# Power to the Bureaucrats, Right On!

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"HUMANITY WON'T BE HAPPY 'TILL THE LAST BUREAUCRAT IS HUNG WITH THE GUTS OF THE LAST CAPITALIST!" claimed one leftist slogan in the '60's; substitute "lawyer" for capitalist" and you have a current right-wing slogan. No one is too fond of bureaucrats. People assume they are more uncreative and dreary than regular people. But as Roland Marchand's lovely essay makes clear, someone really does need to talk about road resurfacing, and any social vision that can imagine bureaucrats only dangling from the rafters is doomed. Utopian vision minus concrete knowledge of, well, concrete, is useless.

So, why are there so few Betsy Marchands, so few local politicians who can mobilize bureaucrats to do good? Roland Marchand says that "in a great majority of actual cases it is not hard to read the moral compass." But often, even though the moral compass works, it doesn't matter because we lack imagination—we don't know where we want to go, and instead of a compass, we need a creative construction crew, to build new organizations that do not yet exist. Often, the compass is fine, but the map is indecipherable—what we thought was a cozy village here turns out to be a theme park; a timber company calls this clear-cut forest a "tree farm;" and (to take an example I will milk more below) just over there might be a toxic waste incinerator, but a corporation calls it a "waste recycling and minimization facility." Often, local candidates have splendid moral compasses, but cannot get elected, because voters are not paying attention to the powerless "toy governments" that local politicians head (Gottdiener, 1987).

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A standard assumption is that the sole source of vision, boldness, imagination, and democracy, along with spontaneity, drama, and blissful ignorance, is "the people;" while practicality, nitty-gritty knowledge, timid adherence to pre-set rules, lack of democracy and lack of imagination line up on the side of the bureaucrats. Simple goodness from the people; complex badness from the bureaucrats. But in my ethnographic observations of local politics, voluntary associations, and activism in two mid-sized suburban areas that I will call Amargo and Snow Prairie, I have decided that that line-up does not correspond to the actual distinction between the people and the bureaucrats. We need a new image of communication between average citizens, bureaucrats, and local politicians, that does not just mindlessly chant "The People, Yes!" and "Democracy is in the Streets!" (as the title of one history of activism puts it, quoting a civil rights activist), but that still sees that capturing the public's attention is not just show. When we rearrange our thoughts about the relationship between local politicians and bureaucracies, we simultaneously have to rearrange our thoughts about local politicians and bureaucracies relationship to "the people." What is a better story line for that *three-way* relationship?

## 1. ACTIVISTS SMASHING

For one image of the relationship between politicians, people, and bureaucrats, the only thing "the people" seem capable of doing is "smashing": "smash the state," "smash capital," etc. Here, we imagine triumphant workers marching with banners and songs, or storming the Winter Palace. Some observers say that this is the only power ordinary people have: the power to disrupt and resist (Piven and Cloward, 1979; Scott, 1991; Baudrillard, 1983). In this image of the relationship between people, politicians, and bureaucrats, ordinary people are assumed to be utopian; bureaucrats and politicians like Betsy Marchand, on the other hand, have "no fascination with utopian visions." In utopias, everyone is too busy stampeding to talk about pavement and road resurfacing; local politicians and bureaucrats dwell in the concrete.

But anti-toxics activists I met in Amargo (Eliasoph, 1988) gathered tremendous knowledge about the technology of toxics production, corporate and government policies, law, the scientific process of reviewing data, and more (see also Lichterman, 1996). Similarly,



in one socialist-led city in Brazil, nearly everyone is on some committee or another, learning about sewers or concrete (Baiocchi, 1997). It is difficult for people with full-time jobs to learn all about road resurfacing, education policy, taxation, watershed biology, parking, air quality, and all the other complex, technical issues that a local politician confronts. But it happens surprisingly often (and could no doubt happen more if more people could gain enough political power to lobby for a shorter work week!). Plodding, technical expertise is not the special territory of full-time politicians and bureaucrats.

