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Review Essay: Me and the Devil Was Walkin' Side-by-Side: Demythologizing (and Reviewing) the Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement

The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement

Corey W. Dolgon, Tania D. Mitchell, & Timothy K. Eatman (Eds.)

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“Legend has it,” the editors of the *Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement* begin their concluding chapter, “that Bluesman Robert Johnson met the devil at the crossroads...[and] sold his soul to acquire some of the best blues guitar chops ever known to humankind” (p. 527). The editors are referring to Johnson’s famous song “Crossroads Blues” and are suggesting, not too subtly, that the community engagement field is on the verge of making a similar Faustian bargain. “If we are, indeed, at a crossroads,” the editors write, “it is our hope that this book gives us a conceptual and strategic map of possible options for redemption and justice, short of any deals with the devil” (p. 529). Specifically, “this volume can be of value in the decision-making process...by recovering a radical and justice-seeking legacy...to address these dangerous times” (p. 528).

These dangerous times, the editors intone, are fraught with peril. “Men and women... desperate for greatness,” they write, “become susceptible to temptations of many kinds... [welcoming] the certainty and the reprieve of the devil’s promise” (p. 527). The editors warn us to steer clear: “Contemporary satanic pacts often come disguised as institutional rationalizations or professional trappings, funding pressures or personal blind spots. But make no mistake about it; dressed-up and rationalized processes generally represent bureaucratic entrapment, corporate hegemony, and neoliberalism” (p. 530). This handbook, they suggest, is thus positioned as a defense against these temptations, a modern-day talisman to secure the future of service-learning, the academy, and society writ large.

There is a problem, though, with this editorial narrative. Robert Johnson didn’t go to any crossroads in rural Mississippi at midnight. He didn’t meet the devil. He didn’t sell his soul. He just wrote a song.

This is, of course, about more than just a song. This is about a myth; a myth of Johnson's transformation, success, and boundary-crossing. It is a myth used and reused, repurposed and attenuated by different generations for different purposes. Levi-Strauss (1955) argued that myths function by explaining the cultural contradictions imposed by binary cultural beliefs (such as the raw and the cooked, sacred and profane, dirty and clean). And Derrida's (1966) analysis of Levi-Strauss pointed out that all such seeming universals are themselves engaged in an exercise of nostalgia-making, attempting (but never fully succeeding) to erase the particularities of their own origin. In Johnson's case, the myth works by erasing the particularity of the man for the seeming universal of an unholy compromise: success in exchange for your soul.

The editors embrace this myth to suggest that the binaries of success/failure and pure/defiled meet at that fateful midnight crossroads. Johnson seemingly serves a cautionary tale that all of us in the community engagement field should listen to carefully: beware becoming defiled as you grasp for the temptation of success.

So let me state it loud and proud: I have been tempted. I have grasped for greatness. I have made deals that compromised my values and ideals. But so have you. And so have the editors. We have all made fraught decisions amongst competing goods, trying to find the "right way" between and betwixt complex, chaotic, and confusing paths. Who among us hasn't sailed between Scylla and Charybdis?

So this editorial posturing is of little help and much harm for the community engagement field. It obscures and avoids our particularities in order to perpetuate a utopian and unreal binary that privileges a seeming purity over some defiled reality. But if the community engagement field has learned anything from embracing the ghost of John Dewey, it should be that theory and practice are always and already conjoint and commingled, that it is exactly our particularities that help us to make sense of, guide us in, and give purpose to our world.

My fundamental point is that if the editors wanted to capture the current moment of the community engagement field (and all of higher education, for that matter) in this age of neoliberalism, they could have instead taken Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues." In that song, the narrator hears a knock "upon my door" and "I said 'hello Satan/I believe it's time to go'/Me and the Devil/Was walkin' side-by-side/ Me and the Devil, ooh/Was walking side-by-side."

The frustrating reality is that we are all walking side-by-side with the devil. We are all ensconced within a neoliberal age, trying desperately, episodically, serendipitously, to teach our classes, engage our students, uplift our communities, one particular moment, course, student, partnership, at a time. Put otherwise, there is no crossroads, there is no devil, there are no "men and women...desperate for greatness" willing to sell their souls; there is no overarching and universal myth or legend that explains or helps guide our actions.

