Can Good Works Build the Good Society?
A Critique of the Ideals of Citizenship Underlying the Idea of National Service

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National service is said to build democracy by fostering "better citizens" who, for example, volunteer more frequently. To remain viable, national service programs in the U.S. must distance themselves from politics. Achieving political neutrality requires active depoliticization, freeing service from political and economic context. Ignoring larger forces that shape social inequities, apolitical service contributes to the entrenchment of these injustices and diminishes the power and promise of democratic citizenship. If citizenship is understood as a relationship of reciprocity that makes demands of the state as well as of individual citizens, then healthy citizenship in a robust democracy requires consciousness of the very circumstances that make service necessary and must incorporate strategies of political activism and agitation.

Introduction

> One of my proudest accomplishments as president was to help revive our tradition of citizen service through the AmeriCorps national service initiative. […] Citizen service will help us manifest our faith [in democracy] and secure our future. – William Jefferson Clinton (2002)

> But democracy, by definition, cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every 'citizen' can 'govern'…Political democracy tends towards a coincidence of the rulers and the ruled. – Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

In September of 1993, President Bill Clinton authorized Public Law 103-82 (H.R. 2010), the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (NCSTA), establishing the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS). The Corporation's mission, according to CNS' own *2003 Performance and Accountability Report*, "is to provide opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to engage in service that addresses the nation's educational, public safety, environmental and other human needs" (p. 4). Charged with the administration of a variety of national service initiatives, CNS' largest service program is AmeriCorps. Through AmeriCorps, volunteers (numbers of whom have annually ranged from 20,000 to 50,000 based on congressional budgetary approval) are given token stipends to "serve with hundreds of local community-based organizations and national organizations" (CNS, p. 3), and receive, upon completing their terms of service, modest educational awards for qualified educational expenses and/or loans.

AmeriCorps is sometimes described as a domestic Peace Corps, an analogy offering a thread tying some of the ideologies and implications of AmeriCorps to those of other development approaches elsewhere. The need for something resembling a domestic Peace Corps blurs the tired binary of developed and underdeveloped countries. Rather, all countries are developing. There exists a continuum of development, along which every country is itself unevenly stretched – engaged in ongoing and sometimes contradictory or conflicting processes of development, simultaneously progressing, stagnating and even regressing. At any given moment, there are usually vast discrepancies in the extent, pace, distribution and direction of development processes within countries as well as between them.

The United States is neither altogether unique nor separate vis-à-vis the global south. Indeed, many of the very forces of economic liberalization and globalization often credited with increasing prosperity and furthering development in parts of some of the poorest regions of the world could also be said to be undermining development in parts of the United States. For example, regarding the fate of unskilled American workers, Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz (2005) underscores: "While free trade may ultimately make every country better off, not every individual will be better off. … Among other things, a flatter world means a less flat America – more inequality." Economic advancement in less developed parts of the world may advance the need for more improved, intense development efforts within countries usually regarded as developed.

The larger message here is one to which this essay will return again and again: effective service demands some awareness of, and attention to, institutions and dynamics beyond the particular community of concern. Over the past two decades, there have been powerful impetus for decentralization and devolution throughout the world, yet also at play are potent forces of global integration. Nowhere can civil society be meaningfully conceived without consideration of the dynamics of socioeconomic structures and political strictures, and service thus conceived runs the risk of reinforcing rather than confronting social injustice. It is just such a conception, however, that is encouraged by the present expression of national service in the United States. While Americans extol the virtues of service, believing deeply in its transformative and redemptive power, national service envisaged as "service that addresses the

nation's educational, public safety, environmental and other human needs" (CNS, 2003, p. 4) raises disquieting questions and is more chimera than reality.

This essay emerges, at least in part, out of my own experience with national service, as an AmeriCorps volunteer with City Year, a much-lauded national non-profit organization. For all I gained from my time at City Year, I harbor a deep ambivalence and concern about the effectiveness, implications and underlying ideology of such service programs. There is much to interrogate about the assumptions and outcomes of national service. Whatever such service has done, in President Clinton's words, to "help us manifest our faith" in democracy, it has done very little to help us, in President Clinton's words, "secure our future" or, for that matter, the future of democracy. This paper argues that vibrant, well-functioning democracies demand service, but not all forms of service manifest genuinely democratic ideals. Rather, the kind and capacity of service are of crucial importance. A deepening of our faith in democracy must manifest itself in a very different manner of service than the one widely promoted by most contemporary advocates of national service.

