

Core Dilemmas of Organizing: What is Community Organizing? What isn't Community Organizing?

by: educationaction

Sat Mar 22, 2008 at 22:25

(Blogging isn't organizing, either. But the two can intersect, and/or interact. - promoted by Paul Rosenberg)

Popular conceptions of civic action in America have become extremely impoverished. While struggle goes on in many arenas of our society, coherent traditions of community organizing in America have mostly faded to myth in the popular imagination.

Old black-and-white newsreels of marching students, brave sharecroppers, and police-wielded water cannons from the 1960s flicker through our minds. But these images have lost most of their concrete meaning and contain few coherent lessons for social action.

I've been writing about community organizing, but I haven't been clear about exactly what I mean by this. There is no single effective model of "community organizing." Currently, however, the approach Saul Alinsky developed in the 1930s on the back streets of Chicago has become dominant in America--for good or ill. I call the current version of this model "post-Alinsky" since it has been significantly developed and changed by people like Ed Chambers, Ernie Cortes, Heather Booth, and others who came after Alinsky.

See the full "Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing" series [here](#).

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POST-ALINSKY COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: A DEFINITION

Community organizing creates durable institutions to give relatively powerless individuals a collective voice.

"Organizers" facilitate and guide these groups from the background while "leaders" give voice to the larger mass of members. Leaders learn practices--like house meetings and one-on-one interviews--for staying in touch with the interests and desires of members. Leaders use these practices to create relationships with members and draw them into collective action.

Organizers may come from inside or outside communities, and indigenous organizers sometimes shift between leader and organizer roles. There are never enough leaders, and a key aim of organizers is to move as many "members" into multiple kinds of "leader" roles.

Organizing groups often fight for service programs, but rarely run them, because this would open them up to retaliation. Organizing groups often monitor service programs from the outside, however, intervening to make sure they are actually serving the interests of the community.

Community organizing seeks to generate POWER over the long term. Wins on individual campaigns are important, but the overall aim is for the organization itself to be taken seriously by the powerful (e.g., elected

officials, business people, heads of large non-profit organizations, slumlords, etc.). This aim is achieved by

--growing numbers of sophisticated leaders

--increasingly knowledgeable members ready to act and become leaders

--a reputation for canny strategy

--the ability to get large numbers of people out to actions, and

--the generation of some level of fear and respect among key decisionmakers.

In the best case, established organizing groups will be brought to the table before important decisions are made. But organizing groups are always looking for new issues that will stretch them, add to their capacity, and gain respect. The "community" of an organizing group is maintained through action. If a group isn't constantly involved in campaigns and engaging members in different kinds of action, it is likely dying.

Inside organizing groups, power is collaborative--the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Externally, power is seen as a "zero-sum" game. Resources are relatively finite. If impoverished communities are to gain something (school funding, health care, etc.), then more powerful communities and individuals will need to give something up (through higher taxes, etc.). This is why you often need to fight. Nobody ever gives you anything that really matters to them for free.

Much more could be said, but this will have to do as a basic definition. Let me emphasize, this is an ideal definition--the reality is often quite messy.

ACTIVITIES THAT AREN'T POST-ALINSKY ORGANIZING

I recently surveyed members of the comm-org listserv (see www.comm-org.wisc.edu) for suggestions (see [this](#)) about how to create a brief introduction to this tradition of organizing. A number of respondents argued that people need to understand what organizing *isn't* if they are to really understand what organizing *is*. So that's what I discuss in the last part of this post. (This section is largely taken from my online introductory course on community organizing <http://www.educationaction.org...> *NOTE: while I do critique some of these approaches, the mere fact that they aren't neo-Alinsky organizing doesn't make them ineffective or unimportant.*

Activism isn't Organizing

Activists like to "do things." They get up in the morning and they go down to a main street and hold up some signs against the war. Or they march around in a picket line in front of a school. (Activists love rallies and picket lines.) Activists feel very good about how they are "fighting the power." But in the absence of a coherent strategy, a coherent target, a process for maintaining a fight over an extended period of time, and an institutional structure for holding people together and mobilizing large numbers, they usually don't accomplish much. People in power love activists, because they burn off energy for social action without really threatening anyone.