Instead, there are day-to-day particularities that are far more powerful than any legend. For once we start to dig deeper into such realities (ours and Johnson's) we discover all we need to move forward. We discover, for example, that Johnson's legendary meeting with the devil was exploited (if not downright created) by white men looking to profit (culturally and financially) from such a myth; that "Crossroad Blues" may actually be about the narrator stuck at a rural crossroads and fearful of the Jim Crow "sunset" laws of Blacks lynched if found outside after dark; and that Johnson's guitar-playing prowess may have come as he

devoted himself in grief to his music after his wife died in childbirth of their first child while he was out on a gig making money for his family (see, for example, Rothenbuhler, 2007; Schroeder, 2004; Stewart, 2013; Wald, 2012).

Johnson's life – and not the myth created about his life – is all we need to realize that we live in a complex and contested world that benefits from our understanding and intervention. This essay is thus as much a review as it is an act of demythologizing the editors' narrative. Specifically, I want to suggest that there are three key themes that cut across this handbook and help us understand its limits and possibilities: community engagement is already at the center of the academy; the importance of disciplining service-learning; and the need to acknowledge the rhetoric-reality gap in our own narratives of community engagement. These three themes help us to realize that we don't need a handbook to mythologize our past and present; we instead just have to dig deeply into the particularities all around us in order to move forward.

Digging Deeply Into The Handbook

I should begin with a parenthetical note: I, of course, am grateful to the editors and the authors of this handbook. I have long argued (e.g., Butin, 2006a) that the service-learning field needs handbooks rather than toolkits if it is to become academically sustainable, legitimated by its ability to construct, maintain, and extend the rigor and quality of its own methodological practices, theoretical frameworks, and *raison d'être*. This handbook is a welcome addition to the field. I should also note that the handbook is 554 pages long, separated into 41 chapters written by 67 authors, with introductory comments and concluding thoughts for each major section, as well as a preface and conclusion written by the editors. There is no way to do justice to, much less mention, all of the viewpoints, arguments, and details. I thus attempt to convey some key points in order to make a larger point.

Community Engagement is Already at the Center

One thing that comes through loud and clear is that community-engaged pedagogy was and is at the heart of higher education. A wide variety of chapters in the first part of the handbook vividly demonstrate that service-learning and its permutations have been around for a long time. Daniels, Hicks and Plummer (Chapter 4), for example, make this point clearly and powerfully when they argue that “Community engagement and service have been major themes at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) since the 1800s” (p. 64). Indeed, HBCU's activism, they argue, “are truly an example of major themes in the black power movement/black pride, and education in the black community...[HBCUs'] focus on community and civic engagement became a precursor to a service and service learning movement of today” (p. 64).

Peters (chapter 5) makes a complementary argument in suggesting that agricultural and extension programs over the last 150 years were focused on advancing “democratic forms of engagement that are built on ‘mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships’” (p. 77). So do Dolgon and Roth (Chapter 6) when they suggest that there is a “concrete impact of labor education and workers' colleges on early links between civic engagement and higher education” (pp. 81-82). In fact, this theme of comingling is repeated throughout, as, for example, Countryman and Eatman (Chapter 7) suggest: “One of the often overlooked historical antecedents to community engagement can be found in the student wing of the

civil rights movement and in particular in the community organizing strategies developed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)” (p. 93). Or, again, when Coles (Chapter 11) contextualizes community partnerships within the frame of the civil rights movement and the community organizing tradition focused on “catalytic action research” that places “one-to-one relational meetings that accent listening at the core of their democratic practice” (p. 148).

There is a real force to reading again and again about the history of so many seemingly diverse and distinct fields and disciplines which all share a certain DNA of engagement and empowerment. It highlights key commonalities and reinforces our collective desire to recapture in higher education – to use Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett’s (2007) vivid terminology – Dewey’s dream of an authentic participatory democracy from the vice-lock grip of Plato’s dead hand of an antidemocratic elitism and idealism.

Yet it is important to point out that this handbook is devoted almost exclusively to Dewey’s dream rather than on Plato’s grip. There is no sustained discussion across 500-plus pages of any of the key drivers or disruptive pressures facing higher education. Not a single chapter spent more than a few sentences on issues of, for example, the outsourcing and unbundling of faculty work to contingent labor, on the massive fiscal disinvestment of public higher education institutions, on the “new student majority” where most undergraduate students are “nontraditional,” or on the influx of online learning and digital learning technologies.