Citizenship, Social Justice and the Good Society

From John Rawls' contributions to our understanding of justice to Amartya Sen's more recent work on human development, it is no longer tenable for those who proclaim their dedication to democracy (or their commitment to a culture of life) to concern themselves with only such broad, unfocused measures as GDP. Similarly, despite the analytical convenience of focusing upon – and, indeed, the vital importance of ensuring – characteristics such as free and fair elections, the democratic-ness of democracies cannot be evaluated solely on narrow procedural grounds. An honest devotion to liberal democracy demands substantial interest in the contours and consequences of distributional issues and in the real lives of individuals, i.e., the outcomes of the lives of the least advantaged among us. Such an interest, if genuine, would of course necessitate a concomitant commitment to social transformation.

Good governance has an important role to play in the shape of social transformation, in ensuring fair and sound policy formulation. While questions of constitutional design and the implementation of a strong series of institutional checks and balances may be critical for good governance, the most important wellspring of good governance emerges from the designs of a politically engaged citizenry and the series of checks and balances with which they confront the government. Good governance and good citizenship are dialectically intertwined, mutually referential and reinforcing, and it is only meaningful to speak of the two in conjunction.

Citizenship is the lived expression of political philosophy, of how we understand what is fair and right. "Since they properly concern duties, obligations, privileges, and rights," writes the eminent social theorist Charles Tilly (1997), "discussions of citizenship necessarily proceed in a normative shadow. … Ideas of citizenship vindicate visions of the good civic life" (p. 599). Likewise, visions of the good civic life vindicate ideas of citizenship. Tilly forwards an understanding of citizenship as "a set of mutual rights and obligations" that "designates a set of mutually enforceable claims relating categories of persons to agents of government" (p. 600). He continues: "Like relations between spouses, between co-authors, between workers and employers, citizenship has the character of a contract."

The "mutual rights and obligations" of citizenship to which Tilly refers materialize from that underlying social contract. Good governance is characterized by a government's execution of its obligations as much as good citizenship is contingent upon citizens' fulfillment of their duties. The "mutually enforceable claims" are rooted in a social contract theory. "A social contract theory can be defined as, most typically, one which grounds the legitimacy of political authority, and the obligations of rulers and subjects (and the limits thereof)," writes political theorist Michael Lessnoff (1990, p. 3). At the core of the social contract and at the heart of good governance lie fundamental requirements regarding reciprocity.

Lessnoff further explains that "the problem of conflicting interest cannot be avoided by social contract theory":

> Questions of distribution of wealth, for example, could hardly be avoided. Should a Lockean solution be adopted, endorsing and protecting private property rights no matter how unequal, so long as the property was acquired in appropriate ways? Or should the Rawlsian solution be preferred, with its requirement of government action to secure 'a social minimum'? (1990, p. 3)

Lessnoff thus concludes "every social contract theory … *must* be a theory of justice" (1990, p. 3), and it likewise follows that every theory of citizenship must incorporate a theory of justice. Any understanding of good citizenship implicitly says something about justice, something in reference to the roots and remedies of social inequities.

In a true democracy, these outcomes matter – they *must* matter. Promoting service that fails to grapple with issues of justice reveals at least an anemic understanding of democratic citizenship, if not a fragile democracy itself. The nature of engagement and participation are revealing reflections of the quality of democracy. Whatever the redemptive power of charitable acts, participation disengaged from politics neither serves nor saves democracy. Meaningful participatory citizenship is not neutral, but must speak truth to power and cannot turn a blind eye to larger forces of injustice that undermine democracy.

Politics and Priorities of AmeriCorps

The NCSTA, as originally proposed by President Clinton, faced what one commentator has described as "a buzz saw of resistance from the increasingly powerful House Republicans" (Just, 2003, p. 9). Arising out of vigorous debate and a contentious political process, the shape of the final bill signed into law by the President evidenced the many compromises needed to enact most any piece of legislation. Writing with James Perry in 2000, Leslie Lenkowsky, at the time a member of CNS's board of directors and later CEO of CNS under President George W. Bush, wrote that "the idea of national service has rightly been dubbed [by Steven Waldman] 'the Swiss Army Knife' of American public policy" and "consensus on CNS's principal mission remains elusive" (p. 304).

The multifaceted "findings and purpose" section of the NCSTA (§2) enumerates a host of reasons and solutions justifying the bill. On the grounds that [1] "there are pressing unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs" throughout the U.S., [4] Americans "can improve their communities and become better citizens through service to the United States," and [6] young people "can be empowered through their service, and can help provide future community leadership," the Act aims to [1] meet those unmet needs, [2] "renew the ethic of civic responsibility" [6] "expand and strengthen existing service programs," [7] "build on the existing organizational service infrastructure, and [8] "provide tangible benefits to the communities in which national service is performed."

