1. I write to submit evidence to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement drawing on my expertise as an editor for a new journal founded by leading British, American and European sociologists called Civic Sociology. Indeed, our motivation in establishing the journal is similar to that which seems to prompt the committee’s enquiry – namely, recognition that critical events in 2016, including Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, portend either dramatically new social and cultural conditions, or, reflect longer-term trends which have hitherto been ignored. In founding a new journal so named, we commit ourselves to not only understanding civic engagement and participation\(^1\), civic action\(^2\) and civic imaginations\(^3\); but, perhaps, more importantly, we recognize that we must have been doing something wrong to have not seen these recent crises coming. And, by ‘we’, I don’t just refer to sociologists, but to all ‘experts’ – academics, journalists, civil servants, professionals – as a whole. For what 2016 reveals, perhaps, most strikingly is: the expert, like the emperor, appears to have no clothes.

2. This presents a challenge for any expert now seeking to advise the Lords on how to positively build bridges between communities. Collectively, our new network of scholars have consulted the committee’s document and have much to contribute in terms of how to conceptualize civic action;\(^4\) others have explored alternatives to prevailing strategies towards ‘heritage’ in UNESCO designated sites;\(^5\) or the relationship between legal rights and urban development;\(^6\) and so on. In other words, we could help address the specific and most worthy questions asked within the document, and will do so in time within the pages of our journal.

3. However, a prior question needs to be asked regarding who needs to be more civically engaged? As presented, the call for evidence mentions British-born radical terrorists and those ‘left behind’. This corresponds with recent research highlighting a civic ‘participation gap’, largely reflective of social inequalities.\(^7\) Yet, the request implies we develop or identify positive British values which should appeal to those marginalized folks in order to re-engage them in the civic process. But, this suggests the ‘problem’ is the marginalized people – ‘them’ – some maybe in self-segregating urban neighbourhoods, and others abandoned in the rural hinterland. How can we make or inspire these folks to engage in new civic behaviours, which will, in turn, make them less marginalized? In other words, how do we help these folks be less of a problem?

4. I would propose a different framing of the problem: the issue of low civic participation is not the fault of marginalized populations, but that of ‘us’: the mainstream, middle-class centre, the experts, the professionals, the academics. We are the ones who have failed to adequately participate in our local communities. We have for too long engaged in what civic sociologists have, following Dickens, called ‘telescopic philanthropy’.\(^8\) Instead of understanding and engaging with nearby deprived neighbourhood just across the train tracks, or off the B-roads up-county, scholars and governments have too often patronizingly tried to solve “Africa’s” problems through ineffective target-driven projects;\(^9\) or, we have been incentivized to partner with academics in developing countries to address ‘Global Challenges’ scattered randomly across the entire planet.\(^10\) All well-intentioned ideas, of course, but, along with the REF and TEF and related pressures emanating from Whitehall, the result is an estrangement between the expert centre and local marginalized populations. What better evidence of this is there than the wildly off-base polling predictions ahead of the Brexit and
Trump votes? Who knew? Certainly not political scientists. Precious few sociologists. And yet many of these same experts will now offers your committee their explanations and solutions anew.

5. As LSE sociologist Lisa McKenzie recently pointed out, ethnographers, actually on the ground, had observed a growing resentment between the political establishment and those whose voices have been ignored for decades.11 If we engaged in a bit less pontificating, and a bit more listening – with intellectual humility as Ruth Braunstein, Andrew Abbott and others contributing to our civic sociology project recommend12 - we might hear just how little trust in our expert authority remains. And, far from being ‘dangerous’, ‘irrational’ and ‘intolerant’, many of those who have disengaged from politics recognize the truth we ignore at our peril: for it may be the middle-class experts in the cities and university towns who are, in fact, the source of the problems we wish to solve.