This is because, I believe, service-learning and community engagement continue to be thought about and discussed in ambiguous language, portrayed as everything from civic engagement to community organizing to the work of Jane Addams (applied feminism and sociology) to the formative experiences of Nadine Cruz and Liz Hollander with participatory action research. There is strength in broad terms that encompass complementary conceptual frameworks and theories of action. Yet the flip side to such lack of clarity is an inability to critique, build upon, and improve specific theories and practices. When we talk about service-learning, are we talking about a pedagogy that allows us to enhance its “high impact” practices? A method for developing and enhancing students’ cultural (i.e., behavioral and/or attitudinal) competencies? A mode of activism committed to social justice? Our inability to define our terms, our methods, or our goals undermines the sustained and thoughtful institutionalization and legitimation of the field (Butin, 2003, 2010a). This handbook perpetuates this problematic ambiguity by eliding the issue rather than tackling it head-on.

Disciplining Service-Learning, Redux

This brings me to my soapbox: that we have been approaching the institutionalization of community engagement in the wrong way by not adopting a both/and strategy of embracing the breadth of current initiatives as well as the depth of disciplining service-learning through academic programs. The handbook contains a cornucopia of wonderful and powerful examples – individuals, programs, and institutions working toward a better world. And yet, such success is ephemeral if it is not deeply institutionalized. What happens, for example, when a key faculty member retires, a powerful champion for your vision (such as a Dean or President) leaves her position, or budget cuts force a retrenchment? There are a thousand flowers blooming in this handbook; but what happens when winter comes?

Dolgon and Roth (Chapter 6), for example, were writing about the workers’ education movement: “Eventually, all of these institutions, programs, and projects disappeared, as

many suffered from inadequate funding and poor administration” as well as a host of physical, financial, and social pressures (p. 84). Yet this applies just as well to any reform effort – such as service-learning and community engagement – not fully embedded within the day-to-day institutional policies, protocols, and practices of the academy. In a similar vein, Stoecker (Chapter 36), argues that service-learning does not actually accomplish what it claims to do – as it rarely teaches students “either the critical thinking necessary to uncover the real culprits...or the collective action necessary to change the structure of power” or what they need to know before they go out into the community – unlike professional programs “such as social work, nursing, architecture, urban planning” (p. 446).

And then there’s Keene and Reiff (Chapter 39), who describe their UMass-Amherst’s Citizen Scholar program. While they are rightly proud of their successes, they voice a deep worry about the future of the program and detail the limits and threats to its sustainability. “The aforementioned crises are structural,” they summarize, “and require structural interventions” (p. 490). They lay out such interventions and then conclude,

If the above sounds more like a four-year curriculum than something that we might do in a class or a series of classes, well, so be it. Our aim ought to be to transform our institutions into midwives of democracy. That requires a vision of how pedagogy and curricula ought to be different from their current incarnations. (p. 496)

What Keene and Reiff describe is the powerful realization that transformation requires having skin in the game. It requires making compromises, leveraging resources, forming pragmatic partnerships, cultivating allies, etc. It requires attention to the particularities of what our students do, how our faculty teach, and how our institutions form and maintain community partnerships.

Stoecker (Chapter 36) bemoans that,

In my experience, most higher education community engagement consists of self-interested institutionally privileged actors acting on the oppressed, exploited, and excluded in ways that maintain systems of power and privilege more than question or challenge them...we decide who and what to serve, the ways in which to serve, and when to stop serving. We eschew projects that challenge power – that threaten government control or corporate dominance – with anything more than academic jargon. (p. 446)

Stoecker, I would suggest, is both absolutely right and completely wrong. He is right in that there is a plethora of research that demonstrates the depoliticized, inequitable, and unbalanced relationship between most service-learning initiatives and the local and global communities with which they interact. And yet he is also wrong; these problems are of our own creation, as we have positioned community engagement in higher education in a very specific way. It could, in other words, be otherwise.

