

Review of Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America by Jeffrey Stout

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Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America by Jeffrey Stout. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

The following book review was written years ago and was not released due to an unexpected logistical error at the journal. Recently, it was re-recommended for publication by the Book Review Editor at the journal given its relevance to current events. A lot has happened, and continues to happen since the review was written that would no doubt have shaped the review were it being written today. The author wishes to say that there is an even more pressing need for grassroots democracy and discussions of citizenship and racism in 2020 than there was when she wrote this. Additionally, reviewing a book that looks—among other things—at the power of faith-based organizations and churches to shift the political landscape would raise some different questions in 2020 than it did even four years ago, let alone when Stout wrote the book. Nevertheless, the topics Stout raises—racism, power, accountability, democracy—could not be timelier, and it is in that spirit that this review is offered.

In *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*, Jeffrey Stout put together an excellent resource for practicing and critiquing democracy. Such a study could not be more timely—and, in 2017 (the time of writing), it raises more questions than it answers. That is not to say it doesn't offer suggestions. As Stout himself says near the end of one of his final chapters, "The delicate task of the social critic is to adopt a perspective that makes the dangers of our situation visible without simultaneously disabling the hope of reforming it" (p. 259). That was no small task when the book originally appeared, in 2010, and now that task is even more daunting. Stout's work speaks to the thin edge dividing the energy and determination real hope can inspire from the apathy of despair or complacency. Even more, it does not shy away from genuinely considering the question of whether democracy—let alone grassroots democracy—is possible today.

The book is divided into twenty chapters, which can be easily sectioned off for group or personal reading. Indeed, it is clear this is not simply an academic exploration of "broad-based grassroots organizing" in the tradition of Saul Alinsky (though it offers a good deal of that as well); it is primarily a narrative, democratic manual. It uses examples of previous successes and failures to explore on-the-ground best practices and pitfalls for getting ordinary people to care, organize, and exert collective power. Stout provides stories detailing how real people organized in the face of disaster or domination, which drive the book's goal of laying out what he believes will be the best chance to develop genuine and sustained democracy. Real and sustained *grassroots* democracy, he is clear, operates by putting discussion-shaping and

decision-making powers and responsibilities into the hands of “ordinary” people who consider themselves and act as “citizens”—although Stout notes some of these ordinary people who consider themselves and act like citizens are, in legal terms, illegal aliens. In that way, the book also asks the not merely academic question of what makes a citizen.

Stout’s book begins by recounting the efforts of groups who used broad-based grassroots organizing to empower disenfranchised survivors of hurricane Katrina, both in the city of New Orleans itself, as well as those moved to the Houston Astrodome. Examining what he notes has elsewhere been called “disaster capitalism,” Stout recounts the push to gentrify New Orleans post-Katrina, at great social cost to many of its residents. In contrast to that push, he lays out the ways in which those residents organized to fight back. And one surprising thing that becomes clear as the book unfolds—not only around Katrina, but also the other stories it follows in Texas, Arizona, and California—is the role churches played to organize people on grassroots democratic issues. Stout lays this out in the very first chapter, noting that while there are other groups increasingly involved in broad-based organizing, churches remain a significant driving force. This is certainly the impression one gets as one reads through the text, and Stout makes a point of devoting three additional chapters (15-17) to examining some of the questions regarding the relationship of church and state raised by such deep involvement of churches. Nevertheless, the stories he weaves leave one with the feeling that religious groups and religious leaders can play important roles in grassroots democracy—if they can work in a pluralist setting to empower people to address injustices in this present world rather than hang on the assurance that the “next” world will be better.

That this book is narratively driven, drawing off the real stories of people who have managed or failed to accomplish real grassroots organization, is a strength. The stories are compelling, relatively recent, and show how real people acted in crisis situations in the face of racism and oppressive power. The myriad of names (of both individuals and organizations) can become confusing as Stout builds his case and draws on stories from previous chapters to emphasize points in later chapters. While this can be disorienting, it has the consequence of forcing the reader to go back and re-connect with that person’s story. Ultimately, this serves the greater purpose of the book, as one of the first things it advocates is getting to know the concerns of the people one is working with—not to mention acknowledging the community-rooted leadership potential of lived experience.

Much of Stout’s book is a discussion of power dynamics: who gets power, who takes it, who should have it, how it should be used and shared, when it should be given back. Grassroots democracy requires the ability to hold power accountable in whatever form it takes (group leadership, political, economic). Indeed, this need for accountability is Stout’s critique, in his second to last chapter, of then-President Obama. He argues Obama uses the language of a grassroots organizer, but does not make himself accountable to the people he represents, or ensure that ordinary citizens are part of the process of deciding what issues should be on the table, and how those issues should be framed (p. 270). Whether the rest of Stout’s criticism of President Obama, which is quite blunt, is fair I think remains to be seen. What is clear is that democracy is in more danger now than when Stout wrote his book. But what also seems to be

clear is that—post-November 8, 2016—a greater and more diverse number of people seem to care about engaging in democracy, and are willing to organize to show that they expect to be taken seriously. In that case, Stout’s book may offer some of the best practical advice for how grassroots democracy can be re-founded. Even then, the question he raises of whether, given all the political and economic power differentials currently in play, ordinary citizens can truly hope to accomplish genuine grassroots democracy and demand accountability from those in power still stands—and that is a question no *book* can answer.

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