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## THE DECADE OF GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

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Review of *The Backyard Revolution*  
(Temple University Press, 1980)  
by Harry Boyte.

Suppose you've got a favorite uncle somewhere, a guy not very politically sophisticated but with whom you really have an affinity, and he doesn't understand the kind of organizing work that you do. Well, if gift-giving is your problem, send him a copy of Harry Boyte's new book *The Backyard Revolution*—but you might want to assure him it really isn't about "Revolution." Or maybe your organizing during the last decade has been in a narrow vein, say you want to get a sense of what the overall grassroots action has been—buy a copy for yourself.

*The Backyard Revolution* is a good account of the citizen action movement of the 70s. Boyte gives us a readable summary of what he calls "citizen advocacy"—somewhat ironic terminology when coupled with "revolt" and "revolution." For the most part, he concentrates on bottom-up activity in one of a number of traditions, namely, Alinsky-inspired turf-based organizing, the Nader public interest approach, and efforts by constituencies linked to specific issues. He does this not just by abstract description but with stories of citizen action organizations. Interspersed are interesting and informative comments by people who have been in these organizations—neighborhood residents, women, seniors, farmers, energy activists, and so on.

Boyte's book is a testimonial to the 70s as the decade of grassroots activism, which is no secret to most organizers. But to my favorite uncle whose political information comes from the daily paper and the six o'clock TV news, the idea that there was a great social movement at the grassroots over the last 10 years is unheard of.

### Motivating Forces

Of course there might be disagreement as to whether all of these areas of so-called grassroots activity do in fact make up a single movement. The view of *The*

*Backyard Revolution* is that these threads of organizing in the 70s have in common the goal of "broad decentralization of social structures," and that the basis for what Boyte calls the "citizen revolt" is the popular belief that "decisions about their lives are becoming further and further removed—in both corporate and governmental structures."

Boyte's theoretical position, however, is that the movement originates in the crisis of the capitalist state. It's an unsatisfying explanation on two counts. First, its macro scope offers very little insight into how Boyte understands those forces at the micro and mezzo levels, where organizers practice. We're to understand the actions of individuals, small groups, and organizations only by much larger, transcending economic phenomena which, while certainly having a place in that action, are hardly the entire explanation for it. Second, while the fiscal crisis of the capitalist state coincides with the citizen action movement of the 70s, it's inadequate as an explanation to deal with what Boyte himself says is largely a response to being shut out of decision-making by monolithic bureaucracies, both private and public.

Before going on with the main theme of *The Backyard Revolution* we'll detour, as Boyte does, to mention his treatment of the condition of the left in the United States for at least several decades—to wit, its isolation from most ordinary people. Since Harry Boyte's credentials include a demonstrated concern—rare among radical economists—for the gaps in political thinking by Marxist theoreticians and activists, it's not surprising that he takes the time to shed light on the left's isolation. He sees that progressive reform has been weakened because, as he puts it, "most liberals (or radicals) could imagine no alternative to defending government and blaming corporations." Of course most other people could as easily, if not more so, villainize the public bureaucracies.

## Democratic Control

If the citizen movement is people showing interest in “taking action themselves to remedy problems,” as Boyte says, then his idea that broad-based social movements are founded in “free social spaces” (“traditional institutions that retain some degree of political and organizational insulation from elite control”) is a valuable insight. He cites as an example how the civil rights movement of the 50s “incubated” in black beauty parlors. Free social space, then, is essential to transforming relations of power through democratic social movements. Simply put, these local groups and organizations are not the cause of our social backwardness but the source of hope for our political and economic progress, which is a point of view already well understood by grassroots organizers in the Alinsky tradition but probably not so on the left.

For Boyte the future is bound up in citizen action, in “the demand that power and resources be transferred to human communities coupled with a vision of government as a civic meeting ground.” He describes the basic problem as “megastructures” and the solution as “citizen power over public and economic activity.”