I have documented over one hundred academic programs – majors, minors, and certificates – at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels that teach community engagement skills, knowledges, and dispositions focused on leadership, social justice, and civic values

(see <http://www.dansarofianbutin.net/academicprograms.html> [<http://www.dansarofianbutin.net/academicprograms.html>]; Butin, 2010b, 2013; Butin & Seider, 2012). These programs will not save the world; but the beauty and power of this empirical reality is that they never claimed to do so. Rather, these are academic programs like any and every other academic program, working to build students' skills, knowledges, and dispositions in a particular content area through sustained and structured pathways overseen by academics committed to rigor, quality, and impact. Philosophers do it, architects do it, historians do it, social workers do it, physicists do it. So I say to Stoecker and the editors: If you want students who will indeed graduate with the habits of mind and repertoires of action to be thoughtful and engaged citizens and can question and challenge systems of power and privilege in a complex and pluralistic democracy, you might consider how everyone else in the academy uses their respective academic disciplines to foster their hoped-for student goals. Just create an academic program so you too can walk your talk.

Mind the Rhetoric-Reality Gap!

Which brings me, finally, to my biggest frustration with the handbook: the profound gap between its aspirational rhetoric and the reality faced each and every day by higher education institutions and their surrounding community partners. The editors position the volume as a revolution: "this book is not about boosterism; it's about transformation. We hope this book promotes radical changes not only in education but in our most fundamental institutions of social and civic life" (p. xvii). And yet what we get is exactly such boosterism, for transformation (i.e., systems change) requires rigorous and systematic attention to the interplay and interdependence of complex systems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Geels, 2004).

But this is not what we get. "In contrast to most work on service learning and community engagement," the editors write, "this handbook embraces community-engaged practices as political education...Researchers must be willing to put aside meaningless indicators of meaningless variables and begin to consider how one might measure the serious impacts necessary to make significant social change" (p. xix). What do the editors mean by "political education"? What counts as "meaningless variables"? How exactly are we to begin to articulate, define, and assess "significant social change"? The editors don't say and the reader is made none the wiser from such rhetorical phrases.

Or to be more precise, such rhetorical phrases assume and imply that service-learning is the true answer to whatever may bedevil the university or society. This rhetoric serves as a signaling device for a liberatory "save the world" mentality that positions service-learning in the unenviable and untenable position of saving the university and society from itself and confuses and disguises a liberal political orientation for an academic practice (Butin, 2008; Fish, 1999; Rorty, 1989). This does nothing to help our goal of legitimate institutionalization.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with rhetoric. So I stand up and cheer when Saltmarsh and Hartley (Chapter 9) argue that "Unlike civic engagement, which tends to reify the hierarchical relationship between college and community, democratic engagement seeks to share institutional power and resources by deprivileging academic knowledge and authority in pursuit of a more ethically sound and just society" (p. 100). But we must also dig deeper to be conscious of the fact that such arguments are all too often built upon a theoretical foundation of critical theory that has long ago been dismantled, as it suffers from a highly

problematic epistemological framework, views the world in simplistic dualisms, and denies its own positionality (Biesta, 1998; Ellsworth, 1989; Sarofian-Butin, 2017).

One of the few who takes up such issues is Wittman (Chapter 20) when she points out that “Real and material barriers to community engagement and service learning persist within the academy” (p. 263) and then goes on to list everything from unconscious bias in hiring committees to faculty of color receiving less grant money to our continued failure to see community partners as collaborators and co-educators within the scholarly enterprise. These issues are critical for us to more fully understand and I would have liked to see her and others tackle them head-on.

In a similar vein, Finley (Chapter 14) begins to carefully work through how we define, operationalize, and assess student learning by demanding that we deliver on the promise of civic learning:

Defining the ways in which students become better thinkers, citizens, and community members is at the core of what it means to define student learning outcomes as they relate to students’ participation in community engagement experiences, such as service learning, community-based research, practicums, or internships. (p. 183)

Exactly. Yet the reader is left with no next steps, no additional research, no definitions. Where are the meta-analyses? The articulation of best practices vis-à-vis high impact practices? The surveys that measure attitudinal changes in civic outcomes and cultural competence? AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics? The system-wide indicators? Are these the “meaningless” variables the editors decry? There are lots of important studies (e.g., Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Janke, 2014; Kolek, 2016; Lin, 2015; Warren, 2012; Whitley, 2014; Yorio, 2012) that could have fruitfully informed this handbook.

