BLESSED ARE THE ORGANIZED

Grassroots Democracy in America

Jeffrey Stout

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GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

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IN MEMORY OF

MARY DOUGLAS, HENRY LEVINSON,
AND RICHARD RORTY

*

ON RELATIONAL POWER:

Lupita tells me she has serious problems because she has no sewer service and the same with this one and that one and that one. This is the way we begin to have a relationship. And then, if you don't have water and I don't have water, let's have a meeting to fight for this.

—*Carmen Anaya*

ON ACCOUNTABILITY:

You said you were gonna, but you didn't.
What's up with that?

—*Joanne Bland*

* *Preface* *

THIS BOOK TAKES A JOURNEY in search of democracy, through an America that Tocqueville and Whitman never knew.[1] It begins in New Orleans in the wake of Katrina and moves on to the Houston Astrodome, in the days when the hurricane survivors were there. It tours the borderlands of Texas, where hundreds of immigrant shantytowns somehow became habitable neighborhoods. It touches down briefly in Arizona, and then passes through some of the poorest communities in California, before ending in a well-to-do synagogue in Marin County.

In each of these places, we will meet people who want to explain, on the basis of their own experience, what they think citizenship means. Their stories will have much to teach us about the nature and prospects of grassroots democracy. Periodically, in the course of the journey, I will pause long enough to clarify some feature of life in a modern republic: citizenship, responsibility, authority, power, domination, freedom, anger, grief, leadership, ideals, values, ends, means, passions, interests, religion, secularity, and the concept of democracy itself.[2]

There is a lot of talk these days, most notably from the president, about grassroots democracy. Change, he says, needs to come from the bottom up. There is, however, a good deal of confusion over what this might mean, how this sort of change might work, and what it can achieve. To dispel the confusion, one needs to look away from the centers of elite power and ask ordinary citizens what they are actually doing in their own communities to get organized, exert power, and demand accountability.

How do they build an organization? How do they analyze power relations? How do they cultivate leaders? What role does religion play in the organizational process? What objectives are being

sought? What concerns, passions, and ideals lie behind those objectives? What have concerned citizens actually achieved and how have they achieved it? What have their setbacks been? Who are their allies and their opponents? What obstacles stand in their way? By answering these questions, we can strengthen our grasp on what grassroots democracy is.

We will also need to consider the criticisms that have been raised against it. It is said to place too much faith in the myopic and apathetic masses, to undermine excellence and authority, to pursue unacceptable goals, to employ unfair tactics, and to mix religion and politics inappropriately. These are serious charges. The most important criticism, however, comes from people who think bottom-up change would be a good thing, but doubt that it, or anything else, can cure what currently ails our politics.

Grassroots democrats have had some success at holding members of local elites accountable: mayors, school superintendents, police chiefs, developers, and so on. But local political struggles disclose problems and structures that transcend the local level. This is one reason for undertaking a journey, instead of lingering for a longer time in one site. All of the stops along the way are nodes in a single network of cooperating organizations. If grassroots democracy is going to have effects above the local level, it will be because networks of this kind are strengthened, extended, and multiplied. I want to bring this possibility into focus.

Presidents, federal legislators, judges, bureaucrats, Wall Street bankers, insurance executives, media moguls, and generals are making decisions every day that have a massive impact on our lives. Together they wield unprecedented power. The sheer amount of power they exercise is worrisome, even if they aren't carrying out a grand conspiracy. Why think that ordinary citizens can end a war, deal adequately with global warming, achieve a just and wise resolution of the financial crisis, or bring multinational corporations under rational control if the most powerful people in the world dig

in their heels? Why suppose that the establishment *can* be held accountable to the rest of us?

Candidate Obama's hopeful answer, born of his own experience as an organizer in Chicago, was that ordinary citizens can indeed "take the country back." His supporters chanted, "Yes we can!" as if trying to convince themselves of their power. He refers often to the need for "accountability."[3] Where, then, is the promised accountability going to come from? All indications suggest that accountability remains in short supply.

This thought forces us to confront a widespread doubt about democracy itself, the doubt against which "the audacity of hope" asserted itself, but which the election of Barack Obama seems to have put on hold only momentarily. If our most powerful elites are now essentially beyond the reach of accountability, as they increasingly seem to be, then why suppose that our polity qualifies as a *democratic republic* at all? It appears to function, rather, as a plutocracy, a system in which the fortunate few dominate the rest. And if that is true, then honesty requires that we stop referring to ourselves as *citizens*, and admit that we are really subjects. The question of democratic hope boils down to whether the basic concepts of our political heritage apply to the world in which we now live.

The stories I shall be recounting come from spirited, committed proponents of that heritage.[4] They think of themselves as citizens, as people entitled to demand a say in their society. Many of them are living under desperate circumstances. The law classifies some of them as illegal aliens. Yet, as Ernesto Cortés Jr., an organizer who will figure prominently in these pages, put it to me, "They do the work of a citizen." They have begun to lay their hands on the levers of power that a constitutional democracy puts at their disposal. They have entered into new relations of authority with one another, and acquired habits and skills they had formerly lacked. Their talents, virtues, and accomplishments are not ordinary at all.

