

## Book Reviews

**DEMOCRACY AS PROBLEM SOLVING: CIVIC CAPACITY IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE GLOBE**, by **Xavier de Souza Briggs**. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-262-52485-8 (paperback); 374 pp.

Reviewed by

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Joshiah Ober, the historian of ancient Greece, said recently that there are two fundamentally different conceptions of democracy. The first is majority rule. On this conception, a society is democratic when collective decisions reflect the views of the most numerous. The second is accomplishment. On this less common view, a democratic society is one that has the power to achieve the common aims of its citizens. Xavier de Sousa Briggs' new book, *Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe*, embraces a deeply pragmatic version of this second view of democracy. The book offers a penetrating tour of how individuals and organizations in the far flung communities of Salt Lake City, Mumbai, Philadelphia, São Paulo, San Francisco, and Cape Town mobilize to address a range of public problems.

Briggs begins with a highly practical question: why can some communities manage difficult challenges such as economic restructuring, sustainable growth, and social service provision while others cannot? His answer lies not in the wisdom of policy, the capacity of the state, nor the presence of civic organizations, nor other forms of social capital. Rather, communities solve challenges such as these if they can muster what Briggs calls *civic capacity*.

In lucid prose describing dozens of rich examples drawn from diverse communities—rich and poor, North and South—Briggs shows that solving these wicked problems, often against the odds, is sometimes possible. Bringing to the fore these examples of social and democratic success is itself worth the price of admission. His keen empirical sense also generates several important conceptual innovations. Successful social problem solving cannot be properly understood, much less explained, with several of the conceptual categories and dichotomies now popular among social scientists and democratic theorists.

First, these cases of successful problem solving result neither from pure public deliberation in which good reasons trump self-interest, nor from bare-knuckled brawls in which interest backed by superior power carries the day. When communities manage to solve problems, Briggs argues, they do so because actors and groups with diverse interests share enough in common (the problem they face) to engage in a kind of joint planning and action that involves some elements of deliberation leavened with heavy doses of negotiation. More important than the distinction between reason and power, however, is

that parties manage to engage in an intellectual process in which they actually learn—they uncover empirical features of the situation that they are in, they learn about each other, and they invent better (more effective, mutually beneficial) solutions to the problems they face.

Second, success in these cases results from the articulation of authoritative decision-making processes with efforts to implement policy and take public action. It is not that there is no distinction between politics and policy, what Briggs calls *the will* and *the way*, but rather that an exclusive focus on one or the other only illuminates part of the dynamic that is necessary to address wicked problems. In planning for sustainable growth, for example, the engagement of diverse stakeholders in formulating Envision Utah's plan eased the subsequent process of implementation because the plans that they developed were both feasible and legitimate. Half a world away, in the slums of Mumbai, Briggs shows that successful rehabilitation efforts led by NGOs such as the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) were successful in part because processes of decision and action were linked in a pragmatically reciprocal way. It is only through their efforts to change facts on the ground—for instance, to finance new housing—that grassroots organizations learned which decisions and authorities—from state and local governments to international organizations like the World Bank—were approachable and, importantly, authoritative.

Third, these cases shed new light on the oft-made distinction between bottom-up and top-down social action. Several of the book's cases, such as SPARC in Mumbai and child advocacy in San Francisco, fit comfortably with the notion that progressive change results from grassroots initiatives. In other cases, however, local business and civic elites formed groups, such as Envision Utah or the Allegheny Conference in Pittsburgh, to lead collective problem solving. In Briggs' account, initiative can come from either the top or the bottom of the local social structure. In all of the cases, with the partial exception of economic restructuring in the São Paulo region of Brazil, however, the agents of change come from outside government—from the economic or civic sectors. Though these cases differ in their origins, they are similar in that they all achieve broad-based inclusion in the medium term. This inclusion, of local elites as well as broader constituencies and private, civic, and governmental actors, is an essential ingredient in solving the kinds of decentralized problems that Briggs focuses upon because the authorities and capabilities necessary to make progress on those problems falls across sectors and social strata.

Drawing upon the work of Clarence Stone and, to a lesser degree, social capital theorists such as Robert Putnam, Briggs identifies "civic capacity" as the variable that enables some communities to succeed. He defines capacity as "the extent to which the sectors that make up a community" are "capable" of collective action and "choose" to cooperate (p. 13). Though there is some variation in the success of collective action in these cases—the example from South Africa is clearly more limited than the others—this book is largely a study of successful civic capacity. This makes for rich reading and offers more useful lessons than a study of comparative success and failure. However, it is difficult to discern from a study of successes the ingredients that grant some communities great civic capacity while others have little.

Indeed, these successful communities vary so much in their histories and circumstances—some are rich, some are poor, some have histories of cooperation, while others are characterized more by conflict—that a notion like *craft* may be more appropriate than *capacity*. It might be difficult to tell from any *ex ante* survey of these

communities—of their organizations, talents, resources, or local networks—whether they would eventually be successful at solving problems such as growth management, economic restructuring, or caring for the least of their members. That is, it might be difficult to tell whether they possessed some critical stock or capacity necessary for social success. Instead, one would have to roll the tape forward to see whether or not actors in that community forged relationships with one another in an encompassing way, developed wise strategies that husbanded their resources, and managed to learn individually and collectively. Such a reading suggests that it is not so much what communities have (capacity)—though having more is usually better—as what they do with what they have or whether they can leverage more from others (craft) that holds the key to successful problem solving.

A processual explanation of democratic and effective social problem solving rather than a view that hinges upon preexisting community endowments may be more congenial to Briggs' current responsibilities. He is currently on leave from his position in Urban Studies and Planning at MIT in order to work as an Associate Director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. Like all policy makers, he will have to play the hand he is dealt in terms of resource, potential partners, and other capacities. Few people move with greater ease from the world of ideas and explanation to the practical challenges of policy and action. *Democracy as Problem Solving* shows just how lucky we are to have a senior political official who brings to the job a vast knowledge of social problem solving in communities around the world, an uncommon humility that comes from recognizing that government cannot solve complex problems alone but instead must cooperate with other sectors, and a commitment to democratic inclusion as not just right, but also good.

**PORTABLE COMMUNITIES: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF ONLINE AND MOBILE CONNECTEDNESS,** by **Mary Chayko**. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7914-7599-7 (paperback); 306 pp.

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It is old news to suggest that community is an overloaded term, representing the sentiments of large national or ethnic groups, resilient neighbors in a struggling alcove, or even the people surrounding a single focal individual. But perhaps the new news is how these wildly different forms of community all stand alongside each other online in information spaces (web pages, Twitter accounts, mobile address books, etc. . .). What to make of these spaces, their inhabitants, and their dynamics? Mary Chayko's book *Portable Communities* addresses these communities through description, past research, and interviews she conducted with 87 anonymous Internet users. The respondents represent the gamut of online lives, and are labeled by some predominant characteristic, such as SocialNetworking2 or InfoGathering3. The respondents are also given a short bio at the back of the book.

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