“THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE is long, but it bends toward justice.” This famous quotation—a Martin Luther King Jr. paraphrase of nineteenth century minister and reformer Theodore Parker—evokes one of the most inspiring images in the history of ideas and has provided a ray of hope during periods of setback in various struggles to achieve a more just society. Yet, it also conveys a dangerous sense of inevitability that may encourage passivity about long-term civic outcomes. Frederick Douglass’s authoritative articulation of politics offers a more engaged—and more realistic—vision of the struggle for justice. “Power concedes nothing without demand,” he said; “it never did, and it never will.” Douglass understood that the arc is long in large part because those who have power and privilege in a society will, as a group, do whatever they can to hold on to their advantaged position. Because they have power, that power can and will be used to suppress those who seek change and the redress of injustice.

The German social theorist Max Weber pointed out that there are two ways that members of society come to accept the established political, economic, and social order: (1) intimidation through fear of coercion—i.e., a police state or its equivalent—and (2) acceptance of the legitimacy of the order of things. Since most of us grow up in families in which we take what we see to be “normal,” we regard it as “normal” to accept one’s condition. This acceptance is the fundamental building block of what sociologists term “legitimacy.” If you grow up in a monarchy, then the monarch comes to be seen as the legitimate authority. If you grow up in a democracy, then the elected head of state comes to be seen as having legitimate authority. If you grow up in a theocracy, then…. But rebellions, insurgencies, coups, and revolutions do sometimes arise, and then the police power of the state comes into play.

Which brings me to a vital distinction between two strategies for change: policy versus action. Policy is a top-down strategy. Those in positions of power can and do shape policy decisions about the allocation of resources. Whether they come from kings and queens or from theocratic leaders, from presidents and prime ministers or from bureaucrats, top-down government policies come from those in authoritative positions of political power. In sharp contrast, action is a bottom-up strategy for change. From food-price rebellions to coal-miner’s
strikes, from masses taking the streets over unsolved brutal rape to demands for lower food prices, bottom-up popular action is all about the mobilization of people who do not hold positions of political power. Of course, this distinction between policy and action does not preclude the interaction of the two strategies. Indeed, policies are often responsive to actions on the streets or in the squares, and actions are surely circumscribed by and responsive to policies—calling out the military, the police, the national guard, or the king’s men, for example, but also loosening restrictions on speech or recognizing the right to convene meetings. It is this very interaction that is at the heart of a strategy to illuminate the potential and power of civic engagement.

A Policy to Subvert Civic Engagement

Most authoritarian states seek to close off their citizens from seeing possible alternative ways of organizing the society and distributing its valued resources. In the period before the mercantile revolution, feudal societies could achieve and sustain “legitimate” order partly because so few traveled outside their own borders. As noted above, if we grow up with one version of reality, we tend to accept that as normal and, thus, legitimate. The mercantile revolution brought about massive trade, and with trade came movement and contact across cultures, nations, and, ultimately, urban centers of knowledge production, enabling a new flow of ideas. Authoritarian regimes in agrarian feudal societies began to fracture and transform, in part because of the shift in power from land owners to merchants and trading moguls.

But it is also true that border crossings and transoceanic travels meant exposure to other forms of political organization. The industrial revolution of the seventeenth century set the stage for the seismic events culminating in the French and American Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. Revolutions are a limiting case—the left end of a long continuum running from civic engagement to apathetic distancing from the public sphere. But it is important to note that civic engagement also appears on the right end of that continuum—meaning that there are opposite limiting cases—those that maintain and enforce the established, making a strong push to return to the older—the ancien régime, the monarchy, or the theocratic state.

