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## Regional Engagement at a Crossroads: The Intersection of Neoliberalism, Access, and Democratic Engagement

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## **Regional Engagement at a Crossroads: The Intersection of Neoliberalism, Access, and Democratic Engagement**

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*Various modes of regional engagement are being developed at an increasing rate across the United States (US). The purpose of this article is to highlight a theoretical tension that currently informs the way conceptions of access are being produced in regional engagement practice. Generally, regional engagement has been organized within larger movements to improve democratic capacity. However, the practical expression of regional engagement has failed to seriously consider how the context of a market-based society shapes theoretical conceptions of access. This article distinguishes the differences between access to new markets and democratic access for social, political, and economic inclusion. This theoretical framework will help practitioners maintain forms of regional engagement that support the larger democratic engagement movement well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

*Keywords: Theory of engagement, Economic development, Socio-political equity, Democratic engagement*

### **Introduction**

There has been a consistent effort throughout US higher education to reinvigorate institutional commitments to democracy and civic engagement. It is no longer acceptable for higher education to withdraw from pressing community and regional problems. As a result, institutions of higher education are now redeveloping and rethinking how their mission aligns with larger public purposes. In 2008 higher education leaders convened in Dayton, Ohio to consider how different forms of engagement were advancing the public purposes of higher education. The conference proceedings were originally presented in a white paper (Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton, 2009) and then later expanded into a book length project (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Saltmarsh & Hartley (2011) asked authors to critically examine a different aspect of the democratic engagement movement.

One of the most immediate challenges facing the engagement movement is maintaining a solid theoretical basis that informs practice. The tense relationship between theory and practice is particularly pronounced when elements of regional engagement implement conceptions of access. Within democratic and regional engagement practice access is often associated within the aspirational goals of inclusion (Thomas & Levine, 2011). Equal access to a full range of areas in the social, political, and economic spheres is considered a normative requirement of equality in most democratic theories (Pateman, 1970). Regional engagement, specifically within economic development programs, often relies on conceptions of access that only align with principles of a market-based society. If regional engagement practice is truly committed to supporting democratic capacity there needs to be an effort to distinguish between conceptions of access that support democratic engagement and those that support larger structures of a market-based society. The purpose of this article is to highlight the conceptual distinction, which separates, access for democratic engagement and access for entry into new markets.

I highlight the theoretical distinction between the identified conceptions of access in the following way. Section II outlines and defines the theoretical process and ideological basis that captures conceptions of access within a market-based society. Section III uses a regional engagement framework developed by Oregon State University (OSU) as an example of how conceptions of access are captured to fit within the ideological structures of a market-based society. Section IV highlights how conceptions of access can be produced to challenge elements of a market-based society and reinvigorate robust commitments to democracy. This section discusses access in relation to participatory models of democracy. Section V provides closing remarks and discusses the implications of this theoretical inquiry for regional engagement research and practice.

### **Conceptual Tensions: Access as Entry to New Markets**

Neoliberalism is the predominant system of thought and ideological context that gives meaning to contemporary social, political, and economic spheres (Harvey, 2005). The epistemological framework of neoliberalism is the ideological basis that informs a market-based society. As opposed to a market-based economy, in a market-based society the logic of markets constructs meaning in all spheres of the human condition. Market-based economies clearly define and bound the logics of markets within the space directly associated with a capitalist economy. Structural elements and tacit acceptance of a market-based society contributes to the general commodification and financialization of the entire human condition (Brown, 2005; Giroux, 2005). Simply stated neoliberalism can be understood as a philosophical framework that attempts to maximize individual liberty through the expansion of the economic sphere. Neoliberal ideology recasts conceptions of individual liberty, extending from the social and political, as a matter for the economic.

Philosophical elements of neoliberalism are often conceptualized in the public administration and public management literature as fitting within New Public Management (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) or tied to more general concepts such as privatization (Savas, 2000; Hodge, 2000) or even in some cases governance (Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2000). The general commercialization of higher education is not a new issue. In fact leaders of American higher education have bemoaned the increased instrumental and commercial understanding of higher education since the early 20th century (Velben, 2004). However, what is new is the intensity and scope in which market values and the logic of capitalism have redefined elements of the university (Bok, 2004; Barber, 2012; Berry, 2011). Academic capitalism and neoliberal ideology have fundamentally reconfigured the organizational design and understood purposes of higher education (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Neoliberalism contours structures of regional engagement to construct very specific economic conceptions of the public interest (Bozeman, 2007; Butin, 2010).

