

Harry C. Boyte, The Backyard Revolution

One tends to feel benign towards the post-Alinsky citizens-action groups that exist around the country, but also somewhat puzzled by them.

The "benign" has to do with interest in greater citizen involvement. The puzzlement has to do with interest in what these citizens-action groups really have on their minds. Boyte's book helps.

There is nothing puzzling about the "technical theory" behind this citizens action movement. The basic theory is old and time-tested. People should be organized around their own felt needs, and from "where they are," culturally and otherwise; not around abstract ideas. The group should make its own independent decisions, and be in a position to do so. If they win some victories, they will feel more competent and less powerless. Coalitions should be sought towards that end.

As the old joke goes, "that might be community organization theory, but it ain't news." Those have been the fundamentals of community organization for centuries, even before the social work schools catalogued them, although some people are much better at doing it than others.

What may be new is that most organizers in the past have used those principles of organizing with a specific prior agenda in mind. Thus, the labor organizers helped their people formulate their own demands and

strategies--but around the prior issues of wages or working conditions. The civil rights organizers organized around the civil rights agenda. The agrarian populists organized around farm issues.

However, the citizens action people, for the most part, say that they have no "agenda" in mind, beyond developing citizens groups which can be effective for whatever it turns out they want to be effective about.

That is where the puzzlement begins. It is, of course, healthy and creditable for a neighborhood group to get together and demand a traffic light for their street; or for a group of aged to get together and demand lower telephone rates for live-alones. They are worthwhile objectives in themselves. But they are modest, and the organizers don't seem modest at all, talking about nothing less than a "revolution."

There is, of course, just the matter of producing more effective and participant citizens. One activist described her involvement as having "broadened my vision of life and what can be done when people work together. It has made me more secure personally and more trustful." Another says: "An organization like OBA gives people the feeling that you can make a decision, you can change something, you can affect your kid's school or city services."

As Boyte asks: "Where do ordinary people, steeped in lifelong experiences of humiliation and self-doubt, barred from acquisition of basic

public skills, gain the courage, the self-confidence, the mutual trust, above all the hope to take action in their own behalf?"

So, aside from the street lights and the lower utility rates, there is the result of more able, more participatory people. That also is a good in itself.

But it is still modest. More able for what? More participatory for what? What are the links between organizations with different self-made agendas, which turn them into a national movement? Labor groups were formed on a natural pro-labor agenda, linked together on a natural pro-labor agenda; and became an effective national movement as a result. So with farmers. So with environmentalists. So with blacks.

But what is the natural agenda of the "citizens action movement?" If it has none, if it is a training school for citizens to do anything they want to do more effectively, and to build some intergroup relations in the process--it is a worthwhile effort. But it is modest; more modest than the tone of the organizers, and that causes some puzzlement. Is there really no ideology beyond technique; are there no values beyond the belief in maximum citizens participation?

Perhaps, there is a belief that if citizens get together, there is a natural pre-ordained ideology that will occur to them. Such a belief begins to be an ideology itself. Or to test the value-free approach, let's look at the recent phenomenon of the "conservative" sweep in the recent presidential elections. One of the aspects of what happened would have

pleased the technical impulses of the citizens action organizers.

Investigation reveals, for example, how important churches were as a natural gathering-place for people, otherwise politically inactive and unaffiliated. In church after church, people who were disgusted with the way things were going with them and with America, got together on their own. They then called upon some of the right-wing Christian action groups to come in and help them organize for political action.

These Christian action groups were astounded by what had happened. They had not approached those local church groups before. On request, they went in and acted as consultants, much as the citizens-action organizers would do. It was one of the more legitimate "grass-roots" movements we have seen in recent America. In this case, the agenda for these local church groups--formerly uninvolved in politics, and with a sense of powerlessness--was the defeat of "liberal" candidates, opposition to abortion, etc. And afterwards, they felt less powerless, more involved, more competent--exactly in the tone expressed by the people in Boyte's book. Would the organizers of the citizens action movement really be pleased by these results? Of course not.

The fact is that there is a prior political ideology which is held by the citizens action movement organizers--and Boyte's book makes that ideology clear. There is to begin with an explicit commitment against capitalism, and against corporate business in principle.

Boyte makes the enemy clear throughout, from the preface of his book:

"the new forms of corporate organization, the corporate propaganda offensive, the diverse lobbying, mobilization and spending tactics through which chief executives seek to make every other sector of the society subordinate to their goal of higher profits..." He asserts that the basic "citizens movement" entails the idea of popular power-control by the majority of people, with equality of resources sufficient to make such control realizable (which) capitalism undermines."

Is this movement, therefore, a Marxist-Leninist movement? No, there is not only disapproval of Leninist organizing methods--but a basic recognition that totalitarianism is the opposite of people's control. Neither profit-making capitalism nor Leninist totalitarianism fits Boyte's bill. What, then?

Essentially, the ideological mood is one of returning to a pre-corporate past, the heart of it, as Nader is quoted as putting it: "the recovery of 'lost knowledge--essentially that grandmother and grandfather knew, before General Foods took over."

Tied to that impulse is the specific concept that "small is beautiful." Schumacher is cited as the prophet. "Larger and larger machines," writes Boyte, "replaced human labor substituting for technologies potentially smaller, more gratifying and safer for people and for the planet." The only specific bit added to that ideology, is the idea of economic cooperatives replacing the corporations.

Well, the small-is-beautiful impulse is very understandable, and almost as old as the industrial revolution, see the Luddites. And consumers cooperatives and farmers exchange cooperatives have always been noble enterprises.