6. Elisabeth Clemens, for example, has reviewed a number of recent books in an essay titled ‘Distrust in Distant Powers’ in which she argues American’s declining faith in the federal government mirrors Europeans’ resentment of out-of-touch bureaucrats in Brussels.13 In Wisconsin, political ethnographer Kathy Cramer set out to understand variations in different classes’ opinions of government, and discovered instead overwhelming similarity across ‘out-state’ populations insofar as anyone not from the major cities of Milwaukee and Madison resented those urban elites.14 Similar findings come up in Arlie Hochschild’s study of rural Louisiana15 and, within cities, complicated political jurisdictions contribute to a sense of absent political power and gang violence.16 These studies can be tied to Clemens’ historical account of the growth of the ‘Rube Goldberg state’,17 referring to the manner in which federal interventions, for good and ill reasons, have gradually undermined the capacities of local governments to react to citizens’ needs; at the same time shrinking pots of federal money are used to ‘incentivize’ regional initiatives according to the interests of Washington insiders. Living and working in Southwest England, I observe similar outrage over large civic infrastructure investments in ecologically-friendly swimming pools no one locally ever asked for. The city council’s response to such complaints via facebook is to ask these critics: ‘why don’t you run for office yourselves?’

7. Recent works by civic sociologists Josh Pacewicz and Michael McQuarrie highlight similar patterns happening again and again across America. These changes are experienced at local and regional levels, but interact in complicated ways with national and global trends.18 Pacewicz, for example, explains the long-term dismantling of local political party allegiances in two Iowa towns.19 Since the 1970s, new local patterns of ‘bipartisan consensus’ in pursuit of large waterfront renewal projects and the like emerged. In effect, these strategies leveraged municipal revenues in favour of external interests – as the saying goes: Wall Street over Main Street – all the while, these consensus- and consultant- driven strategies produced rumps of formerly substantial local party organizations, unions and chambers of commerce. This provided the seeds for polarization as national-level politics – culture wars over transgender bathrooms and the like – overtook bread-and-butter concerns. At the end of the day, no one seems to be happy and each side increasingly resents the other; and, to top it off, there’s no money left.

8. This returns us yet again to the issue of the crisis of expert legitimacy, and authority, in general. To oversimplify a complex recent history, while paraphrasing W.B. Yeats: things fall apart when the centre cannot hold. Three essential crises of public confidence have befallen the so-called ‘establishment’ since the end of the Cold War. First, in 2003, the public was led to believe there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There were none. This was a wilful lie. Britain has
admitted this. America has not. Second, in 2008, the financial markets collapsed leading to the Great Recession. The banks were bailed out while the rest of us underwent a program of austerity. Whereas the economists promised renewed growth, we have experienced unacknowledged inflation, particularly in terms of house prices. The average home in Chelsea now costs £2,100,000 in neighbourhoods a young professional couple could have bought a flat for £30,000 in the mid-1980s. But, of course, we must all tighten our belts. Third, in 2016, the media, academia and metropolitan cultural and political elites completely failed to predict elections in both Britain and the USA. This reflects a much broader series of cultural divides, which have been hitherto ignored by political establishments, largely focused on the goings-on of London or Washington. Any attempts to ‘bridge’ these divides must extend from these capitals and university towns toward those hinterlands and marginalized neighbourhoods which have been excluded or ignored for decades.

9. This is the programme civic sociology proposes to develop by re-orienting our scholarship and professional practices toward problem-solving within local and regional communities, all the while, reflecting more on our ethical commitments, particularly those tensions which exist between experts and the populations they study or collaborate with. We thus consider civic sociology to be reflective and encouraging of a new generation of social scientists, committed to addressing the polarizations of the contemporary world, whether these be divisions between old and young, rich and poor, town and country, and so on. We wish to reconsider these problems from the ground-up, establishing and reconstructing our legitimacy in an age sceptical of experts. We do not wish to smash the idols of previous generations, but rather to carve out a space to develop new ways of pursuing sociology and solving social problems in the 21st century.

10. This involves recovery of a range of civic traditions which have been forgotten. While much historical scholarship highlights the role of civic associations in the American Progressive Era, we argue that there was an equally vigorous civic tradition within British history, particularly during the late Victorian, Edwardian and early twentieth century. This recognition follows on from the ground-breaking historical scholarship of William Whyte who identified an underlying ‘civic’ tradition behind British higher education. Within the social sciences, a civic tradition emerged in the late 19th century under circumstances remarkably similar to today. Inspired by the cultural criticism of Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, John Ruskin and the entrepreneurialism of William Morris, the founders of Toynbee Hall and more besides, a civic sociology tradition developed centred in Edinburgh. Led by Sir Patrick Geddes, Victor Branford and others, this civic scholarship understood the integral relationships between town and country, young and old, university professors and the non-educated poor. Central to the civic sociology project was integration, collaboration and engagement between universities and the public. The centuries’ long regeneration of Old Town Edinburgh is a testament to the viability of this approach and the wider civic and settlement movement. This connected historically with planners of Garden Cities; the Documentary Film Movement; the Kyrle societies, which became the National Trust; rural regeneration projects such as Dartington Hall in Devon, a fascinating institution which combined the ethical principles of Indian philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore, American Pragmatism and the best of English culture so conveniently summarized by T.S. Eliot at the time: ‘Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, 19th-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar’.