My reading is that, in looking at citizen action, Boyte mostly builds on the tradition of Alinsky organizing and the expanding neighborhood movement, even though he describes much more. His observation is that while Alinsky was masterful at organizing people for power, mobilizing to win tangible victories, he provided very little “strategy for attaining broader political goals.” As for the neighborhoods, Boyte writes that over the decade it was becoming better understood within the movement that “community renewal has to begin with neighborhoods themselves: people couldn’t be rescued by others.” This notion leads ultimately to rejection of top-down solutions and decisions in favor of grassroots self-governance. Boyte’s review of CDCs revealed they were tied to the demands of their top-down Federal sponsors, thus unwieldy or unworkable for achieving political or economic autonomy.

Boyte observes that in cities where *formal* governmental decentralization is happening, such as Portland and Atlanta, at the top there’s fear of genuine neighborhood autonomy and at the bottom fear of cooptation—the latter justified by the administrative character of most decentralization so far. What Boyte doesn’t mention is that there are other ways to formal decentralization, not from the top down. And so he misses the mark in concluding that “formal” rights are of little consequence and instead that “authentic democracy” rests on the “health, strength and vitality of neighborhood institutions.”

Although the second proposition is unquestionably true, the first ignores promising bottom-up strategies to get formal public powers decentralized. It’s possible, for instance, to create neighborhood-sized public organizations with formation by petition, from the

bottom up, permanently vesting public authority in the new organizations. It’s permitted in most places by existing state laws or precedents for establishing special district governments. The point is, this option is far too potent to overlook as a strategy for decentralization.

## Problems and Potentials

On balance, professional community organizers may be disappointed by *The Backyard Revolution* in several ways. First, there’s the lack of theoretical unity and coherence. And even though the radical economic (macro) theory provides a basis for criticizing existing economic institutions and their effects on politics, it says little or nothing about *developing* new decentralized institutions.

That suggests the second disappointment. The book’s review of problems and potentials for the citizen action movement, while useful, is scattered and uninspiring—seemingly ungrounded theoretically. Boyte does draw out some of the more important organizing issues, such as “localism (the stop-sign syndrome), mobilizing large constituencies without an institutional base, staff domination, and narrowness of vision. But while helpful it leaves me uneasy: the core of this movement is decentralization, yet none of these point deals directly with improving organizational mileage toward that end, albeit some may do so indirectly.

That gets us to the last point. It’s clear that while Boyte has charted the outlines and much of the substance of a citizen movement on a decentralizing heading, and that he’s deeply sympathetic to it and to the Jeffersonian ideology that supports it, *The Backyard Revolution* offers an agenda for the 1980s that’s only a dim shadow of the movement’s potential. If successful there would be some top-down devolution of public services, a number of progressive legislative enactments, and—from the radical economic program—a “Corporate Democracy Act” that would establish citizen regulation of larger corporations. It’s an agenda that implicitly ignores the difference between building power and contending for state power.

Building power is organizing and mobilizing people in sufficient numbers to leverage targets, while contending for state power is using the power built through organization and mobilization to permanently acquire powers normally reserved exclusively to the state or its agents. These are the powers possessed by the people “in power,” those with whom we’re always fighting, including the power to enact and enforce laws, exercise eminent domain (for taking property with compensation) and police power (for taking without compensation), levy taxes or service charges, and sell non-taxable, interest-bearing securities. We’re always building power but rarely if ever contending for it. So our organizations typically invest most of their resources not in winning structural changes and long-lasting benefits but in survival and maintenance.

### **Agenda for the 80s**

The question for the 80s is, how can we effectively contend for state power at the grassroots? In Harry Boyte's terms, the goal is to go from "free social space" into what European political philosophers and scientists have long called "public space"—a metaphor for *institutionalized* roles that vest public authority in large numbers of ordinary people, guaranteeing permanent and powerful direct citizen action. What

must be done is a long leap beyond organizing and mobilizing to win concessions. What's needed is an organizing strategy, comparable to what the labor movement had for the first half of its life, to shape historic grassroots movement. At the least it must show how to create a long-lasting right of ownership for all citizens in the state's political-economic decisions, through government decentralization sponsored from the bottom up.

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