



## Civic Engagement Revisited - Harry C. Boyte

### Lecture Context MasterClass Draagvlakversterking

October 16, 2008

The first lecture of the Context MasterClass 2008-2009 focuses on civic engagement in the United States (US) in relation to global issues. Key note speaker is Harry C. Boyte; a distinguished scholar, community organiser and activist. He is founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota. He is one of the members of the Civic Driven Change Think Tank, initiated by ISS, The Hague. In the 1960s Boyte was involved in the Martin Luther King organization. Currently he is one of the Policy Advisors for the campaign of presidential candidate Barack Obama.

In this lecture Boyte compares different traditions of engaging with people. He explains why *organising* should be preferred over *mobilising*. Boyte strongly believes in citizens as actors of change, with regard to their personal situation and society as a whole. From this basic perspective, he challenges professionals (development workers) to support people who want to contribute to a better world, in a way that fits with their own talents, experience and skills.

### The Drum Major Instinct

Boyte expresses his pleasure to speak here today to people who are engaged with development issues in the Netherlands. He starts with referring to a speech given by Martin Luther King about the civil rights movement. In this speech King spoke about 'the drum major instinct'; referring to the instinctive desire that every person has to be visible, important and significant. King argues that this is a valuable instinct, but that people should make use of this for public purposes: "be first in love, in moral excellence and in generosity." A deep fear exists in global society that this instinct is misused for private and commercial purposes. The ongoing financial crisis at the moment can be seen as an example of the misuse of this human instinct. Boyte refers to the American Business schools, where classes on ethics are seen as a joke and where students are taught to bend the world, focus on numbers and break moral standards in order to achieve their goals. Initially this is what King warned about. In the organising approach the human instinct is being used for public purposes in order to become a better global and aware citizen. Boyte addresses the audience by saying: "You are taking up public purposes in the Dutch society everyday".

### The organising tradition

Boyte states that the organising tradition has a long history and is built upon a certain philosophical background. Although for the last decades organising was largely replaced by a

mobilising approach, currently one can see signs of the return of an organising approach everywhere. For example this can be seen in the arrival of the Civic Driven Change Initiative<sup>1</sup>. The current Barack Obama campaign can also be perceived as an example of this. Boyte refers to his work in Minnesota as a community organiser and explains that the organising approach includes a paradigm shift. It involves a change in the way we think of democracy as a state towards democracy as a society. Boyte argues that when we see democracy as a society we see citizens as co-creators and agents of change. It also involves a different way of thinking regarding politics, ideological battles and the role of professionals. As well as a shift in thinking about the art of engaging with people who are different. Within organising, people with different backgrounds, views and interests, together define their problems, decide how to take action and formulate what should be seen as success.

This shift can also be seen within the development sector. Within the dominant paradigm in development there is a shift from the quality of opportunity towards the quality of agency. With this Boyte indicates that traditional development work implies to give the poor the opportunities to develop but that the quality of agency implies that the poor are their own agents of change.

According to Boyte organising takes place in everyday life. He refers to the sociologist Peter Berger who recognises the importance of everyday life, such as neighbourhoods, religious communities and community life. Local settings give the opportunity for Civic Driven Change.

### **Three examples of organising**

Boyte points out to three different traditions in which the organising approach is very important. His first example is the folk school tradition in Scandinavia. These schools offer locally and culturally grounded education. Though it focuses on the individual it seeks to develop a public site. It builds upon the vision in which education is seen as a community centre open to the world, in which there is a mutual responsibility for children, their individual talents and civic life. The second tradition that Boyte points out is the settlement house tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example the Phyllis Wheatly Settlement House strived to integrate immigrants in a way that they could enrich U.S. society. On these sites immigrants and native Americans interacted from the idea that immigrants had valuable constructive contributions to make to democratic society. The focus was on individual's talents and capacities. Boyte explains that an African American settlement house would also be open for Jews and other immigrants; this created an enormous intellectual and cultural vitality. These sites were very lively and happening places; sport clubs, jazz music and other clubs were organised to develop civic leadership. The third tradition refers to the community organising tradition in the U.S. This tradition focuses on developing public relationships among people who are different. The popular fronts in the 1930s, wherein people organised themselves in a non-communist way, can be seen as an example. This vital tradition re-emerged in the 1970s.

