Civic Education

My question would not have been asked when the academic discipline of political science was first established. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, many of those who would become prominent as "founding fathers" of academic political science were also among the most active advocates of higher education reform in the United States. This education reform movement was, as many historians of higher education have noted (see, e.g., Cremin 1980; Lucas 1994; Ross 1991; Rudolph 1990), intimately linked with agitation for political reform. Put another way, the reform of higher education was seen as part of a giant civic education project in which new knowledge and civic improvement were inextricably linked. It was in this movement that the importance of civic education for higher education, as well as much of the form of higher education today, was set.

Among the newly emerging academic disciplines, political science was by definition in a unique position to contribute to this civic education project. As the founders of the discipline understood its identity, academic political science would contribute to the education of citizens and political leaders, civil servants (whose number, they believed, should include political scientists themselves), and future generations of political scientists who could then go on to teach political science to others.[1] This tripartite civic education project was to be informed by the "knowledge" that academic political scientists produced in their research.

There are two features of this ideal that need to be borne in mind, as they later had important implications for the development of the discipline. The first is that this ideal presupposed a pedagogical division of labor that had been more or less well-articulated by the late nineteenth century (Farr, Dryzek, and Leonard 1995, 68–76). On this account, the universities—where academic political science was situated—made their most important contribution to the national civic

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education project by concentrating on the tasks for which they were most appropriately suited. This meant training expert civil servants and future political scientists and, of course, producing the knowledge that would then be expanded by future political scientists, implemented by civil servants, and disseminated by the various educational institutions carrying out the wider task of educating citizens.

The second point is that until the second decade of the new century, the idea that all disciplinary activity was part and parcel of this grand endeavor served as a workable professional identity. Indeed, it is difficult to read the self-reflections of academics in this period without recognizing that the modern division of "research, teaching, and service" meant something completely different for them than it does for us. For them, these were three moments in the civic education project. For us, the connections are less certain.

By the 1920s, a number of conceptual and practical transformations in the discipline had begun, which, in retrospect, proved to have significant bearing on the centrality of civic education for academic political science. The story of this transformation is long and somewhat complicated, but there are a few analytically useful highlights to be gleaned from a reexamination of the 1908, 1916,[2] and 1922 reports from APSA committees on instruction that Schacter cited in her article—and some other reports she does not cite. Schacter rightly noted that "the three early committees all upheld the importance of active citizenship," and one can say the same of every subsequent APSA committee on instruction, and even most professional political scientists. But what seems most important to me are the shifts of thematic emphasis among the reports of the Committee of Five (in 1908), the Committee of Seven (in 1914), and (in 1922) the so-called Munro Committee of 1920, as well as an apparent decline in concern with civic education after the Munro Committee report, all of which Schacter also briefly discussed (1998, 631–32).

In the 1908 report, the Committee of Five emphasized the inadequacy of existing modes of citizenship education, whose media included, among other things, "billboards, newspaper headlines, and stump speeches."[3] This became apparent as increasing numbers of students were moving into institutions of higher education without adequate preparation in political science. (Hence, the title of the Committee's preliminary report: "What Do Students Know About American Government before Taking College Courses in Political Science?") Committee members argued that academic political science needed to play an important role in contributing to the education of citizens *qua* citizens, but also stressed that "the entire educational system" bore this responsibility (APSA 1906, 227). On the topic of educating civil servants, the Committee of Five congratulated the guild for helping bring about "reforms undertaken in recent years" (226). And about the education of future political scientists, the Committee said virtually nothing.

In a crucial sense, the Committee of Five's concern was with the dissemination of the knowledge political scientists had produced. By the time the Committee of Seven issued its report, this changed. The problem, it seems, was that the discipline was not contributing enough to the training of civil servants (APSA 1914, 264). On the one hand, as Schacter noted (1998, 632), the Committee was worried that citizens were not sufficiently deferential to experts, and they asked that "Citizens . . . learn humility in the face of expertise." On the other hand, civil servants were not being employed effectively, and the Committee also worried about how "university investigators write books" while "the practical work of government blunders on, struggling as best it can on the knowledge and experience which universities could collect" (APSA 1914, 263).