Scholar-practitioners interested in supporting a practice of regional engagement, that is inline with principles of democracy, will need to differentiate between access as democratic inclusion and access into new markets operating within market-based society. Currently, scholar-practitioners have not been intentional with the way regional engagement produces conceptions of access in practice. If a more meaningful practice of democratic engagement is to be realized, scholar-practitioners, must have the theoretical understanding to distinguish between theoretical conceptions and applied expressions of access.

### **Literature Review and Definition of Key Theoretical Concepts**

In the 1990s there was a sense among administrators, faculty, staff, and the general public that higher education was failing to achieve the institutions “civic mandate” (Boyer, 1990; 1996). Soon efforts within higher education were made that attempted to rearticulate institutional commitments to the public good. The movement has since matured and many elements of engaged scholarship have secured a place within the 21<sup>st</sup> century university (Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009). However, recently, there have been signs that the broadly conceived engagement movement is beginning to lose momentum. Saltmarsh & Hartley (2011) recognized the ebbing strength of the engagement movement and examined potential ways the “democratic purposes of community engagement” can be revived (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011 p. 1). If current trends in the literature are any indication, the future direction of engagement will likely be more directly focused on redefining institutions and practices of democracy. The discipline is now at the point where key theoretical concepts must be clarified before the practice can fully mature.

At a very basic level, the failure to define forms of engagement in relation to democratic purpose creates an instable theoretical basis for the practice of engagement. Lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical concision is particularly troubling for an engaged practice that attempts to respond to neoliberal ideology in a context of a market-based society. Applied expressions of regional engagement, concerned with the democratic purposes of engagement, must be able to recognize the way structures of a market-based society impede the practice. Highlighting and identifying structures of a market-based society will give scholar-practitioners the ability to produce meaningful expressions of access that are inline with basic principles of democracy.

The implications of distinguishing between different theoretical concepts of access is two fold: (1) regional engagement scholar-practitioners will be more conscious of how their practice intersects with the ideological configuration of neoliberalism and market-based society and; (2) regional engagement scholar-practitioners will have the theoretical capacity to reinvigorate the engagement movement and produce applied expressions of the practice that are consistent with the democratic spirit of the engagement movement.

I use the strategic vision of Oregon State University (OSU) to highlight the theoretical context that create conceptions of access that are consistent with market-based society but fail to achieve the theoretical requirements of democratic access. My point is to demonstrate the potential ways administrative and economic structures can impact the way stakeholders define and shape practical expressions of access.

Increasing access to higher education has historically been considered in the public interest (Readings, 1996). Access has had the following two formulations in higher education: Access (1) makes “the hoard of knowledge produced or preserved within universities available to society more broadly,” and (2) opens “...the university to participation by previously excluded or under-represented groups” (Calhoun, 2006, p. 9). Increasing access in these two ways has historically connected to the larger project of supporting commitments to democracy, active citizenship, and the public interest (Giroux, 2005). I use the OSU community engagement mission statement to demonstrate how engagement practice has the potential to produce competing conceptions of access.

In reality, OSU is the epitome of an *engaged campus*. OSU received the Community Engagement classification in 2010 by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. However, theoretical critique allows readers to look past the specific elements of

the OSU mission statement and illuminate the larger structures that produce community-engaged projects and partnerships. Highlighting how structures inherent to a market-based society undermine community and regional engagement at OSU, a top-tier engaged university, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the identified conceptual tension.

The main tag line that frames OSU's community engagement strategy states, "Engaging for Excellence and Impact." Institutions have employed discourses of excellence to communicate commitments to academic capitalism. The previous statement assumes that the pursuit of excellence, or the strategic design to achieve excellence, is the mark of value and prestige (Readings, 1996; Pestre, 2009). Pestre (2009) has developed a well-developed account of excellence discourses as a social technology designed to organize individual and institutional behavior. My analysis accepts the assumption that excellence discourses serve as an accurate symbolic proxy for commitments to academic capitalism.

The larger structure of market-based society reformulates conceptions of access within the OSU community engagement strategy to be expressed in terms of entry into new markets. The description of Strategy Goal 1 in the OSU mission exhibits the tension produced by a general commitment to produce an engagement practice within the ideologically motivated structure of a market-based society. Listed under the overall strategy of increasing access, Strategy 1.3 specifies the goal of increasing access with the following statement: "create an easy-to-use process to access OSU's web-based product offerings and knowledge resources" (Oregon State University Engagement and Outreach 2011, p.9). The substance of the strategy begins to shed light on how the structure of market-based society rearticulates conceptions of access within the parameters of the market. The connection between community engagement and increasing regional access has been recognized (Waldner, Roberts, Widner, & Sullivan, 2011; Bryer, 2011). However, there has been no systematic, theoretical or empirical, effort to consider how the neoliberal context shapes these efforts.