In other words, the NCSTA offers an honest appraisal of present policies and societal arrangements as failing to meet important human needs, and suggests that this situation can be best attacked and remedied through service. Service is supposed to create "better citizens," appropriate service, it is posited, can easily enough be encouraged through an existing infrastructure of organizations, with its impact evident in the tangible benefits to those served. Notwithstanding the wide net cast by the NCSTA and lack of consensus on CNS's appropriate mission, The Corporation "began to emphasize the satisfying of unmet needs as AmeriCorps' primary goal as a way of "co-opting the opposition" (Perry et al. 1999, p. 231). In fact, Steven Waldman correctly predicted in the pages of *The New Republic* in 1995, Republicans would "undoubtedly feel silly" about their opposition to national service, once they realized that AmeriCorps "was the solution to their dilemma of how to dismantle the welfare state without seeming cruel" (p. 22).

Over the past decade, CNS has carefully steered a centrist course and AmeriCorps has gained considerable currency in conservative quarters. "Part of what conservatives admire about AmeriCorps is that it strengthens," in Senator John McCain's words, "groups outside of government that provide services to those in need" (2001, p. 16). Due to the "decentralized design" of AmeriCorps, "funding is placed in the hands of state governors, who give it to their National and State Commissions, who in turn make grants to local nonprofits" (McCain, 2001, p. 16). In essence, AmeriCorps is a block grant scheme for service, with funds disbursed and very loosely audited by a national entity, but largely administered by state bodies. Largely uncoordinated at the national level beyond the vital, enduring legacy of the legislatively mandated "emphasis in the agency [CNS] on enforcing the separation of activities it supported from political activism" (Lenkowsky & Perry, 2000, p. 301), AmeriCorps is not so much national service as it is nationalized community service. Consequently, AmeriCorps volunteers are encouraged to be dedicated, focused and unawares.

Prominent and Dominant Discourses of National Service

In divorcing local problems from politics and partisanship, community concerns are removed from the realm of national political realities. Instead, the romantic rhetoric of the Corporation's Vision Statement invokes an idealized nation where "problems in communities are being solved through service" as "service helps people expand their sense of community so that they look first to themselves and to one another to improve their lives"; "service is viewed as nonpartisan and as a form of civic action in which all people take pride" (Corporation for National and Community Service). Service is a source of personal pride and individual service aggregated nationally ostensibly as a basis for national pride.

In this way, service is rendered sterile, surgically separated from political action and agitation. While "today's young people," Senator McCain reminds us, "have little faith in politics, they are great believers in service" (2001, p. 14). Some observers (Hart & Brossard, 2002) praise the fact that "this generation displays a strong sense of self-confidence, believing they personally can make a difference":

> They are especially impressive because, unlike their parents, they are not protesters and marchers, but participators and doers. They want to make a difference. Their volunteerism is up close and personal. (p. 36)

AmeriCorps calls on – and capitalizes upon – this problematic attitude and, rather than problematize it, relies on and reinforces cynicism regarding state action. In fact, AmeriCorps advances a highly individualistic notion of citizenship as service, of citizenship sans the state.

Turning the old feminist mantra on its head, in AmeriCorps the personal is *apolitical* and preferred for precisely that reason. Distinctly dividing "participators and doers" from "protestors and marchers" in this fashion is an endorsement for individual action as morally superior and more engaged and efficacious than collective movements. Drawing a dichotomy between doing and ineffectual politicking, politics is presented as anathema to action. Moreover, it is faith in democracy and the desire to make a difference, rather than indicators of democracy

and measures of outcomes, that are taken as proof of AmeriCorps' soundness.

Tangible benefits, the immediate, visible impacts of volunteering, are taken to be indicative of the validity and effectiveness of service. Citing the "thousands of homes constructed" and "millions of children taught, tutored, or mentored," McCain proclaims that "AmeriCorps achievements are indeed impressive" (2001, p. 15). Nowhere do McCain or other outspoken proponents of national service ask questions as to the quality of the construction or teaching provided by AmeriCorps volunteers, probe the reasons for this need for volunteer infusion, or explore the possibility that other alternatives might better tackle these needs. "Rather than entrust the nation's most pressing social problems to government bureaucracies and trained professionals," wrote Leslie Lenkowsky, while CEO of CNS, "it aims to provide avenues for ordinary people" (2003, p. 12).

Unabashed advocates of national service seem not to think that "to rely on an army of young amateurs to deal with societal needs seems a strangely indirect way to go about it" (Bennett, 2003, p. A21). Nor do supporters seem eager to acknowledge that "trained professionals" typically reign supreme within non-profit organizations and "paid experts are more highly valued than volunteer leaders" (Skocpol, 2004, p. A6). Instead, service is proffered as a simple, straightforward solution to complex societal problems, with rejuvenated, strengthened communities borne out of aggregated individual service.

