

INTERVIEW

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Taking the Economy Back From the Elites: Blessed Are the Organized

Jeffrey Stout talks about following the money trail, Obama's accountability, and the power of grassroots organizing.

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America

Jeffrey Stout

Princeton University Press (2010)

Jeffrey Stout's *Blessed Are the Organized* is arguably even more relevant now than when it was published last year. Even then, the United States economy had collapsed in on itself. Barack Obama's role had fully shifted from community organizer to Beltway compromiser, and the grassroots was being overgrown by Tea Party "astroturf."

But now—as politicians wrestle our economy even lower to the ground at the behest of organized elites, and the voice of the majority seems to grow ever fainter in their ears—the kind of real grassroots organizing Stout writes about seems all the more to be what we need.

The possibly-good news is that, in this post-Tahrir Square world, we're remembering that something better is possible. There was a momentous takeover of Wisconsin's capitol building, though its immediate goals weren't met; around the country, organized labor continued its tailspin in the face of budget cuts. From [China](#) to [Spain](#), people around the world trying to replicate what they saw in Egypt. In the coming months, ambitious [environmentalist](#), anti-corporate, and [anti-war](#) actions are being planned in the United States.

People are frustrated, and they're inspired. But Stout, a professor of religion at Princeton, insists on asking another question: How will they organize?

Why are the organized "Blessed"?

Well, one definition of "blessed" is fortunate. In a shallow sense, the new elites are as fortunate as anyone has ever been. They practically monopolize society's blessings. If we ask where the "happiness" of the 400 wealthiest Americans comes from, the answer has a lot to do with power, which is rooted in organizational structures. The CEOs of the mega-corporations acquired their power through some combination of luck and organizational skill. The elites are organized, and politicians are responsive to

the organized. The richest among us are calling the tune while the politicians dance. Deregulation, the Bush tax cuts, and *Citizens United v. the Federal Elections Commission* all make sense when viewed in this context. The transfer of wealth from the poor and the middle class to the rich in recent decades is so enormous as to be hard to fathom. But that transfer—like the wealth itself—is a product of organizational activity.

Unhappy are those who are scattered and isolated. Unhappy are those who are weakly linked. Democratic power is an organizational, relational affair. If there is any hope of creating a balance of power in our society, one that can hold elites accountable to the rest of us, it will have to come from grassroots organizing.

What about other definitions? The less shallow ones?

The term “blessed” also has the deeper sense of being sacred, sanctified, or consecrated. This deeper sense can be glossed in theological or secular terms. A lot of the religious people I interviewed for the book, people participating in citizens’ groups through their churches or synagogues, told me that they joined this or that struggle *because they take human beings to be sacred*. For a human being to be sacred is for him or her to be worthy of reverent protection from horrors such as murder, destitution, and various forms of domination. Theism is one way of trying to make sense of all this, but not the only way.

Part of the function of the concept of sacred value in our discourse is to mark off a zone where it seems inappropriate to engage in the calculations of cost and benefit that are appropriate in market transactions. Blessedness in the sense of sacredness is therefore intimately tied up with the justified desire to place limits on the commodification of what we care about most, to protect the most important aspects of our lives from the trade-offs that rightly transpire in the marketplace. Not everything should be bought or sold. Not everything has its worth determined by the logic of exchange value.

How does *Blessed Are the Organized* connect, in your mind, with your earlier work on religious ethics? Does it build on what you learned from more abstract reflection?

My second and third books, *Ethics after Babel* and *Democracy and Tradition*, were my critical response to widespread skepticism about the value and coherence of democratic discussion. My intention was to follow up those books with one more explicitly focused on power relations. I did a lot of traveling in 2004 and 2005, lecturing on that topic and trying to lay out a systemic analysis of how an imbalance of economic power within American society translated into an imbalance of political power. The main theme was the rise to dominance of new elites from the 1960s to the present and the failure of religious and secular citizens to recognize the dangers of the resulting form of domination.

