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Book Review: Creating Spaces for Transformative Civic Engagement in Higher Education

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Creating Spaces for Transformative Civic Engagement in Higher Education

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Maria Avila, *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing*.
Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2018, 136 pages. ISBN: 978-1-62036-104-7

In *Transformative Civic Engagement Through Community Organizing*, Maria Avila argues that civically engaged teaching and research are transformative when they produce long-term cultural change in individuals, institutions, communities, and society in the direction of democracy. Transformative civic engagement moves society away from neoliberalism (the world as it is) and toward a welfare-oriented democratic state based on social reciprocity (the world as it should be). Transformative community/university partnerships educate students for responsible citizenship and create knowledge that is responsive to community problems and the public interest. To perform this role, civically engaged teaching and research need to bring together on-campus and off-campus stakeholders as co-creators of social change, combining their interests, knowledge, and resources in genuinely reciprocal ways over several years. These criteria exclude mere student volunteerism as well as one-way provision of technical assistance by scholars to communities.

Avila argues that neoliberalism is fundamentally at odds with academic civic engagement. Under neoliberalism, universities, faculty, and students act exclusively as economic actors pursuing individual gain through short-term market transactions. In the welfare-oriented democratic state, universities, faculty, and students are socially responsible actors embedded in long-term relations of reciprocity oriented to collective welfare. Avila uses the terms neoliberalism and market interchangeably, which generates confusion. Her critique is actually directed at neoliberalism (and its tendency to completely subordinate the university to a market logic) and not to the market (which can coexist with public institutions and social reciprocity). Aside from the ultimate goal of democratization of society, Avila's approach does not assume or impose goals for community/university partnerships. Civically engaged scholars help communities develop their own voices and pursue their own goals.

Avila's model is inscribed in the paradigm of community-based teaching and research, with its emphasis on reciprocity and power-sharing between university and communities, and in the tradition of liberal arts education, with its emphasis on the education of socially responsible citizens. The focus of the book is on the application of community organizing to the creation of the institutional infrastructure and leadership to support community-based teaching and research. A key feature of this institutional framework is a reward system (including hiring, tenure, and promotion policies) that encourage (or at least do not punish) civically engaged scholarship.

Her approach to community organizing is constituted by four practices: (1) one-to-one or small group meetings to build relationships and identify potential community leaders and their fundamental motivations for civic agency, (2) building a collective of leaders, (3) understanding and using power, and (4) ongoing critical reflection by individuals and groups about the organizing process. Avila developed this model through a critical reflection on her decades-long experience with community organizing at multiple universities and communities, especially at the Industrial Areas Foundation and at Occidental College. In her own words, the book is "a narrative of my personal and professional journey of over a decade, and how I have gone about cocreating spaces where democracy can be enacted" (p. 17). Avila's reflection included several conversational interviews, through which she and her interviewees (faculty, administrators, students, and community partners) shared stories about civic engagement in an atmosphere of relaxation, thereby cocreating the knowledge that resulted in her approach. The conversational interview is a methodological contribution of the book, which Avila develops when discussing one-to-one meetings.

Although the book focuses on community organizing for the creation of institutional spaces and leadership to support community/university

projects, Avila's approach can also be applied to cases in which community organizing is the actual goal of a community-based research or teaching project. In such cases, the scholar would not work just as another community organizer, because scholars possess a specific type of knowledge and resources and work under particular institutional constraints and expectations. Expertise in qualitative research could enable a scholar to conduct the one-to-one or small group meetings for community organizing and then to analyze those conversations. The analysis would be oriented not only to the actual organizing process but also to theoretical questions. Expertise in political sociology could enable a scholar to facilitate the power analysis step of community organizing, including the mapping of actors, resources, and relationships that can foster or hinder community development. Again, this analysis would be oriented both to the organizing process and to theoretical questions. A scholar could also apply techniques of data collection and analysis in the evaluation that is integral

to the critical reflection practice of community organizing. If a scholar is an expert in civic leadership development, the scholar can also provide leadership training for community members and students.

More broadly, the general principles of Avila's transformative civic engagement—critical thinking, reciprocity, democracy—can guide community/university partnerships that do not necessarily involve community organizing. Avila wrote an important book for those who are unsettled by the deterioration of our public sphere but think that university civic engagement, under the right approach, can foster democratic societies.

About the Reviewer

Felipe A. Filemeno is an assistant professor of political science and global studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He holds a PhD in sociology from Johns Hopkins University, where he was a Fulbright scholar.