

Boyte, H. C. (2018). *Awakening democracy through public work: Pedagogies of empowerment*. Vanderbilt University Press. 200 pp.

Review by Alexander H. Jones



Harry C. Boyte's recent monograph, *Awakening Democracy Through Public Work: Pedagogies of Empowerment*, is a unique contribution to the field of education for its citizen-centered approach to pedagogy. Boyte challenges readers to consider the political impact of community engagement in K-12 and higher education, as citizens themselves can be formed as participants in social change. The author terms this process "public work . . . an approach to citizenship in which *citizens are co-creators, builders of the common world, not simply voters and volunteers who fit into that world or protestors who oppose it*" (pp. 5-6). Boyte's text, then, functions as an exploration of blending democratic ideals and education. As Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University, and a well-known champion of public power through community organizing, Boyte is well positioned to articulate a rationale for unifying ethics and values in both organizing and pedagogical empowerment.

Following the outline of the text (pp. 9-11), Boyte's first chapter describes the historicity of community organizing and its impact on citizenry formation. Importantly, Boyte situates the need for public work in the contemporary context of a polarized and polarizing America. Citizenship formation, Boyte asserts, can transcend the arbitrary bifurcation between a top-down approach to democracy and a grassroots movement to social change. This binomial paradigm is part of the problem, reinforcing an us-them dichotomy in which civic activists are needed to promote social change against the evil empire. Focusing instead on civic empowerment, the idea of public work moves beyond activism to truly reviving the role of the citizen as a producer, and not just consumer, of democracy.

The second chapter takes education as a

case study to further explore the potentials of public work. In this coauthored chapter, Boyte and Isak Tranvik argue that when put into practice, the idea of public work strengthens the role of education in civic responsibility. Focusing on K-12 education, the authors suggest that citizens should actively influence school, rather than function as passive recipients of it. Chapter 3 provides a concrete example of public achievement in a high school in Minnesota.

The fourth and fifth chapters document the spread of public work throughout the United States and abroad. Boyte and co-authors Tami Moore and Marie-Louise Ström provide vignettes of young people throughout the continental United States and in 30 countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa whose efforts reflect robust adaptations of the philosophy of public work (p. 80). In these chapters, Boyte likens this spread to jazz, a kind of music that allows thorough contextualization depending on the locality and also requires improvisation. Importantly, Boyte suggests that public work as evidenced in these examples is neither community service nor volunteering nor political involvement, but is instead an appreciative alternative. This third-way approach entails collaboration, support, and cocreating of opportunities for change.

In the sixth chapter, Boyte and Ström begin to articulate the pedagogical dimensions of this jazzlike politics. The authors ground their pedagogy in long-standing community organizing principles identified in the classic works of Jane Addams, the civil rights movement, Danish folk schools, and the Industrial Areas Foundation (p. 107). Respectively, these pedagogical values entail believing that everyone is a teacher and learner, commitment to relationships and listening to others, a public sensibility, and reflective practice.

The final three chapters continue to explore how democratic ideals and education are intertwined in this conception of public work. In Chapter 7, Boyte, Susan O'Connor, and Donna Patterson document how one group of educators at Augsburg University utilizes public work to transform special education. Chapter 8 details additional instances of public work in action, particularly in higher education. At the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, for example, Boyte describes the civic-mindedness of student government, which sees itself as a generator of change and is active in the formation of a public citizenry. The ninth and final chapter entails a clarion call for the growth of awakening democracy in all of life, for citizens to be active producers of society. In an age of polarization and divisiveness, Boyte concludes that civic studies and the building of citizenship are foundational to the democratic project.

Boyte's volume is a well-timed work that tries to envision a new praxis of community-citizenship-education engagement. The author's ideals and challenging vision are appropriately balanced with narratives of actual change, and the whole text seems to address a plaguing dimension of contemporary U.S. society, namely, the paralyzing slowness with which social change occurs. In an age of polarization and partisan everything, Boyte's text refreshingly challenges the syruplike viscosity of change, making the process of democratic engagement appear like currents near a waterfall—quick, clear, and deeply impactful. It is worth the read just to soak in the positive sensibilities, which may salve one's widening wounds from politics, or at least offer fresh air for those stuck in a season of slow change.

Boyte's approach to public work, though enticing, derives from several political-economic assumptions that are left unexamined and present weaknesses to the case the author is making. Further consideration of these weaknesses would have strengthened the volume. Interpreting Boyte's work through the lens of higher education highlights these assumptions.

First, Boyte seems to view the concepts of the common good, public work, democracy, and civic empowerment as part of a grandiose arc toward justice. To be sure, they have been treated as long-standing values of universities. Developing citizens, for example, was one of the foundational

principles of universities in the early republic of the United States. Today, these concepts permeate modern universities' mission and vision statements. Their presence is indicative of an impulse to serve the public and connotes an institutional altruism and positive desire to ensure equality for as many citizens as possible. Embedded in this heuristic, however, are problematic assumptions that refract a different story, one in which these concepts have a clear lineage that evidences injustice.

Concepts undergirding Boyte's public work have baggage. To promulgate them without articulating and addressing their histories and effects is problematic. Historically, the notion of public citizenship derives from Lockean liberal philosophy, which championed empirical thought, classical economics, and the notion of the common good. When institutionalized at a larger scale, these incipient renderings of democratic norms were utilized centuries after Locke in colonization and the creation of nation-states. In other words, not only was the common good, perhaps an early predecessor of Boyte's public work, foundational to American democracy, but it was also foundational to imperial violence. Boyte's inattention to the past harms caused in the name of pursuing "the common good" leaves the critical reader wondering, "What present harms might the blind pursuit of education-for-democracy engender?"

Evidence of the imperialism of democracy is revealed in the second major assumption in Boyte's text, namely, that the spread of public work throughout the continental United States and into more than 30 countries is a good thing. Though Boyte frames the diffusion of the public work philosophy benignly as a jazzlike contextualization in each locality, he fails to acknowledge that the spread of democracy also spreads tacit Eurocentric ideologies. In the development of the British colonies of North America those ideologies eventually led to the supplanting of a monarchy by a democratic republic, but the impulse of citizens to act as producers of their own society also manufactured the genocide of indigenous peoples. In his uncritical embrace of the values he ascribes to the public work philosophy, Boyte valorizes a dated American vision of a common dream. To be sure, the author implores the reader not to ignore the honest happenings of the land, such as slavery and indigenous genocide. However,

despite his explicit call to face the horrors of American history, the author fails to question whether and how the values implicit in public work may inadvertently proliferate the same values and virtues that eventually paved the way for these same horrors. In other words, democracy is not a panacea.

Overall, Boyte's text is an inspirational and energizing take on the power of the people to promote social change. It provides numerous examples to organizers and educators on how to integrate these two worlds—organizing and pedagogy. And it paints a picture for citizens as active agents of change. For administrators and scholars of higher education outreach and

community engagement, this text situates university–community engagement work in a wider political context, offering a reimagined way of forming citizens. Boyte's paradigm of public work thus evokes and demands a response. After finishing the text, readers are forced to wonder if their work with communities and students is merely pigeonholed into polarizing politics or breaks out of this false bifurcation between left and right. Nevertheless, some readers may appreciate a more critical lens directed toward the democratic notions of civic engagement, commons, publics, and good, which are unfortunately not addressed in this volume.



About the Reviewer

Alexander H. Jones is the regional director of development for the Great Lakes with Wheaton College and a doctoral student of higher education at Azusa Pacific University. His research interests focus on the relationship between Christianity, capitalism, and university–community engagement. He received his MA in intercultural studies and TESOL from Wheaton College.