The conceptual disconnect between access to markets and access for democratic inclusion becomes clear when one considers the abstracted implications of Strategy 1.3. The vision of inclusion represented in the mission statement is not one of embodiment; instead, this vision suggests one of (dis) embodied inclusion limited to virtual web-based product offerings (Oregon State University Engagement and Outreach 2011, p. 9). The epistemological tension at an abstract level leads to an interesting paradox in two ways. First, online-distance learning has already been connected to the ideology of neoliberalism in the research literature (Giroux, 2005). Neoliberal universities value online delivery because it commodifies knowledge in ways that easily parallels the logic of profit. Online courses deskill professional faculty, decrease overhead costs for universities, and increase the number of students administrators can enroll in each course (Giroux, 2005). These outcomes call into question the efficacy of claims that assume community engagement for access is always mutually beneficial.

Furthermore, neoliberal universities value online delivery because it commodifies easily transferrable knowledge within the market model. OSU's plan to utilize virtual technologies to distribute knowledge more widely seems to increase a conception of access. However, consideration of the types of knowledge generated through virtual forms of delivery calls such increases into question. Henry Giroux (2005) argued that "on-line learning largely functions through pedagogical models and methods of delivery that not only rely on standardized prepackaged curricula and methodological efficiency; they also reinforce the

commercial bent toward vocational training, de-skilling, and de-professionalization” (p. 267). Community engagement programs focused on access, through online delivery, risk being reclaimed by capitalist ventures focused on directly producing profit or indirectly producing instruments of capital.

From the perspective of regional engagement virtual technologies can be a very powerful tool to reach geographically isolated groups. However, there needs to be an intentional effort to balance between the regional interests of reaching isolated groups and ensuring that the technology is not used merely to enter or create new economic markets for the university. Regional engagement strategies that use virtual technology only to access new and geographically isolated markets violate core principles of reciprocity and mutuality. Defining the line between reaching a geographically isolated region to increase access as democratic inclusion compared to only using the technology to enter new markets is challenging. However, the problematic nature of defining this boundary, highlights the importance of developing a sophisticated theoretical account of neoliberalism for regional engagement practice.

In the case of OSU, the virtual education system, as enacted, likely will increase access to certain types of knowledge that are valued and quantifiable according to the ideological project of neoliberalism. In this case, OSU stakeholders are encouraged to support specific understandings of access tied to forms of advanced capitalism. OSU’s conception of access, as knowledge distribution, is so limited that it does not support forms of participation in the public sphere or recognize how other social and political factors can support more robust forms of economic development. Access conceived as distributing knowledge across society, generally assumes and is conceived to support participation, recognition, and inclusion in public spaces of democratic action. Not all social, economic, and political action can occur in virtual space, where difference and disagreement is reduced and mediated by the (dis)embodied experience. From this perspective, the OSU model increases access to knowledge skill sets with capitalist value, but it will unlikely increase the democratic capacity within the social and political spheres. A critical reading of this conception of access recognizes that OSU is working towards supporting access to job skills and consumer skills, while access to forms of knowledge needed for citizenship, inclusion, and recognition are marginalized.

This theoretical insight illuminates how more robust expressions of economic development will include considerations of the social, political, and economic. Economic development programs focused just on the economic aspects, in this case increasing access to job skills, does not address the overarching issues associated with regional revitalization. Obviously, access to basic job skills will be a crucial component of any economic development plan. However, the theoretical critique of neoliberalism is that a focus on just economic aspects is not sufficient. The neoliberal articulation of regional engagement and economic development is a significant departure from the conceptions that extend from philosophical liberalism. The epistemological basis of philosophical liberalism would define conceptions of access and economic development as originating from a combination of social, political, and economic spaces.

