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# Knowledge for Social Change: Bacon, Dewey, and the Revolutionary Transformation of Research Universities in the Twenty-First Century

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## Review by Chris R. Glass

Our nation and world face unparalleled social, political, and economic pressures that hold transformative potential. Conversation about the future of research universities is in need of bold visions equal to such a moment. *Knowledge for Social Change: Bacon, Dewey, and the Revolutionary Transformation of Research Universities in the Twenty-First Century* offers a bold vision for democratically minded academics concerned about our nation's future. The authors invite the reader to join a crusade to realize Dewey's vision for participatory democracy through the work of America's research universities. The authors, who are among the stalwarts of the modern community engagement movement, make no secret that the book's intellectual and political projects are meant to be provocative. Some readers may greet their provocations as utopian wishful thinking, but the authors make clear that their vision is serious and practical. Their earnestness and commitment to the transformation of research universities should prompt even the most skeptical reader to consider the radical project they propose.

In the book, the authors outline an ambitious *intellectual project*. The book represents a seminal scholarly contribution to the modern-day community engagement movement as the most comprehensive account to date of the philosophical ideas that ground it. The authors highlight key ideas from this intellectual tradition from Francis Bacon, who envisioned the advancement of knowledge as contributing to "the relief of man's estate," to John Dewey, who envisioned community schools as social centers that serve all members of the community. Importantly, they seek to address what they see as a significant omission in Dewey's work on education: the role of the university as the fulcrum on which the schooling system might be transformed. To this end, in accord with the political project outlined in the book, the authors outline a bold intellectual vision: "to construct a comprehensive, democratic, practical-theoretical approach that would free Western thought and the institutions of Western societies from Plato's 'dead hand,' an approach that would, in our term, 'de-Platonize' their social, political, and educational systems" (p. 49). The authors see themselves as heirs to this democratically minded intellectual tradition

and pay special attention to the contradictions, conundrums, and practical issues that led past projects not to live up to their promise.

On this foundation, the authors outline an ambitious *political project* “to radically transform the research university to *radically advance the advancement of learning and knowledge*,” arguing that “such a movement . . . is both possible and capable of producing and *implementing* the knowledge needed to enable all human beings to enjoy long, healthy, active, peaceful, virtuous, and happy lives” (p. xii). The authors recognize that some readers may greet their thesis as bold rhetoric but not a serious proposal, so they make clear: “Are we suffering from a bad case of delusory utopianism? Obviously, we do not think so” (p. xiii). The key tension for the remainder of the book is whether the authors persuade readers to join them in their crusade.

The book is organized into two major parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1–5) explores the intellectual history of community–university engagement. The first five chapters discuss intellectuals who offered a radically transformed vision of higher education in their respective historical eras. Part 2 (Chapters 6–10) describes the neo-Deweyian rationale for the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. The book concludes with an imperative to radically transform research universities. After outlining and assessing the central argument of the book, I will discuss the book’s contribution to the literature on community engagement.

In the first three chapters, the authors highlight Francis Bacon’s belief in human beings’ unlimited capacity to advance learning for the betterment of the human condition—what Bacon termed the “relief of man’s estate.” Bacon argued that the “old regime of knowledge,” in which individuals worked in isolation, needed to be replaced with new regimes of organized groups who work together for the betterment of the human condition. Likewise, Benjamin Franklin envisioned universities as institutions that would develop citizens with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to “do good,” where moral and intellectual aspects of learning would be intertwined. Franklin postulated that the schooling system was the “strategic subsystem” of society, emphasizing the pragmatic, economic benefits of the University of Pennsylvania to the city of Philadelphia. Universities were a means of social mobility for *all* people, not just institutions, for producing gentlemen from a handful of upper-class students. The authors go on to highlight a series of Progressive Era projects, including Jane Addams’s Hull House, as well as the visionary leadership of university presidents

William Rainey Harper (University of Chicago) and Seth Low (Columbia University). They pay particular attention to issues of sustainability and explore reasons why some of these Progressive Era projects did not live up to their promise. The authors take care to commend universities' efforts to engage the central problems of their cities, but highlight how some efforts were tainted with a noblesse oblige that lacked the mutuality of the vision these institutions put forth.

In the fourth chapter, the authors begin to build their case for a neo-Deweyian vision for community engagement. They note a significant gap in Dewey's work: *the lack of focus on the role of universities*. They also do not hesitate to highlight contradictions in Dewey's efforts to promote progressive education, pointing out that his Laboratory School was a scientific laboratory isolated from what children experienced outside school. They assert that while this *specific* solution was "scholastic, academic, impractical, and unrealistic" (p. 54), Dewey's *general* theories, appropriately applied, have the potential to radically transform the university and schooling more broadly. They believe Dewey's emphasis on reflective and strategic aspects of real-world problem-solving is the most effective means to develop the intelligence not only of individuals, but of entire communities.

