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Review of Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini, was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Review of Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*

Abstract

In his important and provocative book, *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson argues that there have been four distinct eras of American civic life, each characterized by a different model of citizenship. In the first era, roughly corresponding to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, citizens deferred to the leadership of political elites, and civic responsibility consisted mainly of affirming the legitimacy of this ruling caste. In the second era, in place throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, citizens played a more central role, though one orchestrated by strong local party organizations that mobilized the masses through patronage, entertainment, and other individual, material rewards rather than through detailed appeals to ideology or issues.

Disciplines

Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

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Michael Schudson. *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. 390 pp. \$17.95 (paper).

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In his important and provocative book, *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson argues that there have been four distinct eras of American civic life, each characterized by a different model of citizenship. In the first era, roughly corresponding to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, citizens deferred to the leadership of political elites, and civic responsibility consisted mainly of affirming the legitimacy of this ruling caste. In the second era, in place throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, citizens played a more central role, though one orchestrated by strong local party organizations that mobilized the masses through patronage, entertainment, and other individual, material rewards rather than through detailed appeals to ideology or issues.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet another transformation occurred, in large part a reaction to the partisan politics that preceded it. This era, in place until the 1950s, was characterized by two somewhat competing models. The dominant model, emerging from Progressive reforms, emphasized managerial efficiency, a nonpartisan professional press, and government by experts. The second, less dominant model emphasized the direct participation of citizens in politics and policy making and was characterized, on the one hand, by local discussion groups, salons, and other forms of civic deliberation and, on the other, by the emerging art and science of public opinion polls. The final era, beginning in the 1950s and characterizing much of today's nonelectoral politics, is dominated by the "rights-conscious" citizen. In this model, individual and collective rights drive the plot lines of politics, and the judicial rather than the executive or legislative branches becomes the center stage on which these dramas unfold.

The description of civic life in *The Good Citizen* is more nuanced than this brief overview suggests. Schudson is generally careful in showing that there were alternative models in play in each of these eras; that elements of def-

erence, partisan politics, expertise, direct democracy, and civil rights could be found in each era; and that each new model of citizenship overlaid rather than replaced prior models. He is also careful in pointing out that each of these models of civic life carry with them positive and negative implications for the quality of democracy. But running throughout *The Good Citizen* is a consistent theme: that the role of the citizen in American civic life has always been more circumscribed in practice than idealized models of “rule by the people” would imply and that, viewed historically, the current state of civic life is at a minimum no less vibrant than in past eras and is arguably a preferable mix of elite and mass democracy.

While there are numerous strands to this argument, it is played out most directly in Schudson’s critique of what he views as the problematic ideal of “the informed citizen,” which emerged most explicitly late in the nineteenth century. He argues that this ideal has few roots in the theories and practice of American democracy that preceded this era; that its ascendancy in the twentieth century has led to a sanitizing of politics, stripping it of the visceral, emotional elements that served as powerful motivating forces in earlier eras; that it sped the rejection of partisan politics and of a politics that is intertwined with everyday social life; and that it has created such impossible intellectual demands on citizens that it serves to weaken rather than strengthen efforts to create a more participatory, democratic civic life.

In the conclusion of *The Good Citizen*, Schudson writes that “the model of the informed citizen . . . still holds a cherished place in our array of political values, as I think it should, but it requires some modification” (p. 309). His recommendation is for a more realistic model in which most citizens regularly “monitor” or “scan” the political and social environment, learning enough to be “poised for action if action is required” (p. 311). And while he acknowledges that “there is surely some line of willful ignorance that, once crossed, crosses out democracy itself . . . [and that the] teaching of democracy and the modeling of democracy should never stop,” he also argues that “we should have in view plausible aims that integrate citizenry competence with specialized expert resources” (pp. 311–12). In the end, “there must be some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands of self-government” (p. 310).