Mobilizing isn't Organizing

Mobilizers often accomplish something. They get pissed off about a particular issue or event, they get

a lot of people out who are hopping mad, and they get some change made (for better or worse). Like activists, they feel pretty good about what they have accomplished. But then they go home and go back to watching TV or reading obscure theory or whatever. They've accomplished what they wanted to and now they're done.

The problem with mobilizing is that winning a single battle is often quite meaningless unless you are in the fight for the long term. Once they go home, the people they were struggling against are free to do whatever they were doing before. In fact, mobilizers can actually make things worse without necessarily meaning to, or they can be used by those who are more sophisticated about what is really going on.

Most political "organizing" is really mobilizing. The goal is to get out the vote, and then the work is done until the next election. Some political organizing may actually damage efforts to organize by misusing organizing tactics. For example, they may use "one-on-one" interviews to build relationships with people just to get them to the polls. When they simply drop these relationships instead of using them to build long term power they may turn these people off to real organizers/leaders that may come to talk with them later. It's not clear to me if Obama is doing this with his "organizing" strategy. I hope not.

Legal Action isn't Organizing

Lawyers are often quite important to those engaged in social action. Lawyers can get you out of jail, and they can help you overcome bureaucratic hurdles, among many other services. The problem comes when a social action strategy is designed primarily around a lawsuit.

My own state, Wisconsin, provides a good example. For a number of years, a major lawsuit was working its way through the courts in an effort to force the state to provide more equal funding to impoverished schools. During this time, statewide organizing around education, as I understand it, largely subsided. By the time we essentially lost the lawsuit at the state supreme court, little infrastructure had been created to fight on a political level for education. We had to start over largely from scratch. Lawsuits, then, can actually have a detrimental effect on organizing. Sometimes, however, organizers have found ways that lawsuits can help energize organizing. This seems to have happened around the Williams education case in California (see <http://www.rethinkingschools.o...>

Advocacy isn't Organizing

Advocates speak for others instead of trying to get those affected to speak for themselves. Relatively privileged professionals often advocate for marginalized groups. And sometimes individual members of impoverished groups become effective advocates. But advocates also include leaders who illegitimately take it upon themselves to represent the point of view of an entire group. The latter are often chosen by the powerful as "legitimate" representatives of points of view to the extent that they serve their interests.

"Pulling Yourself Up By Your Own Bootstraps" isn't Organizing

Getting people in your neighborhood together to clean up the park, creating a block club to watch out

for scared children or criminals, developing a local savings plan in your church, or creating a community garden can be good things to do. In some cases they may actually be quite transformative, and they can foster the emergence of truly indigenous, creative, and relevant models of social action and change. Some of the most impressive examples of this in America came during the Black Power Movement and in the Nation of Islam, for example. But they don't count as post-Alinsky organizing. The post-Alinsky tradition assumes that the problems facing impoverished communities result from the effects of powerful forces acting on them from outside. If you don't contest these outside forces, you are unlikely to be able to maintain the kind of community you want. "Bootstrap" kinds of efforts can lead to organizing, but they generally don't.

Direct Service is not Organizing

As I noted in [this](#) earlier post in this series, Americans today generally equate civic engagement with direct service. But individuals helping individuals (or individuals helping organizations like hospitals, etc.) are unlikely to lead to significant social change, even if it may make you feel better. It allows people to act without getting out of their comfort zone.

Community Governance isn't Organizing

There are a range of efforts going on to ensure that different kinds of services are more responsive to community voices. While representatives of community organizing groups may serve in processes like this, organizing groups themselves almost always remain separate. And there's a good reason for this. Established non-profit and government organizations like schools and health clinics are generally dominated by middle-class professionals with little relationship to the communities they serve. This creates real challenges in even the most honest efforts to altruistically create structures for participatory governance. Organizing groups generally try to remain external to these groups so that they maintain their independent critical voice. In my own [research](#), I was not able to find any effective model for getting public schools, in particular, to allow authentic community participation. However, there is work on how what Archon Fung calls "[Empowered Participation](#)," for example, might be effective. There are also a range of efforts to make government more deliberative drawing on promising examples in [Latin America](#), [Canada](#), elsewhere, but my knowledge of these is limited.