The Committee of Seven was clearly less concerned with the dissemination of political science knowledge than they were with making sure that civil servants were utilizing or applying the knowledge currently available. By 1914, it must have been apparent to members of the guild that, on this particularly important civic education front, the discipline was beginning to falter.

This would have been tough enough to remedy, but the worst was yet to come. As we have seen, in the 1908 report the education of citizens took central stage, the training of civil servants was cited as an example of success, and the training of future political scientists was virtually ignored. The 1916 report contains clear evidence of concerns about the training of civil servants, and (as Somit and Tanenhaus noted [1967, 83]) the Committee of Seven added, "almost as an afterthought," that the universities were also responsible for training students for research. By the time the Munro Committee report was published in 1922, it was becoming obvious that the education of scholars was being drawn into question as well.

This was more than just a sequential addressing of each separate part of the civic education project. It reflected a profoundly different institutional situation. On the subject of civic education, the Munro Committee turned away (as Schacter noted) from "a local emphasis" in civic education projects, but it also (as she did not note) intimated a rather skeptical assessment of the usefulness of the discipline's direct participation in any civic education project—whether this entailed the education of citizens or even the training of expert civil servants.

Indeed, no one less than the chair of the 1920 Committee, William Bennett Munro, declared in 1927 that the "gigantic campaigns of civic education . . . being carried on by organizations of every kind" with the intention of inspiring a "sense of civic duty" in citizens were "pure futility and waste." Munro also attacked a number of "intellectual insincerities" that he urged political scientists to abandon. These included "the nature of sovereignty, the general will, natural rights, the freedom of the individual, the consent of the governed, majority rule, home rule, the rule of public opinion, state rights, laissez-faire, checks and balances, the equality of men

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and nations, and a government of laws not of men" (1928, 7, 10).

Obviously, for some people, at least some of these notions were critical to any successful civic education program. But as Munro saw it, these "insincerities" were simply prescientific ideals that threatened to make any civic education efforts ineffective. Nor was his an idiosyncratic position. After 1920, the kind of criticism Munro articulated became more and more common (Somit and Tanenhaus 1967, 135–36). One might even argue that the fact he made these criticisms in his APSA Presidential Address suggested just how widespread these sentiments were—at least among the discipline's elite, if not the broader body of the guild.[4]

I believe this was perhaps the most important development in the history of civic education in academic political science. But the sense in which it was important is easy to miss if one does not attend the context in which it occurred. Munro and his ilk found themselves needing to respond to a wholly different set of concerns than those addressed by their predecessors on the various APSA committees on instruction. The Committee of Five faced a crisis of dissemination of political science knowledge. The Committee of Seven considered how political science knowledge could be put to effective use. The members of the Munro Committee felt they needed to defend the very authority of political science.

Any number of factors can be cited to explain this authority crisis; I prefer to think of it as being overdetermined. One could readily cite (in some loose chronological order) how the republican political commitments of the discipline's founders were shaped by the German university model from which they drew their institutional plans, which were, in turn, forged by the professionalizing and technocratic tendencies of the Progressive movement, themselves transformed by the backlash against Progressivism, the growing anti-intellectualism of American culture, the Red Scares of the late teens, and the anti-university "counterrevolution" of the late teens and twenties.

But whatever the particularities of the explanation(s) one might prefer, it was the effect of these changes that should draw interest.

To some extent, as I hope to have suggested, the discipline's response to these forces of change was already beginning to crystallize. The unique position of the modern university in American education made it easy to marginalize the civic education of citizens and leaders. By means of a readily accepted institutional division of labor, academic political science did just that. This division of labor may have favored an emphasis on the civic education of civil servants, but the rise and fall of the administrative reform ideal made it useful to marginalize this mission as well. In the aftermath, all that remained of the original tripartite civic education ideal (educating citizens, civil servants, and scholars) was the task of training political scientists.

To put the point somewhat simply, when the authority of the discipline had come under question, the identity of the discipline became more tightly linked to the training of scholars in "authoritative" modes of knowledge. By the 1920s, this often meant a model of knowledge drawn from some or another reconstruction of the logic of the natural sciences; a form of scientism, if you will.

