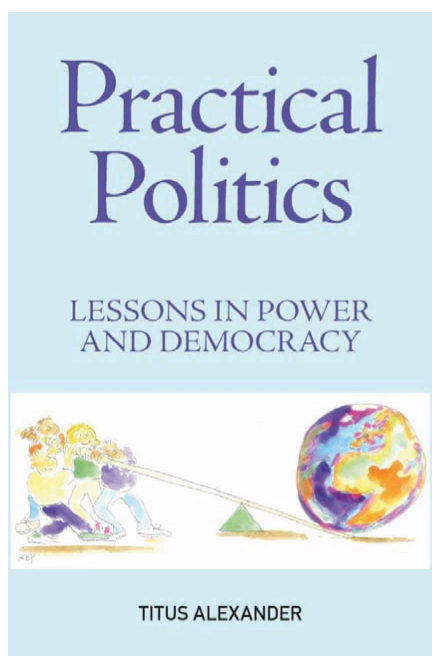


Practical Politics: Lessons in power and democracy, by Titus Alexander

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Practical Politics is the latest encapsulation of Titus Alexander's constantly evolving research and thinking in the field of political education. It can be seen as a manifesto of Alexander's campaign for political education. The book consists of three parts. The first, on 'politics as a public good', lays out the rationale of the book, defines the basic concepts, pinpoints the key sites where politics can take place and justifies the need for political education. The second part, on 'lessons in power', takes a closer look into sites and ways in which political power is exercised and identifies key power holders to be targeted in order to bring about change. The last part, on 'learning for democracy', explores ways to expand the space for political education in educational institutions and provides tips for developing a political education curriculum. The book ends with a brief conclusion where Alexander underscores the importance of political education and repeats his call to stakeholders to recognize its importance.

Alexander's advocacy of political education relies on a straightforward conviction that the more people know about the intricacies of the political system, the better chances they will have to make use of it in their own interests. He highlights that the quality of democracy and socio-political and economic order is determined by whether or not there are citizens who have the knowledge and competences to participate in the system in a meaningful fashion. The fact that such citizens are made, not born, underlines the importance of political education. To strengthen this central argument, Alexander presents significant details and powerful quotes as well as inspiring cases of people's coming together around a cause and bringing about change. At the beginning of almost every section, Alexander tells a story of an effective campaign organized by people with knowledge and competences concerning practical politics that has contributed to the development of a more just and equal society. These stories render the central message of the book interesting to those who want to initiate a campaign or teach about campaigning.

Publication of this book is timely considering that there is a considerable surge in the number of people across the world, from the Middle East to the United States of America, who are interested in politics and determined to create structural changes in the established configuration of the socio-political and economic order. I think Alexander's call for political education and his suggestions to affect those in power will resonate with a greater number of people under the present international circumstances, in which interest in politics is reaching an unprecedented level, and where the need to control authoritarian political power becomes more urgent than ever.

Despite the clarity of the central message, the book includes some conceptual ambiguities that can scarcely escape the attention of a careful reader. One key concept that is rendered vaguely is power. Even though the author attempts to define it on several occasions, as a

reader I am not provided with a clear definition of the concept. There are also statements that could be found to be too strong when used without clarification: '... without universal practical political education there cannot be democracy' (13). What exactly is meant by 'universal practical political education' and by 'democracy' is not clear in the local context of this statement. Other statements of this sort include the claim that 'it is more productive to start with diagnosis than prognosis' (15), and that '... the choice is always political' (40). These statements can be challenged when not clarified adequately, which runs the risk of weakening the central argument of the book. In addition, as an early-career researcher in citizenship education, I sought an explanation as to why Alexander prefers the title of 'practical political education' to 'democratic citizenship and human rights education', but could not find a theoretical clarification for this conceptual choice. It would have been illuminating for me to find some reflections on how political education, democratic citizenship and human rights education differ from, overlap or complement each other.

On many occasions, Alexander emphasizes that a small group of privileged people hold power, knowledge and skills of practical politics, and that economic elites – 'political families' (21), those in 'units of rule' (22), key figures of 'office politics' (91), 'core groups' (101) or 'global elites' (131) – make crucial decisions that affect the lives of millions of people. Based on this assumption, Alexander strives to show 'sideways routes to reach people in powerful positions' to steer the direction of social change for the benefit of all (131). Alexander's concern to show 'sideways' options is laudable, but focusing attention on ways to reach elites implicitly recognizes asymmetrical power relations as a given and harms the possibility of pushing for a structural change. In addition to contemplating the ways to reach elites, Alexander could have reflected more on the ways to make the social and cultural capital held by elites accessible to a greater number of people, so that more people could have a say in decisions that shape their lives. However, Alexander seems more concerned with making people effective political players within the structural constraints of the existing system rather than encouraging learners to seek routes to structural change.

The other underlying assumption that runs throughout the book is that when people are taught how to use power and understand the intricacies of the system, they will be capable of affecting the system for their own benefit. I think this assumption does not give sufficient regard to the internal transformations that one might undergo before becoming politically active. It reduces political education to the acquisition of an external set of knowledge and skills by implying that drawing power maps, knowing who holds the real power and following some predetermined steps would be sufficient to become politically active and bring about change. I think that internal motivation, or having a burning desire to change an aspect of the system, is more critical than obtaining the external set of knowledge and skills of practical politics. I would recommend political education should depart from a consideration of learners' affective preparedness level.

Overall, this highly accessible book makes a convincing case for introducing and promoting political education and comprises valuable practical information for those who want to teach politics to learners of any age. I highly recommend it as a great starting point for all who have an interest in political education; it made me want to read more widely afterwards and to follow up some references mentioned in it. Early-career researchers can find a distillation of a scrupulous reading of political education literature, of which Alexander makes very good use throughout the book. He quotes significant insights from previous studies: '... winning power through violence tends to perpetuate violence' (125); civic education is an effective antidote to 'authoritarian government, corruption or law breaking' (160); '... participation reduces cynicism ...' (171).

These quotes support and facilitate an effective communication of Alexander's central message: that the future of democracy depends on the presence of democratic citizens who can be raised through practical political education.

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