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11. Perhaps here we might encounter some of the positive British values the committee has requested? And yet, we also confront a paradox: which is that, perhaps the quintessence of British, or English culture is to not disclose itself. After all, why did so many cosmopolitan elites in the capital ignore UKIP for so long? Is it not because there is something vulgar – something decidedly un-English about banging on about English values? There are unwritten rules, and one either knows them or you don’t. These must be learned to get on in life, but also, these values cannot be written down, because to speak of them publicly breaks the very rules and expectations. One cannot wrap oneself in the red, white and blue as Americans or Frenchmen do, declaring ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’ as being the ideals above all other which must be embodied by all citizens. And, in any event, as Tocqueville noted of these two ideals in particular: they contradict one another, for one cannot obtain equality without limiting liberty and vice-versa.26 Or, perhaps, as German sociologist Robert Münch suggests, the essence of British modernity is the tension between tradition and reform?27

12. This is why civic education is so important as the committee rightly notes. However, we mustn’t confine our conception simply to a narrow, mandated ‘citizenship’ curriculum as currently exists. Rather, the entire school curriculum should be constructed in order to draw out the civic dimensions of one’s life and the life of one’s community. As Geddes, Jane Addams and others showed, one could highlight civics through biology lessons as much as language study – and my own research highlights the decline of such broad understandings since the nineteenth century precisely due to the replacement of Classical studies with modern foreign languages and specialized, disciplinary-oriented education. Not only does this narrow specialization limit students’ understandings of other cultures, as well as the capacity to reflect upon their own; this prevents students from learning how to learn. Teachers teach to the test, all the while being observed by OFSTED, exam boards and suspicious parents. Meanwhile, the specialized content memorized for A-levels will become obsolete within a few years based on current rates of technological change. In a future full of artificial intelligence, advanced robotics and fake news, what is most important is that students learn how to learn, and a robust, broad civic education may be the only way to engender this.

13. One of the classic civic sociologists we draw upon, W.E.B. DuBois, noted that the goal of education should not be simply to make ‘men’ into carpenters, but, rather should be ‘to make carpenters men’ (excuse the dated gendered language here!). There are, thus, two sides of education – one, technical, providing the individual with skills; and a second, providing the broader community – especially families – with a sense of what life means. What are some of the ideals of the good life? And, how might one use those acquired technical skills to obtain them? It is ultimately a question of ends vs. means. Du Bois wrote:

> If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools–intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it–this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life.28
14. Similar sentiments were expressed by Ruskin, Arnold, Eliot, Morris and others. Indeed, there is a long tradition in Britain of such an educational interest in ‘making men’, or perhaps, better expressed: making adults. Yet, how much entertainment on television or on film is truly oriented toward adults? Harry Potter, recall, is a children’s book. What is ‘Love Island’? Perhaps we avoid such questions for fear of appearing ‘elitist’ – which, incidentally, as noted above, is a strategy which has not worked! But, in avoiding such questions we ignore Arnold’s observation:

The complaining millions of men
Darken in labour and pain –
what they want is something to animate and ennoble them – not merely to add zest to their melancholy or grace to their dreams.