I don't mean to oversimplify these developments. Worries about the authority of academic political science surfaced long before the formation of the APSA in 1903 and might even be considered a nucleating issue for the Association's founding. As early as 1905, Henry Jones Ford urged the members of the newly established professional guild to think about training the "generations of scholars" who could "bring political science to a position of authority as regards practical politics" (1906, 206). But it was not until after 1920 that these concerns came to define much of the identity of the discipline.

What this suggests is that the rise of scientism was not—contrary to so many accounts (e.g., Crick 1959; Ricci 1984)—the cause of the decline of the civic education ideal but an effect of the peculiar concatenation of circumstances that constricted the meaning of "political science" to the training of political scientists in rigorous research methods. With the authority of the discipline at stake, it hardly made sense to worry about the dissemination and utilization of knowledge. What was needed was more, and hopefully better, knowledge. This would restore (or perhaps simply establish) the discipline's intellectual authority.

From Scientism to Disciplinary Reproduction

The 1922 publication of the Munro Committee report marked a moment when scientism became the most popular response to challenges to the intellectual authority of the discipline, and when disciplinary reproduction (i.e., the training of future scholars) became the instrument of this response.

In the context of the discipline's authority crisis of the late teens and twenties, the advantages of scientism were obvious to its advocates. To many critics, however, there were also serious problems with this metatheoretical *cum* pedagogical shift.[5] Reading the disciplinary literature from this period leaves one with a sense of *deja vú*. The debate about scientism became something of a fixture in disciplinary discourse after this initial authority crisis.[6] This said, it is difficult not to agree with Somit and Tanenhaus who quipped that "By the early 1930s everything there was to say for and against a science of politics had been pretty well said, over and over again" (1967, 122).

Worse than being redundant, the debate might be pointless. The 1930 report of the Committee on Policy seems to have settled the matter decisively. The Committee's ordering of disciplinary priorities gave place of honor to research, named publication as a political scientist's second most important responsibility, and relegated citizenship and public service to third among the most important duties of professionals in the discipline. Civic education

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had been identified as merely one of the discipline's defining commitments. Research and publication, once instruments for establishing and disseminating knowledge for civic education purposes, had been elevated to ends in themselves.

With characteristic understatement, Somit and Tanenhaus suggested that such a reordering of priorities "might have transpired even if there had been no science of politics movement," but that "the sequence of events makes it reasonable to infer that scientism accelerated, if it did not actually inspire, a changed outlook in the discipline's hierarchy of values" (1967, 132). Obviously, scientism has not undermined civic education in the discipline, now or in the past.[7] Whatever else the advocates and critics of scientism might have said (and still say), the move toward scientism merely marked the perceived need for, and benefit of, severing "research" from civic education.

While concerns about the authority of the discipline have animated bitter disputes about what "real" political science was, the fact of the matter is that these disagreements have had negligible impact on the growth of the profession. If there were some essential link between public and/or institutional support for academic political science and the validity of, or even some agreement about, its authority claims, the ongoing disputes about these issues would have killed off academic political science long ago. Put bluntly, scientism did not save or corrupt academic political science. The growth of American higher education did.

To grow, political science needed more political scientists. As the years passed, political scientists needed to have Ph.D.s to qualify for academic appointments. And in the academic growth industry, research and publication—not a dedication to educating citizens, not a dedication to educating civil servants, not a commitment to public service, and not even dedication to any particular conception of scientific inquiry—became the means by which Ph.D.s could be distinguished from each other.

What became clear by 1930, if not earlier, was that what counted was how much research a political scientist produced and published. Within a few short years, dedication to "research and publication" cut across methodological orientation, across theoretical paradigms, across research traditions, across subfields, and across the academic disciplines themselves. So, by the mid-1940s, "The purpose of the Ph.D. program, most political scientists agreed, was to turn out 'original, creative researchers'" (Somit and Tanenhaus 1967, 103). Indeed, in what would have seemed a supreme irony to William Bennett Munro, "creative research" even came to include publishing doubts about what constituted "creative research."