Indeed, it is not the point here to argue the ideological validity of small-is-beautiful and economic cooperatives as a substitute for profit making capitalism or economic state totalitarianism. These issues are eminently debatable. Consumer and farmers cooperatives have made the economy more agreeable for a number of people, but they have never made the modern economy go. By adopting this approach, would we, in the style of the more callous environmentalists, be dumping the aspirations of the more disadvantaged people of the world? How will economic cooperatives solve our fundamental economic problem, productivity? Would we be just playing games, like the court maidens in the middle ages who on Wednesday afternoons dressed up as peasant girls for nostalgic picnics in the woods? Would we, as a matter of strength, be turning the world over to the ascendant political force in the world whose slogan is that large-is-beautiful? In the name of what values would we be doing that?

The point is not here to argue this ideology, but to identify it as the ideology of many citizens action organizers such as Boyte. Any such ideology should be stated out front.

There is a connecting piece of ideology which clings to the citizens movement and which also needs to be discussed openly. A cue to this piece might be Boyte's singling out of the Trilateral Commission as a center for

the illicit corporate control of our lives. The Trilateral Commission is also the favorite whipping-boy of the far-right New Right, and of the Leninist left.

There are, in short, a couple of potential problems in singling out "corporations" and "capitalism" as the main enemy, the familiar "scape-goating" problems: diverting people from some of the other real problems; and developing a conspiracy theory of history.

There are conspiracies, of course, but a comprehensive "conspiracy theory", which ascribes all problems of current history to an identifiable set of conspirators is something else again. It is a classic instrument of tyranny, and even of bigotry. If your political enemy is not just wrong, but evil--and engaged in a powerful backroom conspiracy--then the democratic rules must be suspended in order to deal with him. All movements of political bigotry are built on the conspiracy theory; conversely, most ethnic and religious targets of political bigotry have been identified with a conspiracy theory.

A word must be said, in this connection, about "populism," a word frequently invoked in the Boyte book. There is reference of course, to the historical "populist" movement in America, which was most specifically related to the farmers' Greenback fight against the bankers. But "populism" has a generic meaning: a direct exercise of power by the "majoritarian" (another work used often by Boyte) people--the implication always being that there is an elite obstruction to that power. Indeed, there often is, but the jump to conspiracy theory is easy at that point.

One student of the historical populist movement in 19th century America, put it this way: "What was populism if not the distrust of the effete East and its agents in the urban Middle West? Was not populism the forerunner of "grassroots" democracy? Did it not seek to subject the government to the people's will, to tumble the mighty from their high seats, to turn legislators into registrants of the people's will...Did not populism allege to protect the people and their government from conspiracies, from cells of conspirators who, contrary to the people's will and through the complacency or collusion of their rulers, were enabled to gain control of society?"

It was this aspect of the historical populist movement which led some of its leaders to an anti-semitism which fit the conspiracy theory. It is this strain of populism which historians have found in Father Coughlin's movement, in Huey Long's movement, in Joseph McCarthy's movement. This is, of course, not a desideratum of the organizers of the citizens action movement; but it is a hazard of populism, as a political ideology, which should not be taken lightly.

A closely related aspect of this populism is the fetish of "direct democracy," another buzz word of the citizens action movement. If "direct democracy" means the permanent abrogation or disruption of the traditional political coalitional party process in America, then it poses other specific hazards. It poses the hazard of factionalizing American politics to an extent which could predictably disenfranchise even more Americans--and create the kind of politics-by-conflict conditions which have always

preceeded the victory of the political tyrants which the citizens action organizers would least like to see. It should be noted that the same time that the Populist movement was flourishing on one edge of American society, the American Protective Association was flourishing on the other-- a classic situation which required that neither edge prevail.

The point again is not to argue these issues here, but to indicate that there are ideological tendencies associated with this movement which should be recognized out front: anti-corporation, anti-capitalist, pro-small-is-better, pro-economic cooperatives as a systemic alternative, populist.

There are some working matters, related to populist slogans, which should be understood by all participants at the beginning. It is possible to pose a value-free organization, and say that the "people" will decide on the values--and indeed they will, depending on which "people" are naturally drawn together in the enterprise. There is the technical hazard of "participatory grass-roots democracy." If a meeting is called, open to all, and 500 or 5000 people show up, they can legitimately form an ad hoc committee, but they cannot legitimately represent "the people". They have been drawn together haphazardly, depending on the kinds of appeals that were projected.

In addition, if a group is gathered together on the basis of certain broadly stated "values," it is necessary to be careful that those general values are not directly transferred to specific issues. This might happen, for example, in drawing together religious organizations, and coopting

religious values for specific political positions. One leading evangelical Christian theologian complained about the Moral Majority's jump from "individual spiritual rebirth to assuredly authentic and predictable public policy consequences. This expectation does great disservice since it detours evangelicals around intellectual scrutiny of public options and from informed decisions on them...Scripture leaves translation of revealed principles into viable political decisions to the conscience and will of mankind, and equally devout individuals may disagree over the best program for achieving common goals."

In sum, citizens action efforts can have great validity in 1) dealing with certain local problems that are subject to such solution; and whose solution will provide significant relief to many people; 2) Bringing disparate groups together to deal with such common problems, providing an important intergroup experience.

But if there is any further ideology involved in any citizens action effort, it should be laid out from the start. And the ideological matters should be argued from the start. And everyone should be aware of the ideological tendencies that underlie many such efforts.

As a practical matter, it is probably preferable for any given group to join in such an effort without commitment to anything beyond immediate goals. This requires a "floating coalition" in which groups formally "belong" only at points at which they wish to belong. That is different from a formal coalition in which groups may exempt themselves at any point.)