In periods of revolutionary change, civic engagement has real and powerful reverberations across the population. The Arab Spring is the most recent example of how revolutionary times can affect participants who have experienced wrenching turmoil, generating “civic engagement.” In this case, the engagement can range from demonstration and protest to expressing their views at home and never venturing into the streets. Similarly, during the 1990s, the end of apartheid in South Africa civically engaged all sectors of the society with palpable civic intensity. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had a parallel impact across both East and West Germany. In this sense, civic engagement occurs whether or not one attends a public gathering, a rally, or a town hall meeting. It occurs in the barbershops, at the marketplace, and in homes at dinnertime. Citizens are engaged in politically charged conversations about the very nature of the society’s social, economic, and political structures.
But when the dust settles, and a new order comes into existence, there is always a notable decline in civic engagement. And herein lies the challenge for education and educators. Civic engagement becomes too much of an abstraction, a substance-free idea with little transparent relevance to the daily lives of citizens.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, MEET SAUL ALINSKY

While an increasing number of educators are reaching a remarkable national consensus that “engaged learning” is superior to “disengaged learning” (abstract, decontextualized, rote learning), what is actually meant by “engaged” varies widely. To help sort out the various usages, Stephen Bowen has created a taxonomy comprised of four categories: (1) engagement with the learning process, (2) engagement with the object of study, (3) engagement with contexts, and (4) student engagement with the human condition. Bowen’s taxonomy usefully demonstrates how extensively the nature and applicability of learning depends upon the nature of the student’s engagement and his or her relationship to the learning context.

The idea that students learn best when they are “engaged” is as old as education and socialization. John Dewey, the dean of a distinctly American philosophical tradition called pragmatism, founded the University of Chicago Laboratory School on the principle that students would learn best if they were engaged in the process of growing food in a garden, then bringing it to the kitchen for preparation, and finally bringing it to the table for consumption.

One of Dewey’s curricular obsessions was cooking. The children cooked and served lunch once a week. The philosophical rationale is obvious enough: preparing a meal is a goal-directed activity, a social activity that is continuous with life outside the school. But Dewey incorporated it into the practical business of making lunch: arithmetic (weighing and measuring ingredients using instruments the children made themselves), chemistry and physics (observing the process of combustion), biology (diet and digestion), geography (exploring the natural environments of plants and animals), and so on. Cooking became the basis for most of the science taught at the school. It turned out to have so much curricular potential that making cereal became a three-year continuous course of study for all children between the ages of six and eight.

When the subject matter is food, the science of food, or the production and economy of food, it is very easy to see the linkage of that subject matter to engaged learning. Civic engagement remains an abstract idea for most students, because it is typically free from substantive consideration of the practical and the practiced.

Here we can get some help if we bring together the theories and empirical observations of Alexis de Tocqueville and Saul Alinsky, two unlikely political bedfellows who, writing a full century apart, addressed very different elements...
of American political society. Tocqueville’s classic treatise, *Democracy in America*, was written in 1835. He was a Frenchman who spent several years observing the civic engagement of small-town America during the early nineteenth century. What struck Tocqueville most about the new nation was its people’s remarkable inclination to join local interest groups in order to further the agendas of those groups. He went so far as to label the United States “a nation of joiners” because Americans were far more likely to engage the political process in this manner than were the citizens of any other large nation. Notice that the key element of this proclivity to join was the furtherance of the interests of a specific group. Such groups could be as diverse as the Kiwanis Club and the Masons all the way over to Abolitionist and Prohibition groups.

More than a century later, by convincing residents of the most neglected urban communities to press the city government for very specific services, Saul Alinsky pioneered a strategy that came to be known as community organizing. The classic examples of specific issues addressed are potholes in asphalt and burnt-out city lamps. One can begin to see from the examples both the theory behind the strategy and the reason for its successes. Potholes and burnt-out lamps are relatively easy to fix, and so community groups and political operatives can both have an interest in the outcome. For the community, collective mobilization that gets things done, no matter how minor, demonstrates political efficacy; for political operatives in city government, dispatching workers to fix such problems demonstrates effective government. But Alinsky was not just interested in fixing potholes. He wished to empower community organizations to address larger social and political goals.

The Woodlawn Organization (TWO), a Chicago community organization most active in the 1960s and 1970s under the leadership of Alinsky and local religious leaders, was the quintessential example of his early efforts—and remains an embodiment of the movement’s core principles. After the street lights were repaired, TWO took on the issues of other inadequate city services, moving on to address substandard housing, community health concerns, and even unemployment. Responding to potential University of Chicago expansion, TWO successfully organized against the plan because it would have displaced nearby low-income residents. TWO successfully employed protests, boycotts, and other such methods to defend and advance community objectives. TWO and the university ultimately collaborated to form Woodlawn institutions that provided residents with representation and opportunities for leadership in addressing community issues.