Civic Education and Disciplinary Self-Interest

These changes were not lost on astute observers of the discipline. In 1930 Harold Laski observed a tendency in American political science "to judge men by their volume of published output . . . a facile test of promotion naturally welcome to busy administrators." A decade later, Benjamin Lippincott noted that in larger universities where *academic* political science was being defined it was the "quantity of writing" that often determined promotion (quoted in Somit and Tanenhaus 1967, 92). These proclivities, shared by most other disciplines, formed part of what Norman Foerster thought was the means by which "The American state university has progressively tended to subvert the higher interests of American democracy" (1937, 1).

This remains a searing indictment. As Foerster saw it, by the 1930s many universities "had upon their faculties scholars and scientists of national and international repute . . . skilled in the training of specialists." When those in training "received the stamp of specialization," they had "a fair chance to rise to prominent teaching positions." To many academics-in-training, it was already becoming obvious, and "Department heads, deans, and presidents made it plain that the way to advancement in the teaching profession was the publication of articles and books offering contributions to the sum of knowledge" (107, 108).

Most political scientists at, or educated in, major research institutions will recognize their departments, their colleagues, their teachers, in Foerster's comments. If you want to get ahead in academic political science, you don't spend your time engaging in "civic education." You spend it doing research. The rewards for excellence in civic education are few, far between, and little coveted; the rewards for publication are many, immediate, and—for so many academics—highly significant.[8]

I think Sande Cohen may be overstating by claiming that "The 'research model' is undoubtedly a colossal piece of narcissism" (1993, 61–62), but there is something disconcerting (if not disingenuous) about political scientists worrying about citizen apathy when apathy in the academic republic is no less rampant. The two forms of apathy, moreover, may have more in common than might be at first sight apparent. Why would citizens use their education to do anything more than serve their own self-interests when acting as good citizens is likely to result in the diminishment of material or reputational status? When it comes to civic commitments, the peculiarly modern cliché that "virtue is its own reward" rings more true stated obversely as "virtue has its own punishments."

This structural condition is perhaps the most significant obstacle to the renewal of a commitment to civic education in academic political science. Any disciplinary rededication to civic education will have to await a monumental reconstruction of American academic culture. When a scholar's reputation rests as much on his or her success as a civic educator as it does upon his or her publication count, the discipline might change. Until then, civic education will fit only with great difficulty into a culture where institutional, departmental, and individual self-promotion define academic success, honor, and recognition.

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Caveant Consules

Some will insist the picture I have drawn is a caricature. They will point to the civic education projects at many colleges and universities—including research institutions. I know these exist. But if their existence were the rule rather than the exception, there would hardly be a need for an APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the Next Century.

A more troubling objection may come from those who believe that academic political science ought not push too hard in the direction of restructuring itself to accommodate a renewed commitment to civic education. Surprisingly enough, it is these critics who would be in the best position to draw directly on past APSA efforts to assess and improve political science pedagogy.

The 1951 Committee for the Advancement of Teaching was the first to have taken up the issue of civic education in over two decades, and it was the last to do so for many years after. It also reviewed a disciplinary condition very different from that which the earlier commitees had considered, but hardly at all different from the condition we are in today.

All of the usual issues were treated: citizenship education, education for public service, and the education of future scholars (graduate education). The report was virtually ignored, perhaps precisely because its recommendations were so innocuous. On even the most complimentary reading, the 1951 report only endorsed the status quo. Opponents of stronger commitments to civic education could point to the Committee's conclusion that there was already "far more 'practical' instruction in citizenship . . . than even most members of the profession realize." They could also point to the many political scientists, "unsung heroes . . . in colleges and universities sprinkled from coast to coast," who were ably shouldering the discipline's civic education commitments. Moreover, they could note that even if a course was not specifically listed as having a civic education component of emphasis, it did "not have to be 'practical' in its catalog description to be vital in fact." And, in the final analysis, they could readily note that the "emphasis on citizenship in the beginning [usually American Government] course" certainly served to buttress the discipline's civic credentials (APSA 1951, 36–37, 188–94).

These findings must have come as a great relief to those who thought that the discipline was just-as-it-should(could)-be. Similar sorts of claims could also be made by those more or less content with the status quo today. Civic educators, on the other hand, found (and find) themselves advocating a commitment that had already become "pure futility and waste" from the perspective of many political scientists' career concerns, as well "pure futility and waste" from the perspective of those who, for one reason or another, were (and are) happy with the discipline's contours and character.

