

*The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life*, by **Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Elizabeth A. Bennett, Alissa Cordner, Peter Taylor Klein, and Stephanie Savell**. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014. 174 pp. \$39.95 paper. ISBN: 9781612053059.

SHAUNA A. MORIMOTO  
 University of Arkansas  
 smorimot@uark.edu

According to Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Elizabeth Bennett, Alissa Cordner, Peter Klein, and Stephanie Savell, "Americans hate politics" (p. 1). Their book, *The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life*, investigates civic engagement in Providence, Rhode Island, seeking to understand how Americans who quite actively work toward improving their communities at the same time distance themselves from politics. The work offers a timely and insightful contribution to recent scholarship that focuses on the changing ways American citizens engage with the political and civic sphere.

The authors conceptualize their ethnographic study of community engagement in terms of "civic imaginations." Our civic imaginations, they argue, represent our best hopes for the future and our personal theories of how we can improve society. Civic imaginations, therefore, reveal ideal visions of democracy and acceptable forms of political engagement. Accordingly, the research involves understanding the types of civic imaginations represented among engaged citizens and how these civic imaginations allow citizens to be politically engaged while still disavowing politics.

To uncover civic imaginations, the authors observed and participated in select civic organizations in Providence, Rhode Island, including three neighborhood associations, two civic innovator organizations, and two social justice groups. The researchers selected field sites with organizational objectives of political change and/or participation, which were frequently articulated in terms of community-building or involvement. Each author spent time at organizational meetings and events for each group, and talked with, and volunteered alongside, organizational members.

One of the great strengths of the work is that the authors take an agnostic approach to their field sites. That is, they wish to understand what the objectives of engagement are according to those involved in the work rather than to evaluate, ideologically or politically, the value of the work being done. Unlike accounts of community where the idea of what democracy should look like is embedded in the research, this study takes a neutral stance on the impulses of its subjects in an effort to access how community participants themselves envision a successful democratic process. In this way, the civic imaginations of participants emerge from the subjects of the study.

Another noteworthy feature of the book is that the authors undertook a "multi-sited collective ethnography." As fully explicated in the methodological appendix, this involved each researcher following each of the field sites as well as the entire research team coordinating a true equitable collaboration on all parts of the project. As the authors explain, this process was not easy or smooth, but it gave them a confidence in their findings, such that each scholar had to check their own disciplinary and personal biases as they contributed to the overall findings and argument of the book.

Substantively, the book opens with a discussion of American political apathy. Rather than diagnosing this dislike of politics as a net flaw with the current polity, the authors argue that Americans are fundamentally committed to making their communities better. What citizens uniformly stand in opposition to, however, is politics as an inefficient and unsavory process. Because of this, Americans instead see themselves at the forefront of rescuing the United States from the corruption of "politics" and replacing it with more genuine and organic ways of improving society.

In highlighting discourses of an "improved" democracy, the book makes its most valuable contribution. The authors find three types of civic imagination apparent in their field sites: those concerned with power and inequality, citizens working toward social solidarity and consensus, and community members who pursue collective solutions to social problems. As the authors point out, each of these ideas

about engagement, as well as the ways they are enacted, is legitimately democratic and political. Furthermore, each offers potential alternatives to, or at least significant opportunities for improvement on, the current state of American political life. Whether we see activist protest, or opportunities for voice and collaboration with government, or new solutions to extant social problems as the most effective way to improve society influences not only our visions for the future, but also the primary ways we are likely to enact the democratic process.

Of course, each of these civic imaginations also has "blind spots." While activists might not see the ways that their tactics of opposing power can alienate those with less confrontational imaginations, others who build solidarity tend to rely on limited networks and outreach and therefore reflect only the "solidarity" of those with whom they share status and values. Further, discourses of problem-solving can focus on the process to the detriment of outcomes.

The authors reserve the final substantive chapter of the book for a conversation on inequality. Civic engagement, they remind us, is particularly important during the current era of increasing social and economic inequality and continuing retrenchment of the welfare state. While activists' civic imaginations involve seeking equity, groups with both solidarity and problem-solving civic imaginations skirt around or ignore inequality. The authors argue that the failure to address inequality is detrimental to any organization that promotes community engagement. Indeed, ignoring inequality likely excludes those who are structurally disadvantaged while those with more privilege define problems and detail solutions. As a result, rather than improving democracy, groups with solidarity or problem-solving imaginations may actually exacerbate exclusionary politics in their communities.

While the ways that inequality poses a threat to democracy cannot be understated, the authors do not seem to fully interrogate how turning a blind eye to inequality is not an incidental oversight, but instead is deeply connected to organizational members' civic imaginations. Although none of the community members are calling for "more inequality," their ideas about the extent to which inequality is a public and political problem

is another issue entirely. The authors admit that incorporating inequality "is likely to cause conflict in that it necessitates identifying groups—the haves and the have-nots, the privileged and the oppressed—and asserting which groups deserve new privileges or heightened constraints" (p. 121). However, they do not consider that basing one's civic imagination on solidarity or problem-solving rather than power issues might, indeed, be an effort to avoid such calculations. By not addressing inequality, the privileged do not have to relinquish their positions but are still "democratically improving" their communities. Moreover, even those with the most well-developed civic imaginations, privileged or not, will experience and express inconsistencies in how these civic imaginations get translated into policy goals, political expectations, and controversial questions about advantages, resources, and wealth distribution. The lack of in-depth discussion about how our civic imaginations are connected to our positions and power thus leaves the reader wanting. Indeed, lacking further analysis, civic imaginations can be understood to represent the real ways that our political ideologies are founded on (and hence re-establish relationships of) inequality and political position.

This shortcoming, however, opens up wide avenues to further interrogate the relationships between inequality and democracy, and, in particular, to puzzle over how these issues are envisioned and enacted by those engaged in their communities. And by taking citizens' civic work seriously, this book provides a valuable and easily accessible contribution for graduate and undergraduate students of sociology, politics, and social and civic culture. Moreover, it is an important read for activists, policymakers, and anyone interested in improving our democracy.