Neither are spontaneity and drama. Marchand says that the kind of mobilization he wants to portray "lacks the drama of public marches and demonstrations," but public marches and demonstrations lack the drama of public marches and demonstrations, too. They are carefully choreographed with parade permits, arranged parking, and monitors. They are rarely dramatic, but feel a bit absurd. You drive or take public transit to a pre-planned spot, carrying your signs while commuters, schoolchildren, and shoppers eye you with curiousity or scorn. Mouthing ferocious-sounding chants, often to the audience of empty office buildings, polished mini-vans, or no one at all, you obediently stop at traffic signals, duck into 7–11 for snacks, shyly try out the chants or recite them with excessive, ironic gusto, wondering if this is as dramatic as it gets, wondering why you feel mildly haunted by embarrassing absurdity.

Anti-toxics activists in Amargo had this unnerving absurdity problem in their demonstrations, as they marched past McDonald's and crew-cut lawns. And further, these activists resented even having to appear "dramatic" at all, saying that they would not do it if local reporters would pay attention to them when they were more drab and serious and undramatic. If drama *were* to be found in these kinds of demonstrations, then maybe "popular mobilization" would be a more popular mode of political organizing. But the genre quickly fades into uncomfortable irony. Watching Betsy Marchand "mobilizing the bureaucracies" would have been breathtakingly dramatic in comparison.

## 2. VOLUNTEERS HELPING

Another image of communication between local politicians, bureaucrats and ordinary people portrays politicians and bureaucrats

enlisting all community members to help out, one at a time, without having to talk to each other, to work on indisputably good local projects that could be addressed with hands-on solutions. It sounds very democratic and practical, but ends up being much more undemocratic and utopian than anything any voluntary association would ever dream up.

In Amargo, for example, politicians, bureaucrats and citizens together tried to create a Caring Adult Network—a CAN. Without talking very much about it, they imagined a completely mobilized community, in which all good-hearted adults would voluntarily rescue any troubled child, bring meals to old people and blankets to poor people, teach kids to read, coach basketball at night, raise funds for the high school, go to meetings, carry a string bag to Safeway, a ceramic mug to work, do "fifty things to save the earth," and do all the other things that underfunded bureaucrats could not do themselves.

Everyone's moral compasses were in splendid order, but there were no good destinations on the map, and no forum for thinking creatively together to generate them. That is what I mean by saying that this process was not very democratic. For example, parents often had to drop off their children at the schoolyard before dawn. There was no agency charged with coordinating child care, just solitary worried parents dropping off their kids and hoping for the best. Local bureaucrats and politicians—the heads of Youth Services, the Recreation Department, a probation officer, the vice-mayor, and others—could not dream up a bureaucratic solution to the problem. Instead, politicians and bureaucrats enlisted volunteers, one at a time, to supervise the pre-dawn playground. They thought that "mobilizing the people" instead of the bureaucracies was better because it seemed less bureaucratic, more grassroots and democratic than just setting up an agency would have been. But actually, it was worse: in this very utopian vision, volunteers were so busy doing so many tasks, they had no free time left for figuring out broader solutions together.

## 3. "BORING FROM WITHIN"

This image of communication between politicians, bureaucrats and regular people is closest to Betsy Marchand's story: here, good people enmesh themselves inside of government bureaucracies,



mobilizing the bureaucracies and mobilizing inside the bureaucracies, going to meetings to learn how to play along, quoting chapter and verse of the bureaucrats' own rules back to them, to try to make bureaucracies more moral.

The risk, of course, is that after boring enough, you lose your vision. Environmentalists, for example, are often asked by pollutors and local governments to participate in "citizens' review boards." Participants leave these jargon-ridden, stale affairs glazed with flourescent lighting and a miasma of semi-truths, "toxic talk" generated by the corporations themselves and left unquestioned by bureaucrats (Kamenstien, 1988). These forums exist on terms set by whatever institutions sponsor them—usually, on corporations' and government's terms. The forum silences imaginative political discussion, and amplifies whatever facts the people who control the forum select (Kemp, 1985). It leaves no public space for presenting political analysis, for developing a moral vision to help people sort through the information, or for creating new destinations on the map.

For example, the corporation that wanted to build the toxic incinerator in Amargo said that it ran tests of toxic burning, and all ten tests came out perfectly—oh, except for four that had burnt impure substances, or were otherwise done incorrectly. This big "except" was not part of the Local Review Committee's agenda; to discuss it, activists had to disrupt the meeting, bringing in evidence that the officials considered irrelevant. Like Betsy Marchand, activists could do this because they had cultivated a broader vision of how facts are made, of the relationship between facts and power, of corporate honesty and interest. Questions that Amargo anti-toxics activists could *not* ask in the Local Review Committee forum (without appearing disruptive and rude) were, for example: why do we need more toxic incineration when companies should be reducing, not increasing, toxics production? What incentives would there be for a commercial enterprise to follow its own rules regarding which chemicals to process? What quality of oversight would there be in an era of government cutbacks? And more.