In the context of recent public agitations for "civility," "civic engagement," and "citizenship," it was probably inevitable that APSA would respond by once again reconsidering what the discipline has done for civic education in the United States. The question is whether we can succeed in doing today what we have consistently failed to do in the past, especially when we recognize that our situation is very different from our predecessors'. In 1908 the average political scientist might have asked, "How can we disseminate the findings of political science?" In 1916 she might have asked, "How can we make sure that well-trained civil servants are serving the public?" In 1922 she might have asked, "How can we secure the intellectual warrants of the discipline?" These concerns have now become mere "academic questions" with little real-world relevance. Today, the average political scientist can, at best, only ask, "How will committing myself to civic education initiatives affect my chances for getting a job, tenure, or promotion?" Most likely, she will simply dismiss these initiatives as did members of the 1951 Committee, insisting that enough is already being done.

It was only a few years ago that many academic political scientists believed apathy was "functional" for American democracy. There is no small irony in the fact that at the moment when the discipline is prepared to abandon this former article of faith (or is it science?), and embrace participation in civic life as a remedy for (rather than a source of) the problems of American democracy, we might be prevented from doing so because apathy has become functional for success in the academic republic. From this one can only conclude that the APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the Next Century may have to address the problem of apathy in the academic republic as a precondition for addressing the problem of apathy in the political republic. Otherwise, some future historian of the discipline may cite the TFCE along with earlier APSA efforts when she tries to explain to her colleagues why "civic education in academic political science" has always been something of an oxymoron.

Notes

1. Somit and Tanenhaus (1967, 42–48) provide a good introduction to the ways that research, teaching, and service were combined in a civic education ideal for the first two generations of American academic political scientists. I believe, however, that to some extent they allowed a more contemporary division of these three aspects of disciplinary activity to drive their analysis of the founding period. When examined more closely for thematic character, and when set in the historical context of the university reform movement, the reflections of these early practitioners looks less contradictory or conflictual than Somit and Tanenhaus's account might suggest. With this caveat in mind, however, their account is still without rivals.

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2. Schacter cites the 1916 final report of this committee. The passages I cite in this essay come from the 1914 preliminary report of the committee.

3. The quote is from W.A. Schaper in the 1906 report on the establishment of what became known as the Committee of Five (APSA 1906, 225).

4. The APSA Presidential Addresses by Charles Merriam in 1925, Charles Beard in 1926, and Munro in 1927, provide an interesting study of the contentions in the discipline over the issues of scientism and civic education. Merriam was a vocal defender of the complementarity of scientism and civic education. His 1925 address promoted a scientistic outlook with civic educative intent. In 1926 Beard attacked the scientistic pretensions of the discipline, calling them "myopic" and "barren." A year later, Munro would join the attack—this time from the other side of the growing divide, where he dismissed civic education as "pure futility and waste."

Needless to say, the opposition of those thinking like Beard and Munro, rather than those who agree with Merriam, has come to define much of the debate about, and the practice of, research and teaching in academic political science.

5. According to Somit and Tanenhaus (1967), the first wave scientistic agitation swept political science between 1921 and 1932.

6. Somit and Tanenhaus (1967) noted that scientism held sway in political science during the later years of World War II and the years of the behavioral revolution.

7. A similar sort of process can be seen in the development of most academic disciplines, especially in the social sciences and humanities. For most of these disciplines, it is self-reproduction, driven by preoccupations with disciplinary reputation grounded in scholarship, that define their dominant identities. This should not be surprising, especially since these disciplines were all central to the higher education reform project of the late nineteenth century. They, too, were part of a (now narrowly circumscribed) civic education ideal.

From this it should not be assumed that these disciplines followed the same chronology of change, or that the particular features of those changes are not important for understanding the current contours and debates in those disciplines today.

8. This characterization will no doubt draw some protests from some of the vast majority of political scientists who do not work in research institutions. For them, research is perhaps less central to their professional duties than teaching and service. This may well be—although recent trends in the academic job market suggest that even nondoctoral universities and liberal-arts colleges are pushing toward the model I have described. My point is that most practicing political scientists are trained in the research model and, perhaps more importantly, that this model of identity dominates the discipline.

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