### **The mobilising formula**

Since the 1970s a mobilising approach dominated, which is more focused on the politics of individual rights and a secular mass society in which men and women are being perceived as

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<sup>1</sup> The Civic Driven Change Initiative is a recent thinking and debating process to explore and communicate a perspective of change in societies that stems from citizens rather than states or markets. Harry Boyte was one of the think tank members of this initiative. For more information please visit [www.iss.nl/cdc](http://www.iss.nl/cdc).

mobile and uprooted. Citizens are being viewed as consumers and considered largely passive and powerless. This mobilising approach got embedded in politics and society and came to dominate. Mobilising involves “rallying the troops”, a one directional effort to enlist citizens in campaigns and efforts with predetermined outcomes. Mobilising has an often used formula that starts with a simplified message with a clear enemy or target. Further, the issue is being posed as good versus bad and a script is created that shuts down critical thought and any questioning. Finally the idea of rescue of those being victimized is conveyed. Boyte summarises: “whip up emotions and get people moving in a set direction”.

As an example of mobilising, Boyte refers to the door-to-door campaigns in the 1970s in which students highlighted environmental issues and asked people to sign petitions. In these kinds of campaigns there is a clear good versus bad and an enemy but often little space for questions and critique. The speeches of Sarah Palin in which she often speaks of an enemy and poses issues as good versus bad, are an example of mobilising as well.

### **Technocracy**

Mobilising can be observed in professional practices as well. Professionals are taught to provide services and to see people in terms of their deficiencies and needs. Although teachers used to see themselves as leaders of the community and business people used to see themselves centred in a community, there has been a narrowing of disciplinary professionalism in which the public and the larger meaning of disciplines has been lost. In that sense professionals typically learn to mobilise. This pattern also can be described as technocracy. Professionals used to be – and should again become - citizens working with other citizens. One of the keys of organising is that professionals need to change their identity and practice. They should be ‘on tap not on top’, meaning that they should be available and take facilitating roles like being a resource person, catalyst and coach, not an expert who provides all the answers.

He explains the above by showing an example of public art in the 1930s in which citizens are showed as producers and creators full of life and energy. Productive and energetic citizens are working together with the government to build society. Professionals stand on the side, only facilitating the work. Subsequently Boyte shows the Roosevelt memorial that demonstrates a contrary image. The statues that are being shown in this picture illustrates citizens as lifeless and being drained of all energy. Government policy would be directed towards rescuing people who were seen as needy. The result of the rescue approach was that people became passive and dependent. Boyte here makes a comparison with the development sector in the North Atlantic society that seems to work with a similar vision of citizens; it is about helping those poor and needy people and delivering services to them.

### **A challenge**

There lies a challenge in finding new ways to engage with people and to change our paradigm. Boyte argues that in the contemporary world the old organising principles are returning. Obama mentioned in his Philadelphia speech that there is a need to find democratic roots in all communities. Organising is also what shaped Barack Obama, as can be recognised in his first book ‘Dreams from my father’. To bring together diverse communities and people around public issues close to home, is the founding principle of organising. Important is to note that the issues are means to an end; building public community. The foundation of organising is based on the idea that every person is unique, dynamic and profoundly complex and is strongly embedded in culture. Boyte therefore argues that it is very important to listen to peo-

ple's stories (in one-on-ones) to find the basis for public stories and issues. Finding common ground to work together.

Boyte points out that in the last decennia most institutions have become service oriented and people are being perceived as clients and consumers. He mentions the example of the Jane Addams School for Democracy in Minnesota where every student is a teacher and every teacher is a student. At the school they are working with immigrants and they see this as an opportunity to both teach and learn from immigrant cultures and communities. Students going through orientation meetings are being told that they are not here to 'help'. The next example he gives refers to an initiative in which a community claimed to take up the responsibility to educate their children and that this made institutions work together and work with communities again. A culture of learning was created, in which many kinds of knowledge were deemed important.

Referring to the Netherlands Boyte speaks of an initiative in Amsterdam South East he learned about from Lorna Koenen (chair of resident's organisation LSA). In Amsterdam South East, an old multi ethnic neighbourhood, a group of people from diverse backgrounds have taken up various issues instead of just housing issues. They take up the broader task to build a community in the neighbourhood. This is in the same spirit and a parallel emergence of the organising approach.

### **Mobilising vs Organising**

Boyte concludes this lecture by pointing out the differences between mobilising and organising, and does so by showing a summarising table.