Movement Building is not Organizing

Organizers in this tradition are seeking to build identifiable organizations, durable institutions with clear leaders and structure. This is quite different from efforts to foster the emergence of more vaguely defined mass "movements," although organizing groups may certainly participate in such a movement. See Anderson's book [The Movement and the Sixties](#) for a thoughtful discussion of "movements."

Nonpartisan Dialogues About Community Problems are not Organizing

There are a range of efforts to create opportunities for people to meet together and engage in dialogue about community problems. My favorite example is the [study circles](#) approach, but there are innumerable other examples. The dialogue approach seems very important and is sometimes overlooked by those focused on community organizing and fighting over power. Unlike community organizing, the effort in contexts like these is to be open to a diverse range of opinions, out of which

some consensus may be reached, but not necessarily. While dialogue also happens inside organizing groups, the focus is on generating a collective and singular "voice" and on wresting resources and power away from "others." Organizing assumes that dialogue isn't enough since success requires someone to lose resources, control, etc. Everyone is not allowed in the discussions that happen inside community organizing groups, and there is emphasis on the idea that there is a difference between a diversely defined "us" and "them." Dialogic efforts, even those that seek to engage in action after dialogue, tend to place more hope in the possibility that we might all get along if we could just talk honestly with each other.

Lifestyle Changes aren't Organizing

Buying a Prius may help the environment in some small way, but it is unlikely to make any real impact on pollution or climate change. Sometimes (mostly middle-class) lifestyle activists will say "well, if everyone bought a Prius, then we'd change the world." There are only two problems with this. First, even if everyone did buy a Prius it wouldn't make much of a difference. And second, everyone is not just going to go out and buy a Prius because they think you are so cool and they want to be just like you. It may be true that having a small, committed group of individuals begin with lifestyle changes may catalyze the emergence of a social movement for larger structural changes. But it is the collective action and structural change that makes the difference, not the fact that you own a Prius. Again, this is often a way for relatively privileged people to feel good about their actions without going outside their comfort zone.

That seems like more than enough for now. I'd welcome any comments, critiques, and corrections.

But a couple final points for those who are interested. First, examples of alternative traditions of community engagement can be found in Myles Horton's vision of the [Highlander Center](#) and in the legacy of [Ella Baker](#) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from the 1960s. These approaches are generally more lauded by middle-class intellectuals than the Alinsky model because they fit quite well with middle-class preferences for non-hierarchical collaborative dialogue. Second, the community organizing vision of a shifting and open leadership hierarchy may be more realistic in community organizing than in labor organizing, despite other similarities. Leaders of community organizing groups (unlike organizers) are rarely paid, and members of community groups can easily "vote with their feet" if they don't agree with leaders' decisions. In contrast, leadership positions in unions are often paid, and "exit" from unions is much more costly. (See [Democracy and Association](#) by Mark Warren on the ways "exit" and "voice" affect different kinds of social change organizations.)]

Tags: [mobilizing](#), [legal action](#), [advocacy](#), [civil rights](#), [sncc](#), [ella baker](#), [alinsky](#), [Service](#), [activism](#), [social action](#), [community organizing](#), (All Tags)

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20 comments

thanks for this post (0.00 / 0)

One quick thought.

the overall aim is for the organization itself to be taken seriously by the powerful (e.g., elected officials, business people, heads of large non-profit organizations, slumlords, etc.).

Why isn't the aim to build power to the point where the organization itself can take power, in whatever fashion? Doesn't this artificially constrain, from the very beginning, the members or organizing groups to always be subordinate?

by: *dr anonymous @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 16:40:06 PM CDT*

This is really a reformist (0.00 / 0)

strategy, not a "revolutionary" one. There is no realistic way groups like these will "take" power. Let's face it, is a local community organizing group ever going to have as much power as a bank or a mayor, except on very specific issues?

Furthermore, these groups really don't want to actually run programs, which would open them up to attack, they just want the programs to exist.

However, it doesn't mean they are always subordinate. To the extent they can generate real power, they will be able to be equal or more than equal members at the "table".