As CNS CEO, Lenkowsky was unequivocal about the fact that this approach reflects "a political philosophy in which government is limited but citizens are active" (2003, p. 7). Writing in 2002 with John M. Bridgeland, head of the newly-formed Office of USA Freedom Corps, and Stephen Goldsmith, chair of the CNS board of directors, he is even more explicit that their vision "ensures that citizens, rather than government, take responsibility for the health and safety of their neighborhoods and their nation" (p. 19). Driven by a notion of good governance as simply limited government, their recognition of civic responsibility, rightful or not, is inextricably knotted in an abdication of government obligation, an outsourcing of rightful government duties.

An alternative to direct federal intervention, national service appeals to an abiding American faith in federalism, individualism and the ascendancy of individual charitable works, effectively reducing good citizenship to well-intentioned individual engagement in good works. In this narrow vision, national service "aims to provide avenues for Americans … to dedicate themselves to reaching out and ministering to the needy and suffering" and "to bring hope and help to those most needing it" (Bridgeland, Goldsmith & Lenkowsky, 2002, p. 21), with the aspiration of, in the words of a 1999 campaign speech by George W. Bush, "building communities of service and a nation of character" (as cited in Lenkowsky, 2003, p. 7).

Reverend Jim Wallis critically dissects the egoism and conceit of this moral vision:

> The real theological question about George W. Bush was whether he would make a pilgrimage from being essentially a self-help Methodist to a social reform Methodist. God had changed his life in real ways, but would his faith deepen to embrace the social activism of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who said that poverty was not only a matter of personal choices but also of social oppression and injustice? Would Bush's God of the 12-step program also become the God who required social justice and challenged the status quo of the wealthy and powerful, the God of whom the biblical prophets spoke? (2003, p. 21)

Although Wallis is speaking in religious language, in an article regarding "George W. Bush's theology of empire," the underlying question he raises concerns the connection between ostensibly good, moral individual behavior (whether as a pious Christian or as an upstanding American citizen) and larger issues of fairness and equity in the structure of social opportunity. Meaningful citizenship and service, no less than honest religious devotion, require an honest interest in social justice and in challenging "the status quo of the wealthy and powerful."

Wallis' analysis exposes the fact that dominant social myths vis-à-vis the relationship of the individual to society and the state tend to disregard the role of larger socioeconomic structures and contingencies. Charity is not justice, and as Douglas Hicks explains in *Christian Century*, "service can accomplish only so much": "government, the market, civil society and other institutions also have important roles in a good and just society" (2002, p. 11). Individual charity alone does not create social change; help is not reform. Absent systematic pursuit of systemic justice, individual good works, however conscientious, compassionate and/or charitable, ring hollow. Good works are not the only element of good citizenship.

"I Made a Difference to That One!"

Founded in 1988, the expansion of City Year from Boston to fourteen additional cities across the nation would not have been financially feasible without steady funding from CNS.

In keeping with the aim of NCSTA to facilitate public-private partnerships and assist nonprofits with capacity building, the vast majority of the over 6,000 City Year veterans served as members of AmeriCorps.

City Year "seeks to demonstrate, improve and promote the concept of national service as a means for building a stronger democracy" (City Year [*a*]). For City Year and for CNS, confident in the uplifting effects of compounding community service on a national scale, expanded service and civic engagement opportunities are expected to cultivate stronger citizens and, in turn, a stronger democracy. This great promise, though, has been proscribed by its very premises, which seem to equate the vitality of citizenship and democracy with a narrowly-constructed notion of civic participation.

The mythos of service is evident in "the starfish

story," one of many "Founding Stories" which "are told and retold to share the inspiration upon which City Year was built and the ideals and principles which continue to guide its development today," and to propagate "a strong culture that reflects the values its [the City Year community's] members learn and hold in common" (City Year [*b*]):

> A little girl was walking along a beach covered with thousands of starfish left dying in the sun by the receding tide. Seeking to help, she picked up a starfish and tossed it back into the ocean. A man, amused by her action, said to her, "Little girl, there are too many starfish. You will never make a difference." Discouraged, she began to walk away. Suddenly, she turned around, picked up another starfish, and tossed it as far as she could back into the sea. Turning to the man, she smiled and said, "I made a difference to that one!"