There is no point in hiding the fact that my own democratic com-

mitments incline me to identify with what these citizens are trying to do. In the eyes of some readers, this bias may threaten to spoil the whole project. The solution, I believe, is not to adopt a mask of value neutrality. Whether my sympathies have clarified or clouded my vision of citizenship is a good question, which is not for me to answer. Expressing my commitments clearly at least gives readers an opportunity to make allowances. Democratic social criticism, as I practice it, is not merely *about* democracy. It proceeds from a point of view shaped by commitments and friendships that are democratic in nature.

Listening closely while ordinary citizens describe their struggles, victories, and setbacks is itself a democratic act. One of its benefits is to bring the ideal of good citizenship down to earth. I want readers to experience something like what I experienced when talking, face to face, with citizens who believe that democracy's health depends on one-on-one conversations, small-group meetings, critical reflection, and organized action. I also want to explain clearly and precisely what these practices involve and set them in comparative and historical perspective. Contemporary grassroots democracy warrants the sort of respectful examination that is more often accorded to ruling elites and to the democratic heroes of the past.

To imagine the future of our politics in light of these stories is to allow the actual political practice of ordinary people to influence our vision of the politically possible. Saying this is not to prejudge the question of what one can reasonably hope for in politics. Perhaps there are insuperable obstacles preventing us from moving very far at all down the paths these people are treading. The only way to find this out, it seems to me, is to go down those paths and press against whatever obstacles one finds there. If the practices of organizing and accountability require modification or expansion in order to address the daunting problems now threatening democracy that is something to decide on the basis of experience. It is not the sort of thing one can deduce from a theory. This book is an expres-

sion of dissatisfaction with democratic theory in its current abstract form.

A degree of trust in the testimony of ordinary citizens is required to build up an empirically grounded sense of what citizenship is. I have been able to confirm some things that citizens have told me about their communities and campaigns, but news reports on local controversies tend these days to be rather sketchy. In any event, I am concerned here mainly with how citizens conduct their organizing when the media spotlight is not on them; what their motives, ends, values, and ideals are; to whom they attribute authority; and how they view their opponents. On all of these topics, my main evidence is what citizens have told me, and my main reason for trusting that evidence is my direct observation of what they are doing.

I do not think of myself as an ethnographer, let alone as an investigative reporter, but as an observer and critic of the political and religious dimensions of contemporary democratic culture.[5] My goal throughout has been to elicit from the testimony of active, hopeful citizens *a conception of what citizenship involves* and then to subject that conception to scrutiny in light of the most important criticisms that have been brought against grassroots democracy. These criticisms pertain to the ends and means of democratic action, the relationship of religion and politics, and the grounds for hoping that grassroots democracy can achieve major reform. My quarry is an informed, thoughtful view of what citizenship is, can be, and ought to be, not a detailed account of this or that campaign.

Readers are free to judge for themselves the credibility of the particular stories I have chosen to retell. Given that the testimony is coming from human beings engaged in conflict, one can safely assume that it is to some degree self-serving, self-deceived, biased, resentful, or based on wishful thinking. Yet it comes from people who are responding to demonstrably unjust circumstances, on the whole, with courage and restraint. These citizens do not present themselves as do-gooders. In fact, they speak with refreshing can-

dor about the role self-interest plays in motivating them. But there appear to be other concerns in their hearts as well.

My impression, as someone who has observed them in action, is that they do spend as much time as they claim to spend conversing face to face, cultivating leaders, engaging in research, and reflecting critically. As a result of spending time in these ways, they have in fact acquired and exercised power, and won some significant victories. Whether the citizens who take hope from those victories always treat or characterize their opponents justly is impossible to determine on the basis of the evidence I have gathered. Another open question is whether the grander hopes for democracy harbored by some grassroots activists can be achieved. Hope, by nature, outruns the evidence that can be adduced for it and is inherently hard to distinguish from wishful thinking. Still, something will have to be said about its grounds.

At a minimum, the stories considered here can clarify what some citizens *take themselves* to be doing and the ideal of citizenship they *aspire* to embody in their conduct. It seems to me that the rest of us at least owe such stories a hearing and are ourselves to be judged by the quality of the hearing we give. Reading or listening to someone else's story, no less than telling one's own, belongs to the work of a citizen and brings with it an ethical demand, as well as a host of practical questions. The demand is to respond fittingly to one's fellows who seek partners in the formation of a just society. The questions include whether (and how far) to trust the people telling the stories, whether (and how far) to share their hopes and join their struggles. To answer such questions in one way or another, or even to refuse to answer them, is already to play a role in determining the kind of society we have.

Blessed are the organized. This is shorthand for the central claim of grassroots democracy. It needs elaboration and qualification. There are good and bad ways of organizing: effective and ineffective ways, democratic and nondemocratic ways. Only some of the ways

now being tried have any likelihood of promoting the common good and thus any chance of making our communities happy and just places to live. I do not claim that the examples considered here give a full picture of contemporary democratic practice. Many groups of different kinds are needed to achieve a genuinely inclusive republic that is free from domination. Democracy would benefit from books on each kind. But I will try to show that the kind of group examined in this book, the broad-based citizens' organization, has an important contribution to make. I shall also try to show how the rest of the political landscape looks from the perspective of such organizations.

Will people who are now meek, weak, and isolated inherit at least some patch of the earth and establish there a society in which even the most powerful are held accountable in a system of just laws? I am not certain that they will. Neither, however, am I certain that they cannot. It is in the uncertain, broken middle that the hope for democratic accountability manifests itself in the deeds and words of ordinary women and men.

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