It was, I think, a solid piece of systemic analysis. But I discovered that it had a surprisingly debilitating effect on my audiences, especially on the young people who were most persuaded by what I was saying. Gradually, I came to realize that my systemic analysis was making things worse for the very young

people I was hoping to wake up and energize. In the last chapter of *Blessed Are the Organized*, I describe a conversation with my son Livy, who, after listening to some of my analysis, advised me, only half jokingly, to entitle my book “We’re Fucked!” It became clear to me that neither he nor most other Americans in their 20s had a sufficiently concrete idea of how people have organized to bring about large-scale change in the past, let alone of how the most successful citizens’ organizations operate today.

Tell me about the process of researching *Blessed Are the Organized*. Going out on the road isn’t a common methodology for a philosopher. What convinced you that doing that sort of thing would be necessary?

I got a call from Ernesto Cortes Jr., who had just read *Democracy and Tradition*, and he asked me if he could come to Princeton to discuss it with me. I had never met him before, but Ernie and I hit it off during that first visit, and he invited me to come to Los Angeles to lead a two-day seminar on *Democracy and Tradition* for 50 or so organizers associated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, the confederation of citizens’ groups founded in 1940 by Saul Alinsky.

After the seminar, I immediately headed out with some of the organizers into the communities they were working in. That’s where I collected my stories about Los Angeles, Pomona, Maywood, Marin County, and various other places in California. By the time I got home, I realized that the book I was writing had been turned upside down. I wouldn’t be tagging a few thinly described examples onto the end of a systemic power analysis. I would have to begin with the stories I was hearing and remain grounded in stories throughout.

In the winter of 2007, I led another seminar for IAF organizers and leaders, this one in Houston, and again went out into various communities to see what contemporary grassroots democracy looks like on the ground. The most important stops on that trip were in New Orleans, 16 months after Katrina, and in the Rio Grande Valley, where I accompanied a team of experienced organizers on a tour of the region where the shantytowns along the Mexican border had been organized more than a decade earlier.

I don’t pretend to have done a full-scale ethnography of the Southwest IAF network. How could one do that in a summer and a winter? Rather, the book is an exercise in public philosophy. It is meant to resemble classic works of traveling theory like Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and Martineau’s *Society in America*. I wanted to bring the philosophy of democratic citizenship down to earth.

How has your thinking evolved about your early experience with activism in the 1960s? How are conditions different now, do you think?

The labor unions are obviously much weaker. The civil rights movement ended. The struggle against the Vietnam War ran aground. But, meanwhile, there has been a remarkable growth in grassroots citizens’ organizations. Nearly all of that growth has been under the media radar, but it has been truly significant. And many important victories have been won. Community organizing, which was focused

on organizing particular neighborhoods, has given way to what Cortes calls “broad-based” organizing, which is meant to build ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse coalitions that can last for generations.

Still, all of this growth doesn’t fully compensate for the deterioration of organizational strength elsewhere in society. So it’s a net loss. Another very significant factor is that a large proportion of the underclass is either in prison or undocumented—and therefore disenfranchised.

Do you think that any kind of spiritual awakening—or religious awakening, since people so often distinguish the two—is requisite for grassroots organizing?

The book’s last chapter discusses a couple of passages in *Walden* where Thoreau refers to the “sleepers,” the ties beneath the railroad tracks, as human beings. His point is that the people and goods riding the trains do so on the backs of workers. The railroad was a symbol of technological progress and social change in 19th-century America, but for Thoreau it also serves as a symbol of domination, like the plantation and the mill. Thoreau saw that if the sleepers could only be awakened and find a way to stand up together, they would actually have the power to bring the entire system to a standstill or, even better, to transform it into something more in keeping with human liberty.

Thoreau was right. We remain powerless only so long as we remain in the prone and unconscious posture of a sleeper. The example of Thoreau shows that such transformations need not be confined to traditional forms of religious conversion. Still, it is no accident that the Second Great Awakening shaped abolitionism and feminism, as well as the temperance movement. For better and for worse, American politics rides the tides of revivals.

Religious communities often seem to be hindering social mobilization against the economic order today. What has to change for this to change? Are new kinds of theologies or religious organizations necessary?