This story is said to be "emblematic of the idea that each person we serve is a person who can genuinely benefit from our work. Seemingly hopeless problems can only be solved by taking a first step to begin working on them." (City Year [*c*])

The appeal of this tale lies in the fact that is difficult to malign or find fault with the genuine concern and good intentions of the little girl in this story. Certainly, every starfish lucky enough to be saved does "genuinely benefit," and we should not discount or doubt that genuine benefit. An authentic interest in social justice turns one's attention to broader forces and institutions with systemic effects, but should not degenerate into a denigration or dismissal of the real lives touched by a starfish approach, so to speak. Still, concentrating on one face of a problem hardly constitutes "taking a first step to begin working" on actually solving the underlying problem itself. Ameliorating symptoms is not finding a cure, and it is even further from prevention, which is what solving problems should really entail. If we are concerned about the plight of starfish that have been left "by the receding tide," then we must find some way to go about confronting the crisis of the tide itself.

The alternative is to concede the impossibility of systemic action altogether. This attitude would suggest that serious social problems are intractable and cannot possibly be solved, that they are fated, rather, to return with the regularity and inevitability of the tides, that we can only do our best, *post facto*, to go about addressing symptoms and consequences. Perhaps this is the peculiar paradox of American individualism, characterized by inspired hope and charity on the one hand and a despairing Calvinist resignation on the other. If so, then the moral of the starfish story tells a deeply troubling tale about how we conceptualize the good society, good citizenship and the spirit and reach of service. Social transformation requires repudiating this alternative and instead reformulating the substance of citizenship.

Individualism, Citizenship and Service

The benign intent of individual commitment to community service is seductive, but truly consequential national service "must produce more than individual fulfillment for those involved and temporary assistance for communities in need" (Eisner, 2002, p. 27). Blind faith in the power of individual action engenders the present conception of national service, one which neglects consideration of social barriers and political circumstances, but social conditions and political context always constrain the character of available service opportunities and appropriate service strategies.

Service that only addresses social symptoms *post facto* can serve to condone, perpetuate or uphold governmental choices and administrative arrangements that contribute to creation of those very symptoms recognized as requiring action. City Year veteran Drake Bennett contends: "systemic government solutions rather than piecemeal acts of goodwill better address many of the problems that volunteers tackle" (2003, p. A20). In such situations, when "reduced federal appropriations are starving institutions," the end result is that "well-intentioned young people who fill the gap are enablers of the attack on public services" (2003, p. A20). Political commentator and essayist E.J. Dionne (2002) similarly stresses that "citizenship cannot be reduced to service," in the sense that service "cannot replace the responsibilities of government" or become "an alternative to a genuine summons for national sacrifice or a fair apportionment of burdens" (p. 4).

In December of 2001, Michael Brown, City Year's co-founder and President, appeared on PBS's *a Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, to participate in a panel discussion on service. While Brown argued that "we need to have our civic imagination challenged" and "we need to reinvent American citizenship for the 21st century," his arguments were not particularly imaginative or inventive. He and his fellow discussants simply argued, as so many others elsewhere have, for a further expansion of service opportunities. The thrust of the conversation reflects the national service movement's emphasis on size over scope, quantity instead of capacity, and breadth rather than depth. "We need to get Americorps up to a million people at least every four years and eventually every year," declared Brown. Notwithstanding the segment's title, "A Culture of Service," there was no discussion of the culture of service, although a great deal was perhaps revealed about the cultural common ground of some of national service's most outspoken advocates.

Senator Evan Bayh casually commented upon "the fact of freedom is, in fact, not free," Leslie Lenkowsky urged that "Americans should be expected to give something back to their country," and Michael Brown testified that "people want to believe in something larger than themselves," but none of the commentators actually offered anything in which to believe, discounting the empty patriotic fervor of their call for the mass mobilization of passive participation in service. No

thought was given to the idea that meaningful service must critically engage the relationship of socioeconomic structure and individual agency, and directly question how citizens are connected to one another and to the state. This dream of national service is a vision not of collective action on national needs as locally inflected, but only of a national assortment of individual community-based actions, offering individual assistance by and to people across the country rather than systemic change on a national level.

Service only transforms society when service fosters active, involved, politically engaged citizenship. Service that fails to consider the ties that bind us, service that fails to sincerely interrogate the nature of citizenship, is failed service. Service and citizenship are dialectically interrelated, each informing and inflecting the other, each constitutive rather than purely consequential of the other. Service and citizenship are not wholly distinct, because service itself is an embodiment of a particular construct of citizenship; service itself is saturated with an ideology of citizenship. Citizenship is not simply the sum of certain enumerated behaviors, but is much deeper and more complex than that – and demands a much more robust conceptual framework. Service is a form of civic participation and all civic participation is engendered by an ideology of citizenship, albeit often implicit. Action and ideology cannot be disentangled; it is ideology that gives motivation and meaning to action.