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 17:33:42 PM CDT*

[[Parent](#)]

UNITE-HERE owns a bank :) (0.00 / 0)

I don't know whether groups that engage in organizing *should* take on power, but at different points in different societies, they have taken on that strategy. I would simply argue that it's important to keep the debate in play, particularly at the formative stages. Otherwise, how do we escape from this seemingly endless cycle in which the corridors of power are filled with the same people and the same policies.

Perhaps the point is irrelevant because the whole point is those who *contest* power versus those who hold it--but as someone with a severe distrust of the state and other powerful institutions, it seems incumbent upon me to try to provide a mechanism by which a slightly less bad set of institutions that set the terms of people's lives might emerge. For example, a kindly credit rating agency might do us some good.

by: *dr anonymous @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 06:42:04 AM CDT*

[[Parent](#)]

Good point (0.00 / 0)

And it relates to your earlier points about finding ways to integrate organizing and service.

I think part of what you are talking about are institutions that are more integrated into the community, and have more community governance. This is a different

strategy than the organizing I'm talking about, and there is some interesting work going on exploring how to make it effective.

Community organizing groups generally (not always) stay external to the actual service they fight for--which allows them to come back and critique them when they don't do what they are supposed to. There is a tension here between staying independent and critical and becoming attached to a particular service institution.

There is an interesting example in the work that the Texas IAF has done creating relationships between communities and schools, where they are walking the line between offering the service and keeping the service organization accountable.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 07:09:00 AM CDT

[[Parent](#)]

If only... (0.00 / 0)

If only you had mentioned the teach-in this coming weekend earlier... instead, I have to be all middle-class-y and work on my research.

by: *Peter from WI* @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 17:42:26 PM CDT

exclusion-based definitions are tricky... (4.00 / 2)

... But the issue of how we've defined, and then clouded the definition(s) of various forms of civic engagement is definitely one worth going over.

Frankly, while I totally identify with the need to talk about "What organizing isn't" I think the urge is symptomatic of a problem many organizers have. Namely, that organizing can't co-exist or even draw energy from the aforementioned "not organizing" activities.

That said, it is when people are led to believe that those activities are a suitable replacement for organizing activities is where the progressive movement as a whole has lost a great deal of ground.

by: *rallydemocrat* @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 21:23:47 PM CDT

There is a real danger of dogma (4.00 / 1)

The definition I've given is pretty broad, but the major organizing groups have a pretty defined set of strategies they use. I worry that this may shut down some creativity (although they can also be very creative themselves).

And there are a range of other approaches to community change and engagement besides organizing that I think are important. I'm especially interested in the study circles model (studycircles.org).

We need to be careful not to put all our eggs in one basket.

So your points are well taken.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 21:49:00 PM CDT

[Parent]

Organizing sects (4.00 / 1)

I feel honor bound to mention that since the 80s there has been a race-oriented critique of the kinds of organizing that you write about coming first of all from Gary Delgado of the Center for Third World Organizing and the Applied Research Center. See for example, from Delgado, [Organizing the Movement, Beyond the Politics of Place](#), and [Stir It UP](#) by Rinku Sen.

They charge white organizers from the Alinsky tradition with failing to tackle the racial and class contradictions within their hoped-for constituencies with the result that the organizations they so laboriously build are too essentially apolitical to survive the onslaught of the rightwing populism. That is, they can win stop signs, but they prove helpless when the issue is affirmative action or abortion rights.

The Obama campaign seems to be both voluntarily and involuntarily leaping into some of those gaps -- about time.

Can it happen here?

by: *janinsanfran* @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 21:39:18 PM CDT

Yes (4.00 / 1)

And they are right, at least on some points. I've read the Delgado but not the Sen. The organizing group I work with seems to have woken up to the racial issues. I've discussed some issues with race, here: <http://educationpolicyblog.blog...>

I'm not sure that the set of strategies embodied by organizing necessarily require that the racial and class contradictions be overlooked (and I think that is going too far as a critique anyway).

But I think it is completely accurate to say that organizing is one strategy among many. And my sense is that what we need is a range of different approaches, valuing the different strengths and weaknesses that they bring.

Organizing isn't enough. But right now we don't even have much organizing.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 21:59:37 PM CDT

[Parent]

No argument (0.00 / 0)

about our need for multiple activities of which organizing is just one. I said "sects" very intentionally -- for too long lots of practitioners wrote off anyone working outside their particular practice. We're getting somewhat smarter these days. I work in obscure but I hope useful bridge-building myself.