15. Perhaps we have further neglected in recent decades, as sociologist Robert Bellah argued was the case in America in 1985, that contemporary societies have settled into a form of individualism which is essentially ‘adolescent.’ We mistake the virtues of this interim phase of life: the unrootedness of the student leaving home, their quest for identity, initiative and independence, ‘along with their less savory concomitants of adulation of success and contempt for weakness’ for what it means to be a fully, self-actualized human being.29

16. But, is this not the fallacy of classical liberalism itself, as Philip Gorski recently argued in the case of America?30 Liberalism – or, what contemporary social critics call ‘neoliberalism’ – has been the heart of a broader consensus amongst the expert centre currently undergoing a comprehensive crisis of legitimacy.31 Under their watch, public services have been converted into simulated markets organized around targets and, ostensively, “choice”. Many of my critical colleagues argue this is an insidious attempt by the powers that be to turn us all into automatons – and, while that is, indeed, the effect – as a sociologists of professions, I interpret the cause as being largely due to an over-extension of economics and business professionals into problem-areas for which their knowledge was ill-suited. These include, healthcare, education, civil service – essentially, everything other than actual economic markets. Regardless, as noted above, these experts have failed to deliver the goods. Look at the economy, politics, culture and society. What a mess!

17. Gorski, however, provides an alternative to liberalism which is rooted in similar historical and intellectual traditions – early American ideals during and since the colonial and revolutionary eras – which, consequently, also connect to British traditions, including the civic tradition noted above. Indeed, following Bellah, Gorski calls this tradition ‘civic republicanism’. In contrast to the liberal ideal of freedom as being solely freedom from restraint – Isaiah Berlin’s ‘negative freedom’ – civic republicanism is rooted in classical and Biblical ideals of self-actualization through active citizenship. The language of markets and consumption can be replaced with the language of civic virtue and the good life. Rather than thinking of the government as being opposed to the individual, the community becomes the means through which the good and just are obtained.

18. In his discussion, Gorski notes different conceptions in the notion of ‘corruption’, which might helpfully draw out issues related to the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy: Since the late 19th century, ‘[corruption] has come to mean self-dealing and quid pro quos – bribery, nepotism, influence peddling, and so on. It suggests individual moral failing – the proverbial “bad apples”’.32 The civic republican understands corruption differently, in terms of a sociological imbalance: ‘corruption infects the whole tree, not just one apple. How so? Simply put, if one group can exercise power
without being checked by another, it will elevate its corporate interests above the common good'. Soon enough, everyone realizes this and starts to behave selfishly, becoming a ‘free rider’ to avoid being a ‘sucker’.

19. We are thus in a position to reconsider some of the questions the select committee asked regarding shared British values. From a liberal, or neoliberal point of view, the question is ultimately framed by thinking of individuals as problems which must be solved. What laws, mandates or responsibilities do we need to impose in order to obtain the behaviour we wish from British citizens or immigrants? For example, we do not want a terrorist attack, and those radical individuals were detached from communities, and therefore civic participation is a solution to prevent those individuals from exhibiting these forms of deviance. But, from a civic republican point of view, the question is not framed in terms of the outlier deviant, but in terms of the entire community’s commitment to one another. How does the individual come to realize themselves within these communities? Rather than thinking about what barriers impede youth from being engaged civically, we should ask a different question, namely: what actual opportunities are we providing youth and disadvantaged populations – native born and immigrant, old, women, straight, gay – as they do their best to get on in life? For decades, neoliberal experts, politicians of both parties at both local and national levels, have provided what seem to be ‘opportunities’, but which are too often the mere absence of impediments; these are then cynically renamed as individuals’ “choices”. Everyone knows this is proverbial poppycock. And, every election henceforth will involve throwing the bums out until some minimum satisfaction is obtained by the public vis-à-vis the powers that be.

20. What is required is a redistribution of the civic functions across the national geography and across social groups – white British, immigrant, young, old, and so on. This will not happen automatically, and must be planned – reflexively, ethically and actively. Everyone should have a part to play in their local, national and the global communities. They should feel a part of their histories and know their histories – warts and all! But, in order for such participation to occur, those opportunities and a robust civic education must be available. In recovering the civic sociology tradition, in Britain, American and beyond, we intend to contribute to this integration process in a concerted, long-term and ethical way. We have only just begun this process of reconstruction, but we thank you for your time and consideration at this early stage of our project. Please do not hesitate to let us know if we can be of any further assistance.

Please direct any questions, comments or concerns to the contributing author:

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NOTES

3 Gianpaolo Baiocchi and others, Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life (Routledge, 2015).

This is the on-going work of Alvaro Santana Acuña within the Canary Islands.


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T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (Faber & Faber, 2010).