Dionne writes that "if the new generation connected its impulses to service with a workable politics, it could become one of the great reforming generations in our nation's history," (2002, p. 5). For it to become so, Dionne suggests that the national service debate must become "a debate over how we Americans think of ourselves," as well as "a debate over how we will solve public problems" (2002, p. 5) – in other words, a debate about the nature of citizenship, an exploration of ideology. Unfortunately, social scientists who empirically study the nature of service have largely failed to encourage the development of such a debate. The work of social science must penetrate to the heart of prevailing conceptualizations of American citizenship and democracy. Yet, when James Perry and Michael Katula reviewed "37 empirical studies about the relationship between service and citizenship," they found that "formal definitions of citizenship are largely absent in the studies of service and its effects" and that the "vast majority of authors forgo formal definitions of citizenship and proceed directly to discussions of the concepts operationalized in their own research" (2001, p. 332).

Civil Society and Inequality

Kayla Meltzer Drogosz is one analyst who does challenge the false bifurcation of politics and service (2003, p. 15): "And how can goodwill, fellowship, and sympathy transform the public realm? They can do so only through politics." Service and its benefits as lauded by the national service movement lie exclusively outside, and even at the expense of, active efforts to change the political and economic apparatus. Proponents of national service suggest that service invigorates civil society by promoting civic involvement and building social capital, without considering the distorted socioeconomic dimensions of supposedly civil society. Citing "what Benjamin Barber has called the 'rising hegemony of neoliberal theory,' Drogosz calls attention to the fact that "it is certain that far less thought has been given in recent years to how economic inequality defines the very 'civility' of civil society" (p. 16).

Like AmeriCorps' advocates, research on AmeriCorps largely ignores the dynamics of economic inequality. There is little consideration of whether other government policies, or their absence, undermine the ultimate effectiveness of service. Civil society is, in fact, regarded as separate of such issues, its health instead measured by indicators of social capital, to the exclusion of, for example, indicators of the distribution of economic capital. When social capital is thus treated, as an isolated measure of good will and good works, social capital simply describes summated sentimentality – affect, not effects. Such an approach is anathema to the development of a politically relevant concept of social capital.

Social capital is, hence, a concept that has been roundly criticized for its political consequences: "it aides the shift in responsibility for 'social inclusion' from economy to society, and from government to individual, informing policies that focus on social behavior, reducing the cost to government, since … it provides non-economic solutions to social problems" (Franklin, 2003, p. 349). Robert Putnam, perhaps the leading propagator of the idea of social capital, has been taken to task because his "concern with social capital so far has not been linked systematically with the topics of power and inequalities" (Evers, 2003, p. 15), and his "discourse on social capital gives room to a misconception of the interrelationships between politics and civil society, with the latter being considered as a kind of basis for a political superstructure" (Evers, 2003, p. 16). Indeed, dominant discourses of service and social capital do seem to suggest that from the good behavior of individuals, out of isolated individual acts of charity, will arise some sort of utopian polity, with an invisible hand directing rightful social change and no conscious political efforts necessary on the part of individuals in order to achieve social justice.

Putnam himself has been careful at times in distancing himself from such an approach, as in an interview in *The OECD Observer*:

> **Social capital is not a substitute for effective public policy, but rather a prerequisite for it and, in part, a consequence of it.** Social capital … works through and with states and markets, not in place of them. … Wise policy can encourage social capital formation, and social capital itself enhances the effectiveness of government action…(2004, p. 15).

Social capital is an inherently and importantly political

category only of consequence when understood as such. Social capital is of little value when considered or constructed without regard to political and economic capital and the formal distribution and exercise of power in society. Putnam writes elsewhere, with Susan Pharr, that "people who are civically engaged are more likely to ask for and get good government" (2000, p. B5), and it is the extent to which this happens that makes social capital relevant.

Service must be more than an individual act of faith, and in order to pay closer attention to the efficacy and legacy of community service and civic engagement, we must reconsider the distinction between civil society and the administrative state. There is a distinction, but there are also connections, and the connections between civil society and the structures and strictures of the administrative state must be illuminated. If social capital is to be a useful concept, then Putnam's "features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively" (1996, p. 34) ought to offer us a bridge linking society and the state. Thoughtful and productive service and civic engagement demands understanding and engaging the existing political and economic provisions of civil society, upheld by state apparatus.

Civic Engagement, Political Disengagement

National service is purportedly built upon a framework of engagement and participation – its promoters claiming to disdain passive citizenship – and, yet, national service advances an understanding of civic engagement that encourages and embraces political disengagement. In the CNS worldview, the upstanding citizen is the one who prefers polite acts of representative democracy to the raucousness of a participatory democracy that makes demands of government. Beyond voting and volunteerism, AmeriCorps veterans are not inclined to be particularly engaged or to feel politically empowered or optimistic. One study found that while "AmeriCorps participants are significantly more involved in communities at completion of their service commitment" (Simon & Wang, 2002, p. 528), the service experience does not "build members' confidence in public institutions" and members "do not feel that political leaders are generally concerned about them" (p. 529).