In addition, the uneasy relationship between neoliberalism and economic development obviates the overall goal of access as democratic inclusion at worst, and limits or qualifies the goal at best. The virtual delivery of knowledge is fundamental and informs the conceptual tension. The concern for access loses meaning once it is filtered through the

structures of market-based society. Epistemological tensions frame issues of access as valuable in a capitalist sense only when (1) the increased access occurs over digitized space and fits within the neoliberal market and (2) does not really pose a significant challenge to existing power structures operating within embodied space. Forms of online community engagement allow universities to talk about the symbolic value of democratic access for inclusion without challenging or questioning the existing structures of market-based society and advanced capitalism. When pushed to the theoretical limit, OSU's understanding of access is presented as legitimate and valuable only when it does not challenge structural elements of market-based society. The implications of this conceptual tension calls into question the type of access the OSU strategic plan truly encourages. Is this a conception of access that is concerned with only entry into new markets and increased capitalist value for the university? Or, is this a conception of increased access that supports the symbolic value of democracy and inclusion of historically marginalized groups?

My intention is not to criticize OSU's community engagement strategic vision. Instead, I sought merely to demonstrate how the ideological basis of neoliberalism shapes common concepts associated with regional engagement. The epistemological assumptions that structure these forms of thought are insidious, but nonetheless reproduce existing structures of market-based society. This theoretical point raises important issues for regional engagement stakeholders interested in developing a meaningful practice. As an academic field, concerned with issues of access, it is important that the formation of engagement practice has the theoretical basis to highlight these types of challenges. This theoretical (de) construction will arm scholar-practitioners with an effective language and theoretical method to critique existing community and regional engagement structures at their university.

### **Conceptual Tension: Access for Democratic Inclusion**

The contemporary moment has positioned the engagement movement as attempting to enhance the capacity and public commitment to democracy (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). In other words, efforts are being made within higher education to create structures and practices that generate co-produced forms of knowledge and challenge notions of expertise. The assumed goal is that higher education can support democratic practice by facilitating increased participation and inclusion. The future success of regional engagement depends on accounting for the contemporary trends in the democratic engagement movement.

The previous sections have demonstrated how applied conceptions of access, within regional engagement, can be bound within the structures of a market-based society. Access for democratic inclusion, rearticulated in terms of access to new markets; undermines the democratic potential of engagement practice. If a truly democratic movement is to be revitalized through forms of engagement, conceptions of access, ought to be considered within participatory models of democracy. This section highlights the basic elements of participatory models of democracy and outlines the potential to apply more meaningful theoretical conceptions of access to regional engagement practice.

Participatory models of democracy find their intellectual roots within the liberalism of self-development of John Stuart Mill (Mill, 2003). Ironically, the participatory model was developed to explain general disengagement and citizen apathy. Proponents of the participatory model argue that citizens avoid public decision making processes because institutions are not responsive to their needs and demands as democratic participants

(Patemann, 1970). Proponents of the participatory model assume that more people would choose to participate if public institutions are redesigned to encourage democratic involvement.

The redesigned institutions would be based on a conception of access that increases democratic inclusion in the social, political, and economic spheres. The expanded space of democracy in participatory models is especially important to consider from the perspective of regional engagement. Regional engagement practice is constantly confronting, not only the context of a market-based society, but attempting to maintain university-community partnerships that are co-produced and democrat in nature.

Essentially, the participatory model arms scholar-practitioners with the theoretical tools to revitalize the *habits of heart* necessary for meaningful democratic practice (de Tocqueville, 2004). This can give scholar-practitioners the tools to produce a regional engagement practice that is truly collaborative and generative. Conceptions of access that increase inclusion associated with decision-making processes of the social, political, and economic sphere will promote an engaged process that respects principles of engagement.

There are two general aspects that will improve regional engagement practice if scholar-practitioners develop conceptions of access from within the participatory model of democracy. First, conceptions of access that extend from the participatory model of democracy will challenge existing structures of market-based society that currently limit regional engagement practice. The OSU example, highlighted in the previous section, demonstrates how the logic of markets and structures of a market-based society creates a practice that articulates access in terms of entry into new markets. Conceptions of access, consistent with participatory models of democracy, will expand democratic practice into the social, political, and economic spheres. The expanded space of democratic access and inclusion will help scholar-practitioners maintain a more robust regional engagement practice.

Second, extending democratic practice into the social, political, and economic spheres will likely produce better outcomes and create a regional engagement practice that is closer to the theoretical tenets of engagement. A focus on leveraging regional engagement to increase democratic access in the social, political, and economic sphere will encourage scholar-practitioners to generate forms of engagement that are co-produced in terms of process and outcome. This approach to regional engagement will not only move towards ideal principles of engagement, but has the potential to reform democratic practice broadly across society.