Schudson would find a great deal of support for his argument in much of the public opinion literature. Polling since the 1930s has consistently documented low levels of political knowledge among the American public, leading Philip Converse to write that “the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of an informed observer, astonishingly low” (1975, p. 79). Imbedded, as this research was, in an era in which the model of the informed citizen was dominant, these findings produced a great deal of concern. “It seems remarkable,” wrote Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, “that democracies have survived through the centuries. . . . That is

the paradox. Individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists” (1954, p. 312).

A good deal of the public opinion theory and research that has emerged over the last 40 years has been an attempt to resolve this apparent paradox. Starting from what E. E. Schattschneider (1960) called a “realist’s view,” many have argued that the need for a generally informed citizenry is overstated. For these scholars the solution to Berelson’s paradox is not to change citizens—or the system in which they operate—but to rethink the definition of democracy itself. In this view (one that is quite consistent with that articulated in the last chapter of *The Good Citizen*), real democracy functions through some combination of government by experts, the availability of “attentive publics,” the resourceful use of heuristics and information shortcuts by citizens, and/or the beneficent effects of “collective rationality” wherein the whole of citizen awareness is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Good Citizen is not without shortcomings. Given that it covers 200 years of U.S. history, in places it oversimplifies what are much more complex tensions regarding the theory and practice of citizenship in each of the periods examined (e.g., the competing impulses of mass and elite democracy that characterized the third era deserve more explication than they receive). At times the portrayal of the “informed citizen” model begins to look too much like a “straw man” (e.g., few serious advocates for an informed citizenry would disagree that “we should have in view plausible aims that integrate citizenry competence with specialized expert resources” [pp. 311–12]). And the recommendations included in the final chapter avoid many of the thornier issues that underlie debates regarding the informational requisites of good citizenship (Do most Americans know enough to be the monitorial and rights-bearing citizens that Schudson advocates? How does one explain or address the systematic differences in political knowledge across race, gender, income, etc.?).

These shortcomings are minor compared to the book’s many contributions, however. *The Good Citizen* provides a compelling argument for both the changing, contextual nature of democracy and for the negative consequences associated with unrealistic definitions of good citizenship. As such, it also represents a challenge to practitioners, theorists, and researchers (myself included) who believe that in attempting to rehabilitate the image of ordinary citizens by downplaying the possibility or necessity of an informed public, we run an equally great risk of selling both citizens and democracy short. Regardless of where one stands on this issue, *The Good Citizen* is must reading for anyone interested in or concerned about the future of democracy in the United States.

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Elaine B. Sharp. *The Sometime Connection: Public Opinion and Social Policy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999. 256 pp. \$17.95 (paper).

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What is the relationship between public opinion and government policies in the United States? This question bears on the influence of (or some other role for) public opinion in American democracy, and it has ramifications for how democratic politics might play out worldwide. With the expansion of survey research, national public opinion data became available so that researchers could begin to study the correspondence or correlation over time between the public's policy preferences and government actions. *The Sometime Connection* is one of the few book-length works that elaborate on this question and examine it directly in some depth; it is the right book at the right time to analyze the opinion-policy connection in the cases of important social and economic welfare issues. Specifically, there are separate chapters that analyze crime and imprisonment, affirmative action, the regulation of pornography, abortion, welfare assistance, and Social Security.

To understand how opinion and policy are connected and to make normative as well as empirical judgments about this connection, the author is concerned not only with the possibilities of responsiveness or nonresponsiveness of policies to public opinion but also with whether public opinion is real and meaningful to begin with and whether political leaders or others have "manipulated" public opinion in order to align it with government policy. Thus the author not only builds on and adds to past research on the statistical relationship between public opinion and policy but also connects to it the study of "non-attitudes" (as defined by Philip Converse and reconsidered by John Zaller) and of influences on public opinion about important policy issues as they are actively debated.

The author justifies the book's focus on social policy by selecting specific issues that should have been visible and relatively well known, and for which "social policy touches the lives of ordinary people every day" (p. 2). The issues, then, are each important in their own right, and they cover a sufficiently