Untainted by the ostensibly self-evident unwholesomeness and inefficiencies of politics, service is an alternative to the problems of politics. Civic engagement is offered as a solution for political disengagement, community service a surrogate for political commitment. Michael Dell Carpini, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School:

> Civic engagement has become **defined** as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a local river or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy. (as cited in Bennett, 2003, p. A21)

There is, however, no neutral political void free of ideological pollution, nor any act of service of such sort, wholly pure and innocent, no matter how well-intentioned, naïve or purposefully politically averse. To turn away from politics is to turn away from civics.

When service is approached as if distinctly different and disconnected from participation in the political process (beyond the polite civic engagement of involvement in the most formalized of roles and rituals of representative democracy), it becomes very difficult to make any serious attempt at addressing the underlying conditions that make service necessary. Service of this variety sustains the status quo and thwarts the democratization of political and economic institutions. The aversion to politics undermines not only democratic ends (fair outcomes) but democratic means (good governance) – in short, democracy itself. "Self-government," Drogosz accurately explains, "is not just a social venture; it is a political venture" (p. 17).

The idea that service ought to be nonpartisan and free from ideological pollution is the manifestation of a particular citizenship ideology that promotes citizen service as a substitute for, and as superior to, appropriate state action or intervention. This reflects a social contract in which the burdens and obligations of subjects well exceed those of rulers, which is very far from reflecting the norms of democratic governance. Since all service has political implications and ramifications, supposedly apolitical service ought to be understood the embodiment of a particular (and particularly disingenuous) politics.

The effort to "depoliticize" service is accompanied and accomplished by attempts to dehistoricize the nation's political legacy. In CNS' *2003 Performance and Accountability Report*, the official explication of the Corporation's attempt to address its first strategic goal, that "[s]ervice will help solve the nation's unmet education, public safety, environmental, and other human needs" (p. 6), begins with this extraordinary claim: "Throughout American history, service has been the principal means by which citizens have sought to improve the human condition" (p. 7). No mention is made, to give but a few examples, of Radical Reconstruction, Progressive anti-trust actions, New Deal legislation, the Civil Rights Act or Great Society programs.

Service is not and cannot be free floating, unanchored from ideology and social context. Service reflects a particular understanding of what is and what should be. Choosing to refrain from active political involvement is a political choice with political ramifications, whether the choice is willful or resigned. Those who serve, those who promote service, and those who study service, must all be keenly aware of this fact, and work to critically illuminate underlying assumptions. The failure to do so does not lead to service that is pure or non-partisan, but to service that is instead characterized by either unawareness and/or resignation. Such service closes its eyes and, hence,

contributes to structures of oppression and inequity rather than achieving social justice.

The People and the State

Politically disengaged service does not so much "manifest our faith" in democracy as it does our skepticism of democracy, a disbelief in the possibility of good governance and, indeed, in the possibility of democracy itself. If a democracy is a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," then disbelief in good governance is a disbelief our own ability to do good. The promise of democracy is not simply freedom from government (liberty), but freedom through government (equality). To believe in the former without believing in the latter is to not believe in the central premise of democracy, that people are capable, collectively, of governing themselves.

Both meaningful engagement and legitimate democratic politics presuppose critical *political* engagement by citizens. The writings of Alexis de Tocqueville are often invoked to argue otherwise, to demarcate a line between civil society and the administrative state, and to draw an artificial distinction between civics and politics. Recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, that Tocqueville's "conception of civil society is inextricably linked to strong national government and politically engaged citizenship" (Drogosz, 2003, p. 14, referring to the work of Skocpol and of Wolin). Christopher Simon characterizes Tocqueville's central assessment: "absent the active involvement of citizens exercising innate political freedoms, democratic nations are susceptible to the pursuit of antidemocratic, administratively derived solutions to shared problems of governance" (2002, p. 672).

For Simon, though, AmeriCorps is neutral and democratic, "an important effort to rebuild social capital and civic-mindedness in citizens who are once again being called upon to take a more active role in solving community problems" (2002, p. 675). This is also CNS's own characterization. In its *2002 Performance and Accountability Report*, CNS claims that its "primary strength is the network of non-profits and state agencies that use national resources to achieve local goals through community service" (p. 11).