Table I: Two Approaches to Civic Change

| Approaches | Mobilizing  | Organizing   |
|------------|---|--|
| Goals      | Rally the troops<br>Solve problems                      | To solve problems and also to develop civic agency   |
| Methods    | Power points<br>Reports<br>Protests and rallies, etc.   | Forming a team<br>One on ones<br>Mapping power<br>Building relationships<br>Creating alliances<br>Thinking strategically |
| Sites      | Programs<br>Academic departments Centers<br>Task forces | Free spaces<br>Informal gatherings<br>Strategic meetings<br>Local communities  |
| Outcomes   | Activities  | Civic Identities   |

Boyte explains that mobilising involves 'rallying the troops' – enlisting citizens in campaigns and efforts with predetermined outcomes. In the mobilising approach the problem becomes the driver and there is an urgency to have to solve this problem. The need to solve an urgent problem will always exist. The methods that are used are protests, rally's, petitions and campaigns; all one directional methods in which information transfer is central. The sites where this takes place are silo cultures, for example in diverse programs, academic departments or task forces. Overall this generates an activity culture which is fact based and high-pressured.

Contradictory to this the organising approach is looking at what people are learning while they are solving problems. The methods that are used are diverse. Boyte mentions relational meetings and one-on-ones in which you meet with another person and probe for a person's story. Through this method you try to learn from the other person, find out who he or she is and to form a public relation for public action. One on ones require curiosity, suspension of judgement and good listening. Another important method is power mapping, in which you see who has interest and who has power, while doing this people can find new patterns for public action. The sites where organising takes place are more fluent and have public qualities. These are free spaces and informal gatherings where public skills interact.

### **Concluding remarks**

During one of his speeches in the United Kingdom Obama notes that reflection and learning are very important. Reflect on what the meaning is of what we are doing. In an action oriented approach it is very difficult to reflect and learn from what you are doing. Boyte argues that organising will shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century but it will take a while to get there. The challenge is to introduce organising principles in expert dominated, mobilising cultures.

Boyte concludes with a reflection on the Dutch development sector and the emerging Private Initiatives in the Netherlands consisting of engaged citizens who want to contribute to a better world. In the language being used he recognises the one-directional message: 'we' are helping 'them'. There will be a shift from the view of development as one-way traffic, service oriented and a way of poverty alleviation. This view will shift towards a notion that it is possible to create enriching societies, to be interactive and open.

### **Discussion**

The speech by Harry C. Boyte is being followed by a plenary discussion. In small groups the visitors discuss the following topics briefly:

- The stressed role of citizens as co-creators;
- The importance of organising over mobilising;
- Shifting the role of professionals.

One of the first questions is related to the difference between mobilising and organising. A participant asks whether mobilising focuses mainly on big target groups and organising mostly on building relationships among individuals. Boyte answers that it is not either/or but that there are different philosophical traditions behind it. Within organising the starting point is the individual but the end is to build public community.

'Organising has better results on the long term, but perhaps it is good to use mobilising in the mean time?' asks one of the participants. Boyte explains that one-on-ones are not only a window to a person but also to the culture of that person. Organising is about the understanding of a community in a deeper way. You deal with individuals but see them as networks, relations and communities. Therefore organising is slower, but this is for the sake of better results. Boyte argues that mobilisation techniques are used very often and can make things happen but do not create a culture change. It is not deep enough for that. He mentions that the trade unions in the U.S. are shifting from organising towards mobilising. The trade unions have closed their store front offices, whereby making themselves detached from the communities and made their members into clients. One of the participants argues that the same parallel can be seen with the Dutch trade unions, which used to focus much more on organising in

the past but have shifted to mobilising methods. Though slowly they have started organising techniques again through which they try to organise youth, women and immigrants.

Boyte points out that Barack Obama comes from an organising background, and this can be seen in his campaign as well. While Hilary Clinton's campaign used the slogan; 'Yes she can!', the audience of Barack Obama is shouting; 'Yes we can!'. Boyte stresses that 23.000 people have received at least one day of organising training in the Barack Obama campaign. He notes that there was a fundamental difference in organising the Obama campaign. While creating neighbourhood teams there was a respect for both republican and democratic voters. This had enormous implications.

One of the participants argues that we should be careful not to fall into duality. Boyte agrees that a combination of organising and mobilising can be used for a certain good and explains that organising does have mobilising moments. But he stresses that there are different philosophical backgrounds and methods behind mobilising and organising and that ultimately only organising will lead to long term and fundamental changes in society.