A lot of people—some religious, some not—are quite confused these days about how a market economy works and largely ignorant about the nature and causes of the transfer of wealth to the top one percent of the top one percent of earners. There are a lot of people between the 50th percentile and the 90th who are voting against their economic interests. It seems doubtful that religious groups are primarily responsible for the public’s widespread ignorance of such economic facts. It’s true that theologians and pastors were largely silent on the transfer of wealth and power that occurred in the U.S. between 1965 and 2008. But secular intellectuals didn’t help much either.

If we can get beyond the misleading choice between secularism and religious resentment of the secular, it should be possible to get back to the hard work of building coalitions to fight domination. That work has an intellectual component, but it’s mainly a matter of patient, hopeful, wise organizing.

There are calls on various fronts lately—notably, from Jim Wallis—to think of budgets as “moral documents.” Is this a productive way, do you think, to bring ethical issues to the

fore in the debate about economic policy?

We're bound to get immoral budgets as long as ordinary citizens are under-organized and therefore lack sufficient power to influence the way in which the entire debate is framed.

“Centrist politics,” you observe, “masquerades as grassroots democracy.” We see this both on the right: The Tea Party, and the left: the Obama campaign. But how do we know the real thing from impostors?

Anyone who follows the money trail can see that the fat cats who fund the Tea Party are essentially running the show. The Tea Party wouldn't exist without that money supply or without constant stoking from right-wing radio and television. That's what makes it an elite affair. The Tea Party was able to scoop up a lot of free-floating resentment and direct it against taxation and the social safety net. It's true, however, that some of this resentment appears to be truly populist in spirit. If so, it is unlikely to sit well with the funding structure of the organization.

Obama employed the rhetoric of grassroots democracy during his campaign for the presidency, and his political apparatus is still presenting itself as a grassroots operation. Campaign workers typically refer to small-group meetings with Obama supporters as “house meetings.” Broad-based organizers use this term to describe meetings designed to get 8 to 12 people talking freely about their concerns and problems. But in Obama's organization, “house meetings” appear to function as focus groups do in traditional campaigns. The campaign operatives already know what the issues are going to be, at least for the most part, and the point of meeting with supporters is to test out various ways of spinning those issues. That's a top-down process, regardless of what it's called.

In 2008 Obama raised a good deal of money from small donations. But his dependence on big donations remains great enough to compromise his claim to be running a bottom-up campaign. And his behavior as president has been strongly oriented toward accommodating the interests and concerns of his elite financial supporters.

So the general answer to your question is: Follow the flow of money, information, and influence. Genuinely democratic organizations avoid reliance on big money, and their leaders work hard at earning the entitlement to speak for the rank and file.

Do you expect Obama to revive a community organizing model for the coming reelection campaign?

His campaign organization is still using the same rhetoric. It has never been as oriented toward the grassroots as it has pretended to be. But now that he is in office, it should be especially obvious that his own organization cannot be expected to hold him accountable. Grassroots citizens' organizations deliberately maintain independence from the political parties. They do so in order to remain *in a position* to hold politicians accountable. Obama is one of the people we need to hold accountable now.

Candidate Obama used to talk about the importance of having an organized progressive flank to “make” him do what needs to be done. But President Obama has repeatedly mocked and castigated progressives who have tried to stiffen his spine. He dismisses them as a gaggle of whining utopian pundits who would rather have no loaf than accept half when necessary. The reason he can afford to treat them in this way is that they do not yet have a power base that is sufficiently independent and organized to hold him to anything.

Do you think there was a sign of hope for grassroots organizing in the U.S. during the occupation of the Madison capitol building?

I definitely took the events in Madison as a hopeful sign. One could see a lot of Thoreau’s sleepers waking up and beginning the process of getting their act together. But the real question is whether the organizational work that comes out of that event takes full advantage of the wisdom of experienced people who have been perfecting organizational practices over the last decades.

The same question applies to the hopeful signs we have all witnessed recently coming from the Middle East. Will the mass demonstrations give rise to organizations that permit concerns and issues to rise from below while still having leaders who earn the entitlement to represent the rank-and-file participants? Only if the organizing is conducted wisely. That’s a big “if.”

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