The rhetoric of democratic decentralization obscures the fact that this is not necessarily the sort of pluralistic grassroots participation that inverts the purported pyramid of federal political power, but a devolution to local elites who may have no cause to be aware or responsive vis-à-vis local needs. As the political sociologist Theda Skocpol explains, "in an associational universe dominated by business organizations and professionally managed groups, the mass participatory and educational functions of classic American civic life are not reproduced," for "America today is full of civic organizations that look upward in the class structure, holding constant rounds of fund-raisers and always on the lookout for wealthy 'angels'" (2004, p. A6).

In the case of AmeriCorps, the wealthy angel is CNS, and even Leslie Lenkowsky acknowledges similar effects on account of The Corporation (Lenkowsky & Perry, 2000):

- Grantees that might be especially close to the grassroots and adept at reaching underserved populations find themselves left out – at least from the substantial amount of funding allocated nationally – largely because they lack the wherewithal to comply with federal rules (p. 303).
- Since many nonprofit groups regard advocacy as an essential part of their mission, the CNS's heightened concern moved the agency toward controlling not just the direction its grantees moved, but also how they conducted their activities (p. 301).
- Moreover, there is some evidence that CNS grantees are switching funds from their own programs to those activities for which federal assistance is available (pp. 305-6).

Lenkowsky and Perry also concede that CNS's priorities are shaped, at least in part, by "the views of politically influential officials and groups" (p. 306). In a sense, then, the top-down and apolitical (read: anti-political) bearing of national service makes it a vision neither of freedom from government nor freedom through government, but rather an elite-administered, "antidemocratic, administratively derived" approach.

This is the picture of civil society operating not outside of politics, but at the behest of politics, the picture of weak citizens serving a strong state, and it depicts the disingenuousness of purportedly neutral, apolitical service. As Marx famously discerned in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." If we fail to take into consideration these circumstances, the power of service and of civic engagement are potentially rendered impotent, or perhaps even unintentionally inflected in counterproductive directions. Apolitical service is ineffective service.

Politics and service are inseparable; good works require good politics.

Reconciling Service and Politics

There does exist scholarship within political science pedagogy that suggests a potential pathway towards a reconciliation of what Tobi Walker has labeled the "service/politics split" (2000, p. 647). Service programs must incorporate robust service learning components to, in Walker's words, "teach political engagement." Others, too, have written about assuming a more politically conscious approach to service. Tony Robinson advocates "pedagogy of liberation" (2000, p. 610), while Mary Kirlin advances "civic skill building" as "the missing component

in service programs" (2002, p. 571).

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne write of "three visions of 'citizenship'" in their article "Educating the 'Good' Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals": "the personally responsible citizen; the participatory citizen; and the justice-oriented citizen" (2004, p. 2). Westheimer and Kahne emphasize the importance of "pursuing dual goals," suggesting that "those committed to educating social activists who practice justice-oriented citizenship would ideally want to couple critical analysis of root causes of injustice with opportunities to develop capacities for participation" (2004, p. 6). To affect social transformation, those who serve must "be able to both analyze and understand structural causes of deeply entrenched social problems and gain the skills and motivation to act by participating in local and national politics and community forums" (2004, p. 6).

The good citizen is interested in more than personal responsibility and/or participation.

To be a citizen presupposes the existence of a state, and good citizenship demands both good politics and good works. Without the former, the latter alone can never amount to much more than the promotion and coordination of random acts of kindness, no matter how well-intentioned or ambitious a national service program. Good citizens can contribute to creating the good society if and only if good citizenship means more than just good deeds. "National service is a means to an end – a point, sadly, too often lost in the dreamy exhortations of this newly popular crusade," and, Jane Eisner reminds us, it "will truly be service if it produces a cadre of informed leaders" (2002, p. 28).

Service cannot be measured merely by numbers of participants or hours of participation. Service requires attention to political obligations and societal outcomes. If we consider the plight of the starfish to be tragic, then we are obliged to do more than rescue a handful of individual starfish, for the failure to do so would itself be tragic. Compassion means, quite literally, "to suffer with," and genuine empathy can be the engine of social transformation, but it demands more than charitable feats. Let us continue tossing starfish back in the ocean, but let us also tackle the tide and work to ensure that fewer wash ashore in the first place.

The topography of development is starkly uneven, with cleavages in access to nutrition, education, healthcare and essential consumer goods along the fault lines of race, gender and class as well as nationality. These are undeniable facts – and indefensible in genuinely democratic societies. Democratic citizenship assumes individual ability and commitment to value and empathize with others' needs, fashioning through politics *and* service a society oriented toward just ends and particularly sensitive to the concerns of the most vulnerable and the least advantaged among us. Faith in democracy demands faith in such a possibility and dedication to realizing that possibility. Only then will we have truly secured our future.

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