The fifth chapter provides a lucid and comprehensive account of the modern community engagement movement that is essential reading for anyone involved in it. The authors trace the long hibernation of university civic engagement after the end of the Progressive Era, followed by the social and political conditions that led to its reawakening in the 1980s. They trace events from the creation of Campus Compact (1985), to the Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University (1999), to the more recent publication of *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (2012). The authors do not shy away from citing recent controversies, including what they term the "crisis of purpose" within the service-learning movement, when disciplinary pedagogical rationales began to rival the democratic and civic purposes of service-learning (p. 79). They argue, "The higher education democratic civic and community engagement movement emphasizes that collaboration inside and outside the academy is necessary for producing knowledge that solves real-world problems and results in positive changes in the human condition" (p. 69). This chapter's historical account illustrates how the community engagement movement continues to adapt as it seeks to achieve its aims.

In the sixth and seventh chapters, the focus shifts to the neo-Deweyan roots of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships and its link with West Philadelphia. The authors outline academically based community service (ABCS) and university-assisted community schools (UACS) as two key strategies behind the Netter Center. The West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), which emerged from an undergraduate seminar led by Benson and Harkavy in 1985, provides the intellectual underpinnings of what is known now as ABCS. For the authors, ABCS is similar to service-learning in that it takes place in a credit-bearing course and involves service activities that are identified with community partners. However, ABCS is rooted in community service and integrated with research, teaching, and learning designed to advance the systemic improvement of the community. It has a “strategic focus on the local manifestation of universal problems” (p. 101) and mobilizes various disciplinary perspectives to understand and act on these problems. Moreover, ABCS aims at the long-term structural improvement of the community, not the immediate alleviation of individual suffering or for the future benefit of an individual student. Benson et al. envision their work at the Netter Center as a “university-wide, community-wide, communal” (p. 105) participatory action research project. For the authors, it is this focus on *communal* that differentiates the approach from others; it promotes genuinely working *with* and *for* the community through ongoing planning and project implementation. A careful reading of the first six chapters usefully unpacks the neo-Deweyan rationale for the work of the Netter Center.

The authors argue for “locally rooted” change that is part of a national and global movement in their final three chapters. They describe the regional, national, and global initiatives of the Netter Center. They also return to their central thesis: that research universities are *part of the problem* and must radically change their institutional cultures and structures. At the heart of their argument is a proposal for a “democratic devolution revolution” that involves the investment of government funds for universities to create strategic, sustainable partnerships. To be clear: governments would be second tier to other entities, such as universities, voluntary associations, faith-based communities, children and their parents; governments would be less focused on delivery of services and instead would fund community–university partnerships. The chapter ends with a call to “democratic-minded academics to create and sustain a global movement to radically transform research universities” (p. 148).

One of this book's most important contributions is the authors' simultaneous retrospective and prospective account of the community engagement movement. It provides a valuable intellectual grounding for any serious-minded academic or graduate student with an interest in community engagement or service-learning. The authors use accessible language throughout the book with anecdotes that allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the implications for research, engaged scholarship, and society. That said, the authors make no secret that their radical vision for transforming higher education is meant to be provocative. Thus, the book's historical account of community engagement would provide a strong intellectual foundation for lively, serious-minded discussion in a faculty learning community or graduate seminar. It could serve as a basis for participants to draw out the implications of provocative issues and questions the authors raise throughout the book.

A major strength of the book is its well-developed neo-Deweyian vision for community engagement represented in its discussion of the design of the Netter Center. It is clear the authors believe Kurt Lewin's dictum that "there is nothing as practical as a good theory." Readers will come away with a clear sense of the rich theoretical basis for the work of the center. The book's call for a "devolution revolution" is a fitting climax; however, it also raises questions. In the contemporary policy and fiscal context, I am skeptical that state and federal governments would support the vision the authors put forth. It would likely take nothing short of a new Progressive Era for the government to support the authors' proposal. Further, this and other calls for the transformation of research universities continue to be dogged by the usual suspects of "institutional inertia" (p. 31), including a faculty rewards system that remains slow to recognize and reward engaged scholarship.

The book's description of the 30-year evolution of the Netter Center illustrates the reality that transformation requires slow, sustained work—and a bold vision. Transformation is not instantaneous; it is best viewed within the long arc of history. The central contribution of the book may be the assertion it makes that our nation and world exist in a moment of transformative potential. *Knowledge for Social Change* is a book for such a time, largely because it takes our work out of "the moment" of a particular day, year, or decade and places it in the context of centuries. In so doing, the authors make their case: History demonstrates that the transformation of research universities is achievable, but not without bold vision and concrete action.

## **About the Reviewer**

**Chris R. Glass** is an assistant professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Foundations & Leadership at Old Dominion University. His research interests include publicly engaged scholarship and global student mobility. He received his Ph.D. from Michigan State University.