This point is particularly relevant for regional engagement focused on economic development. The participatory model will address development from the social, political, and economic spheres. Not only will approaches be multi-dimensional but they will likely have increased community involvement. Community partners will be able to participate in the development process in a range of capacities that span the social, political, and economic spheres. Economic development models that are generative conceptions of reciprocity will be more likely to capture nuanced needs of each community and region (Dostillo et al., 2012). Traditional economic development models rely heavily on top-down structures and expertise directives originating within the economic sphere. Participatory models of democracy can challenge the limitations associated with traditional modes of economic development. Recognizing the ideological context of market-based society will ultimately lead to a more intentional regional engagement practice.



## Conclusion

Henry Giroux (2005) recognized how larger contexts that inform higher education “need to be analyzed in terms of wider economic, political, and social forces that exacerbate tensions between those who value such institutions as democratic and those advocates of neoliberalism who see market culture as a master design for all human affairs” (Giroux 2005, p. 277). Scholar-practitioners need a theoretical framework for regional engagement, which resists the logic of neoliberalism and avoids focusing only on producing direct and indirect value within limited spaces of the economic.

Regional engagement strategies that emphasize job training are best understood as a response to neoliberal critiques of higher education. However, the increased focus on reformulating elements of the university and regional engagement, in relation to perceived market needs, fails to diagnosis economic development problems appropriately. Many assume that part of the problem with the economy is that universities are not responsive to the training needs of the labor market. However, the intense focus many regional engagement programs have on job training overlook the structural elements of the global economy that lead to high levels of unemployment and cyclical periods of financial crisis. The type of critical thinking, creativity, and academic rigor required to successfully navigate the choppy waters of a knowledge-based economy have been diluted within most academic and regional engagement programs.

The shift toward vocational training in higher education disempowers students and stakeholders involved with regional engagement. The shift towards vocational training in higher education, specifically universities, ensures skill-sets and types of knowledge are determined by the perceived needs of the economy and business. Giving corporations the power to inform regional engagement programming, without meaningful collaboration with faculty/scholar-practitioners, might be expedient in the short-term but strengthens the ability of corporations to manipulate the labor market over longer periods of time. The aspirational goals of regional engagement should not affirm the exploitation of workers but give stakeholders the ability to critically evaluate their position in society across social, political, and economic spaces. Regional engagement programming ought to develop the capacity of community stakeholders to understand their situation within the labor market. A balanced focused on the social, political and economic sphere will give the corporate critique of higher education less currency.

In the context of the labor market, a form of regional engagement focused on democratic access across social, political, and economic spheres will support a more meaningful public discussion about the underlying reasons neoliberal ideology support rather high levels of unemployment. Structures consistent with neoliberal ideology explain why corporations are outsourcing jobs to lower-priced labor markets. Issues with the labor market and high unemployment rates do not represent a failure of universities and regional engagement. Universities should avoid the pressure to reshape curriculum and regional engagement programs to emphasize technical and vocational training.

The institutional organization of universities is better suited to support a context and space for public debate of key questions associated with unemployment and the labor market. Using regional engagement programs to increase democratic access, across social, political, and economic spheres, is a more appropriate response from universities to confront the challenges associated with a globally competitive labor market. The focus for regional engagement strategies, originating from universities, ought to be on collaborating with

community stakeholders to define and structure public attention and action. Democratic access that reaches across the social, political, and economic spheres can be the vehicle to a more meaningful engagement practice.

At a basic level, normative theory needs to establish the bounds of the market as it relates to regional engagement. At its core, community and regional engagement is a phenomenon that reaches across the social, political, and economic spheres. The structure of the partnership connects distinct elements within society to pursue collective goals. Regional engagement, as a social phenomenon has been tracked and documented primarily through descriptive studies. As such, the community engagement literature has focused primarily on the particular elements constituting effective university-community partnerships (Hancock, Smith, Timple, & Wunder 2010). This type of research approach fails to capture the way regional and community engagement practice connects and relates to larger social, political, and economic issues.

The theoretical method of (de) construction will help scholar-practitioners develop a regional engagement practice that responds to ideological structures of market-based society. However, the power of (de) construction is really the beginning of the theoretical project. As regional engagement programs become more sophisticated it is important the normative foundations of the practice keeps pace. Scholar-practitioners not only need to clearly develop the normative basis of community and regional engagement, but must legitimate and define the scope of access that is consistent with participatory models of democracy.

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