If “civic engagement” is considered a lofty abstraction and remains unconnected to community action, having little meaning for college students, then “engaged learning” would become the opposite pole of the continuum. To be engaged usually requires attention to a substantive goal, whether it is the unfulfilled
pothole or an edible garden education project. So what might be a bridge to connect the two? This brings to mind the classic experiment in social psychology in which two teams of students competed to achieve a valued goal. One team was given an organizational requirement that leaders had to be elected. The leader of the second team was designated by the experimenter and given nearly authoritarian control over the strategies and techniques for achieving the goal. The different outcomes were interesting, but the most significant finding from the study was related to how much each group came to learn and understand about the nature of political participation. Most important, each group learned a vital lesson about how social organization affects relations between participants and about varying structures of political leadership and authority.

I now want to draw the triangular connection among Tocqueville’s analysis of “joiners” who seek to further a group’s agenda, Alinsky’s insights about the baby-steps on the road to civic engagement and empowerment, and the engaged learning about political processes that emerged from the social psychology experiment involving two teams organized according to either democratic or authoritarian structures.

Most students arrive on a college campus with little or no practical experience with civic engagement. High school civics courses were once common, but they are now rarely a feature of the curriculum. Suppose that all college freshmen were required to complete a questionnaire about their knowledge or experience of civic engagement. Further, suppose they were informed that, before they graduate, they would be given a similar questionnaire, in order to see what impact their college education had made. Next, suppose that colleges and universities in a particular region were in competition for whose student body had the highest rating in “civic engagement,” meaning an indicator of civic learning directly connected to engaged actions with consequences in the community. This would set the stage for some evaluation group to make that assessment, of course, but the competition would be local and regional. Some campuses might emphasize the Alinsky approach, providing incentives and rewards to students who engage in a local community (outside the campus) to help “fill the potholes.” Others might find this problematic or risky, but would instead provide engaged learning sites and forums where students could engage in activities with an organizational structure on campus in order to lobby for a particular group interest. Students would define their own substantive concerns and interests—and there would be no shortage—from lowering tuition and transforming curricula to furthering the rights of gay or Muslim students and confronting anti-Semitism and racism. And perhaps most significantly, participation in the process itself would constitute effective engagement.

Policy, Action, and Competitive Civic Engagement Awards

Earlier, I discussed the distinction between policy (top-down) and action (bottom-up)—and the interaction between the two strategies. Students mobilizing to effect change on campus are engaged in action, and what they confront is policy—as determined by college administrators. In this framework, the administration (and to a lesser degree, the faculty) constitute the policy element in these institutions.
The faculty, in general, are ill equipped and hardly motivated to teach civic engagement. In order for there to be any traction on the matter of increasing student participation, there needs to be a realignment of the rewards structure.

Few things animate university administrators and their public relations offices more than rankings with other institutions. So why not have a “civic engagement ranking” of higher education institutions, sponsored by, for example, the Bringing Theory to Practice project in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities? Each institution could generate its own version of such engagement, but the key measure would be student assessment in exit interviews or exit questionnaires.

In the end, the quite appropriate question will be raised as to the purposes of increased engagement—why is it something to encourage? The first answer takes us back to the “arc of the moral universe” that “bends toward justice”—but only if and when there is mobilization. Second, while participation of the citizenry is the bedrock foundation of a democratic society, in ordinary times, for the bulk of the citizenry, that truth is typically either brushed aside or taken for granted. Yet, unless the capacity for mobilization is cultivated, concentration of wealth and power is the most likely trajectory. Thus, lastly, the increased concentration of wealth and the ever-widening gap between those at the top and the rest of the society pose a serious threat to democratic institutions.

NOTES
1. Frederick Douglass, “West India Emancipation Speech” in Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings, eds. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 367.