Are these questions fueled by "utopian" visions? Perhaps; but what makes local politicians like Betsy Marchand competent enough to be moral is that they, too, have mental filters to sift through the seemingly neutral barrage of facts. In Amargo, activists could decipher company scientists' static "facts" because they had a broader analysis of government regulators, corporate trustworthiness, the

meaning of progress and more. A risk of "boring from within" is that without a broader vision, to tell you which facts to notice, trust, question or doubt, you get stuck in someone *else's* utopian vision: corporate sponsors had their own broad visions of technology, progress, and profit-making, that caused them to ignore the facts that activists considered relevant, and to fixate on details about valves, screws, and pipes that anyone with even a slight distrust of corporations would consider irrelevant. "Vision" and tenacious adherence to facts are inseparable.

Saddest of all was the fact that, while many government bureaucrats agreed with activists, there was no forum for them to express their agreement. These bureaucrats had taken their jobs precisely because they had once been environmental activists who had decided to "bore from within." But now, they had to play by the forum's rules, that silenced their political voices. Local politicians could have used their positions to do something important here: to create a forum for airing creative, dissident views, from bureaucrats and citizens alike.

On the other hand, surprisingly, sometimes bureaucracies can be more bold and imaginative than grassroots volunteers. Voluntary associations run a risk whenever they discuss bold, critical, contentious ideas: they might dissolve at any moment, members might decide to have dessert at home instead of rushing to the evening meeting.

Bureaucracies, in contrast, do not dissolve if members feel a little discouraged. Thus, schools-related volunteer groups in both Amargo and Snow Prairie tried hard to avoid discussing political issues like funding and racism. But some bureaucrats in Snow Prairie tried—gently—to force volunteers, and the School Board, to discuss them. They considered it their job to mobilize the people's mouths. Sometimes, that is, the bureaucrats mobilize the people and the politicians.

## MOBILE MOUTHS

Betsy Marchand sounds like a wonderful person, but to support more local politicians like her, we need more *citizens* like her, with a moral vision like hers. That won't happen until people like her create forums for communicating a vision like hers; and a big part



of the vision should be about communication itself, about creating forums between local politicians, bureaucrats and ordinary people, for public learning, so that people can learn, among other things, how to question corporate interests productively. Of course, the Christian Right already has a whole national slate of militants who are "boring from within," but not for opening up imaginative, free communication. For them, there is only one "word" that everyone must follow.

A tale about local politics might have characters named after different modes of conversation itself, like Salmon Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), where characters have names like Blabbermouth, Without-a-Tongue, and Chit-chat, and the adventure is about what would happen if all the stories in the world dried up. Our story would be about the various relationships between different kinds of forums, between citizens, local politicians and bureaucrats. Settings would be the main characters; they could even have names like Upstanding Neighbors Chatting Agreeably, Bureaucrats Mobilized, and Behind-the-Scenes Whispers! Okay, so it's not very novelistic, but as Bertolt Brecht once said, individuals do not cause events like wars any more in real life, so drama must also focus less on individuals.

This is not to say that any conversation is good and more is better, and any problems caused by conversation can be solved with more conversation. It is not to say that there is no place for dramatic social movements. It is not to say that the only proper place for public-spirited conversation is in that odorless, impersonal, idealized forum that theorists imagine the public sphere to be—important conversations are often held in passing, on playgrounds benches, in churches, cat-lovers clubs, day care centers, welfare offices. It is to say that people who are "boring from within" should keep questioning the forums they create, both in and out of bureaucracies.

A good politician should, like Betsy Marchand, have "a bias toward action—toward 'making something happen.'" But, often, "making something happen" requires forcing discussion of an issue that regular citizens want to avoid confronting. In fact, the "something" often *is* discussion; sometimes, the goal is to get ordinary citizens and bureaucrats to reflect, imagine, discuss, make friends, meet, so that local politicians have some thoughtful support for their moral visions.

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