



SID-NL Lecture Series 2013-2014

“Citizens at the Centre of the Globalising World”

On 10 February 2014, SID NL welcomed Harry C. Boyte to give a lecture on the new civic politics. Harry Boyte suggested how the world can become a citizen centred world, with citizens as the foundational agents of democratic society. Moderator Fiona Dove (Executive Director of the Transnational Institute) chaired the discussion with the audience.

Introduction

Harry Boyte recognises that we are on the threshold of a new civic movement with citizens at its centre. Boyte introduced the theme of his lecture by talking about his visit to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in the Rijksmuseum, an iconic image at the heart of the Dutch tradition exemplifying Boyte's argument of civic agency. *The Night Watch* is the image of self-organising citizen efforts across society. Civic agencies are deeply rooted in the Dutch identity as can be seen in the 'polder model'.

Weber wrote in the beginning of last century about the inevitable spread of bureaucracy and rationalisation through modern societies. He described this as "*the polar night of icy darkness.*" Weber hereby anticipated what South African intellectual Xolela Mangcu now calls technocratic creep. Intellectuals came to write about politics, from a stance of detachment from the general citizenry. Civic culture is then distanced from all kinds of institutions. Hostility even arises towards advocates of the citizenry.

The freedom movements of both the American Civil Rights Movement, in which Boyte played a role, and the South African anti-apartheids movement animate Boyte's argument. Their main lesson is that everyday citizens are the most important agents and architects of democratic change. This lesson challenges conventional public narratives and politics.

Bread Line statue

A famous speech by Donna Shalala also addressed technocratic creep. Professor Boyte illustrated her definition with the Bread Line statue at the Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C. The message of mainstream progressive politics is that the government saves a needy, pitiful people. This has

become the message woven into the fabric of contemporary institutions of all kinds. Roosevelt on the contrary, argued that the genius of America lies in ordinary men and women. To give an example of technocratic creep Boyte referenced to the scientific magazine *Nature* calling for scientists to take their message to citizens. Herein lie two premature assumptions: that scientists have the solution to all problems, and that scientists are not citizens. Technocratic creep devalues other kinds of knowledge, neglecting the knowledge of citizens. Experts who see themselves as enlightened, rational, and scientific seek to enlighten and inform the mass of citizens, who they perceive as needy and pitiful. A growing detachment between professionals and citizens arises.



Foundations for civic politics

Boyte mentioned a different kind of politics by broad based community organising. In most public treatments, movement leaders take on gigantic proportions, while the people become radically diminished. The dominant story holds that Martin

Luther King gave a speech and Congress abolished segregation. Nelson Mandela got out of jail and negotiated the end to apartheid, while he was actually in jail when the masses were organising themselves. Thus, what is lost is the immense creativity and spirit of everyday citizens, as well as the molecular transformations in communities and institutions that made these movements successful. The top-down public story of the movements has a counterpart in the view that government, politicians, and experts are the drivers of change. Lost in both is the politics of civic agency. In the heart of these movements was a different kind of nonpartisan politics that emerged from the 1930s. Later, during the pre-anti-apartheid Martin Luther King had assigned Boyte to mobilise poor white working class people in the south of the United States to stand up against segregation. The same thing occurred against apartheid in South Africa. Politics in this nonpartisan sense means learning to deal with people with whom one would normally disagree.

Work has to be put back into the equation, Boyte argued. Public work, either paid or unpaid, highlights the citizen as a co-creator of communities and society, more than being a volunteer, voter, protestor, or consumer. It poses a solution towards the idea of the *“polar night of icy darkness”*. A higher education movement for civic engagement offers an expanding terrain for public work. Higher education shapes civic identities and career plans of students. In recent decades conventional views locating citizenship largely in voting, in off-hours voluntarism, and in civil society have come to take work off the map. As citizens have been replaced by service providers, Americans have become a nation of consumers not producers of democracy.

In January 2013, the Centre for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) partnered with the Mayor of Falcon Heights, to organise citizen-based approaches to gun violence after the shooting of December in Newtown. Boyte had claimed that government laws alone could not fix the problem. The attendees included working people and two elderly residents. These residents expressed regret that there were so few “citizens”. So when the CDC staff raised a question about this definition of “citizen”, it prompted a lively conversation about how much power there might be in the community if people would see their work sites as civic sites.

Discussion

Fiona Dove first commented on Boyte’s speech. Dove said that she had been part of the South African movement in the same way that Boyte had been involved in the anti-segregation movement. The problem she has with civic agencies is that there is a convergence between a progressive and a non-progressive agenda. To illustrate this she named David Cameron’s big society, or Dutch King Willem Alexander’s participatory society. Multi-stakeholder governments are currently discussed in the World Economic Forum in Davos. This can become problematic since the costs of society will weigh heavily on citizens. In general terms, Dove does agree with Boyte, but warned the audience for playing into an agenda that misuses the portrayed role of citizens. Furthermore, Dove addressed the elite-capture (the indifference of the elite towards citizens) taking place in South Africa as well as in the European Union.



The first question from the audience regarded the rising inequality thwarting civic agencies. Is government not needed to pose regulations and rules to fight climate change? Boyte argues that government is a partner and a resource for the citizenry. The people’s movements of the 1930s are often forgotten when we draw parallels between Obama and Roosevelt. Furthermore, Boyte urges business people to take responsibility as citizens. Other questions regarded technology as a resource for democratisation and Obama’s ‘failed’ campaign. Boyte argued that technology does not replace face-to-face relations. This was one of the lessons learned in the Obama campaign. Also, Obama’s campaign shifted from “Yes, we can” to “I’ll do it”. Citizens think in terms of politics being able to rescue them, while they should be thinking in terms of self-organising.



Obama's gifted civic policy advisors had all kind of ideas how government could be catalyst, but it is not the centre piece of his policies.

The second round of questions started off with the defence establishment of the US. Those concerned should seek strategies to reach the rest of the population. The late 1960s movements that swept through the world resulted in ideas of a more peaceful version of the American dream. Boyte also addressed fatalism. As he grew up in the south in the 1950s, his parents were one of the handful whites who were against segregation. Nobody thought that something would change. The same can be said for the disbelief of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Finally, Boyte addressed a question on forces that are potentially dangerous. He argued that one should engage these movements. Both the Tea Party in the US and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands are besieged. Even though these movements are dangerous, one should question how to engage them. What Boyte had learned in the civil rights movement is that in times of threat, the last thing progressives want to do is polarise because they are likely to lose.

This was the sixth lecture in the 2013-2014 Lecture Series 'Dispersed Power in a World in Transition, organised by the Society for International Development in cooperation with NCDO and VU University (International Office).

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