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Focus on: Citizens and Public Choice

May 2002
Books Worth Reading

The Kettering Foundation's researchers, associates, and program staff seek to keep abreast of current literature on public life and democratic culture. Following are a few recently published books that we have found to be relevant to the foundation's work.

All of these books are available at bookstores, libraries, or directly from the publishers.

The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House

By Benjamin R. Barber
New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001

Benjamin Barber, now Gershon and Carol Kelso Professor of Civil Society at the University of Maryland, offers a compelling personal testimony about his interactions with President Bill Clinton and the White House during Clinton's two terms.

As a memoir, Barber's story about life as a public intellectual among politicians is similar to Jay Rosen's tale of his time as a public intellectual among journalists in What Are Journalists For? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Both accounts detail the struggles of engaging practitioners with larger ideas that can inform, and transform, their practice. Both Barber and Rosen reflect on how the experience has changed them as thinkers who, most of the time, stand apart from power and practice.

The theme of Barber's book is that however much intellectuals, as advisers or informal consultants to high officeholders, may want to leap at the chance to tell truth to power, they must heed the impact power — itself inevitably constrained — can have on the pursuit and articulation of truth. The book also discusses the "fundamental change in the nature, ideology, and constituency of the Democratic Party over the last several decades" and the matter of Clinton's remarkable, charismatic personality and unresolved legacy.

Three chapters in particular speak to issues of relevance to people interested in democracy and civil society. In Chapter 4, "The Art of Speechwriting," Barber moves beyond memoir into reflections on the role of rhetoric in making lasting impressions and in bringing coherence to a body of political thought and practice (a shortcoming on both counts in Clinton's speech-making). In Chapter 6, "The Community Service President," Barber explores the great difference between community service as a means to prepare and engage citizens in self-rule and volunteerism as a substitute for governmental action. And in Chapter 7, "Chairman of the NEH — Not!" Barber uses his being considered as a candidate for the leadership of the National Endowment for the Humanities as a chance to argue that arts and culture are essential elements in preserving democracy and self-rule.

The Truth of Power is a brisk literary jaunt, filled with fascinating details about the Clinton White House, memorable insights into Barber as an indomitable political theorist and frail human being, and keenly articulated notions about how democratic theory comes to life in the concrete actions taken by politicians, intellectuals, citizens, and public institutions.

—Cole C. Campbell
Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal
By Carmen Sirianni, and Lewis Friedland
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001

The single thing that defines the importance of Civic Innovation is that it is both descriptive as well as prescriptive. It is descriptive in outlining the development of civic innovation and social learning over the past several decades. It is prescriptive in providing a “master narrative” of how a civic renewal movement has emerged and how it can be nurtured into the twenty-first century.

To the authors, civic innovation entails the mobilization of social capital in new ways. Further, it looks to new institutional forms coupled with “out-of-the-box” policy designs to enhance the democratic process. But it does not stop there. In addition, civic innovation requires the active involvement of citizens and civic associations in offering critical and reflexive revisions of the movement as it progresses. Illustrating this concept are the stories throughout the book of successful individuals, associations, and movements that have undertaken the critical process of reflection, assessment, and change — hence, innovation.

The corpus of the book involves four cases that are spread across four chapters. The authors detail how civic innovation has taken place over the past several decades in the areas of community organization, the environment, community health, and public journalism. A final chapter is devoted to the careful construction of a “master narrative” that outlines what the civic renewal movement should do in order to stem the tide of cynicism and disengagement that has defined American society for the past 30 years. This narrative argues that for civic renewal to be successful, it needs a vibrant and healthy civil society that is stretched horizontally across a wide array of institutions, markets, organizations, associations, and individuals. The creation of this civil society is a necessary component for civic renewal.

Several themes in this study stand out for particular mention:
- The importance of learning and learning communities. Individuals and organizations that succeed tend to have adapted a style that will allow feedback loops to enhance learning.
- Overlapping networks that are defined by their density or thickness. These are organizations or communities that are connected both horizontally and vertically, which enhances adaptation and innovation.
- The importance of trust to enhance social cooperation. Diverse groups are able to work together because they have learned, over an extended period of time (iteration), to trust one another.
- The importance of social and policy entrepreneurs that serve as leaders. Whether it is an individual (Harry Boyte) or an organization (the Kettering Foundation), one or many individuals and/or associations serve as an important resource to successful innovation.
- Nonpartisanship and deliberation. Because civic renewal depends on large groups of people and organizations working together, the emphasis is on avoiding policy, actions, or language that will marginalize or stigmatize various sectors of the community.

The authors use a quote from Proverbs 29:18 to conclude this study: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." They have given us a much-needed instructional manual to reverse the decline in civic-mindedness that has moved like a shadow over the United States for the better part of 30 years. Civic Innovation gives us some necessary direction to begin the important work of community-building and democratic renewal in the new century.

—Chris Kelley
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