This rhetoric-reality gap becomes crystal clear in a wonderful interview that Corey Dolgon has with Catherine Orr (Chapter 22). Orr is a senior scholar in the Women’s Studies field and author of a Teagle Foundation White Paper on the intersection of Women’s Studies and civic engagement (Orr, 2011). In the interview, Orr argues that Women’s Studies “has developed a vast body of scholarship and a collection of pedagogical approaches that bridge theory and practice for students at institutions seeking to bolster their roles as citizen scholars” (p. 284) and, as such, her discipline “constitutes a valuable resource for a meaningful rededication to higher education’s civic mission” (p. 285). This appears exactly in line with the goals of the community engagement field.

But what Orr does next separates Women’s Studies from the community engagement field: she links these goals to specific means and methods. Engaged pedagogy, she argues, is itself worthy of critical analysis, for “how do you continue to do the work of teaching and writing about the structures of inequality that perpetuate racism, sexism, class inequality, etc. at the same time that you are an integral part of those very structures” (p. 286)? “Institutions of higher education,” she argues, “are now leaning in heavily on civic engagement and service learning as a redemptive narrative in austere times” (p. 287), and such rhetoric demands a response, “a call to colleges and universities to walk their talk...holding the institution accountable by trying to position ourselves as core to its stated mission” (pp. 288-289).

Orr is arguing that being an engaged and public scholar requires careful and thoughtful analyses of the particularities of what we do and say, inside and outside of our respective departments and disciplines. There are no Faustian bargains, no satanic pacts, no bureaucratic entrapments, no corporate hegemony here. Or if there are, then it is up to her and us to figure them out and call them out in order to better walk the path we are all on. She is just asking us to do our job as academics ensconced within the neoliberal university.

To put this otherwise, acknowledging one's own positionality goes a long way toward bridging the rhetoric-reality gap. None of us are pure. We have all, in our own ways, confronted complex situations, made difficult decisions, regretted our actions. Do the editors really want to claim that they are somehow immune from defilement and not one of those "men and women...desperate for greatness"? This phrasing and framing, to be blunt, actually makes no sense. What exactly would it look like to make a "satanic pact" within the bureaucratic entrapment of the corporatized university? Give me specifics and not some abstract and rhetorical universal. Give me particularities and I will show you Robert Johnson hustling to make a buck, mourning the death of his wife, aware that being out after sunset risks being lynched. We are all – the editors, me, you – walking with the devil, side by side, doing the best we can to push forward our respective visions for a better world.

Concluding Thoughts: Listening to the Knocking on the Door

"When Robert Johnson was first rediscovered after the 1961 record release, people who had heard the music tended to romanticize the long-forgotten artist," writes Schroeder (2004) in her biography of Johnson. "It is no surprise that the romantic vision of Robert Johnson started with a group of disaffected, artistic, college-aged men during the turbulent 1960s... and so made a cult figure of a Robert Johnson with preternatural skills and supernatural connections" (p. 39). There was thus a natural affinity for embracing the seemingly historical – yet contemporaneously created – myth of Johnson's deal with the devil:

It could be that the story of Johnson's pact with the devil (which, as we have seen, was not widespread until the mid 1960s) burgeoned because of the alienated sensibilities of the generation that resurrected him: it is a product of the Age of Aquarius. Seen in this light, the idea that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil reflects the youth, the threatened masculinity, and the countercultural attitudes of the musicians who recognized his musical genius and are largely responsible for popularizing his music. Feeling emotionally dispossessed by their culture, they appropriated Johnson's literal dispossession and elevated it to mythic status...the signifier that was Robert Johnson, like all signifiers elevated to the status of myth, loses its connection to time and place. (p. 40)

Schroeder reminds us that details matter. "The Age of Aquarius is over," she writes, "at least in literary and cultural studies" (p. 40). And, I would suggest, in the community engagement field as well. Time and place, the temporalities and particularities of our students, our faculty, our communities, our colleges and universities matter. We no longer need, nor should be trapped by, myths and legends that claim to guide our way. We already have a history and a present that is rich and powerful enough to claim a warrant from and to build

upon. Yes, we daily confront “wicked problems” with no clear sense of the way forward; and yes, some days we may take two steps backward for every step forward; and yes, the system we are in is all too often uninterested, unhelpful, or even antagonistic to our vision. But that’s the reality of being committed to a better world while always-already ensconced within a neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015; Butin, 2015; Rich & Tsitsos, 2017). So I don’t know about you, but I’m going to go put on some Delta Blues and keep plugging away.

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