I really appreciate this whole series. Organizing and its ramifications are very little understood by many who labor for progressive goals elsewhere.

Can it happen here?

by: *janinsanfran @ Sun Mar 23, 2008 at 23:51:55 PM CDT*

[Parent]

I think this point applies more broadly (0.00 / 0)

Which is that in any "community", there are multiple fractures within it, and organizing "the community" often means empowering the local elite (whether on gender, sexuality, or other grounds--particularly those more rooted in "the individual" than the community) within that community. In other words, social structures don't simply disappear with the formation of a block to contest community power.

However, while I think an analysis of the power *within* a movement is important, it's equally important to look at the efficacy of the movement in resisting/combatting/etc. external power.

I wonder if anyone has read any foucault-derived analyses of American community organizing traditions...would be interesting.

Thanks again for raising an interesting topic of discussion.

by: *dr anonymous @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 06:47:45 AM CDT*

[Parent]

oof i left out class / income / social status / other variables that come from outside the American political tradition (0.00 / 0)

by: *dr anonymous @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 06:49:56 AM CDT*

[Parent]

That was too stark (0.00 / 0)

it's not that there are no "communities" but there is no "community" in the singular. And the "communities" that do exist are much less coherent than the kind of identifiable ethnic etc. groups that Alinsky was able to bring together in the first half of this century. Which creates many new problems for organizers, and is why organizers have developed tools to help their leaders create webs of relationships that can stand in for the established community groups that have dissolved to some extent.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: [educationaction](#) @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 07:20:30 AM CDT

[Parent]

ah...social capital (0.00 / 0)

Yeah, I get it. I actually meant that each of those particular blocks has fractures within it that can't be ignored (whether the "community" is preexisting or constructed by the organizing). The whole debate about essentialism/identity in organizing efforts is extremely important. But I do think that one of the strengths of community organizing as opposed to socially rooted forms of building community is that you have the ability to build community informed by a more progressive outlook.

But I'm curious as to the extent to which what you're saying is really still the case today. Are there really no social institutions (formal or informal) in these places? No churches, no clubs, no "illegal" van networks, people talking to their neighbors, etc.? I've never been in a place like that, though the work on the Chicago heat wave deaths and the connection to social isolation would I suppose bear out what you're saying to some extent. And I looked into why Houston never had an immigration march nearly the size of Chicago in the wave of mobilizations that happened a few years ago, and the lack of existing solid and continuing social ties among Latinos was an important factor according to one professor I spoke to.

by: [dr anonymous](#) @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 08:47:44 AM CDT

[Parent]

Churches are one of the few (0.00 / 0)

examples of durable community institutions that remain, and it's no accident that most of the large, national community organizing umbrella groups (IAF, Gamaliel, PICO) focus on organizing churches. Most community organizations are really run by professionals these days (see my updated addition to the post). Of course there are other community groups of all kinds, and always will be. They are just not as robust as they were decades ago. And it's hard to know how to reach and organize the diverse collection of groups that do remain. (There are always unions, too, of course.)

I tend not to like the term "social capital" because it is so vague. I want to know exactly what kind of ties there are. And the key for organizing are durable organizations, like churches, not more ephemeral "ties." On the other hand, ACORN and groups like it tries to organize individuals instead of organizations, and these "ties" must be more critical to them. But I don't know a lot about the individual or "door knocking" approach to organizing, myself.

--Aaron Schutz ([Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing](#))

by: [educationaction](#) @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 09:06:25 AM CDT

[Parent]

There is no "community" (0.00 / 0)

especially in impoverished and oppressed inner cities where people are often hiding from each other.

This is why you need multiple organizing groups to represent different aspects of the community.

I'll talk later about how the dominant congregational groups are actually mostly middle class.

I don't know of any Foucault related discussions of organizing. Actually, most of the work on organizing hasn't been very critical. Scholars seem to have "discovered" organizing only fairly recently, or at least that's my sense.

Most of the work on organizing that I've seen (and I'm not really "up" on the most recent) really mostly describes what they do instead of engaging in sophisticated analyses or critiques. Most of the work is also pretty laudatory.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 07:13:03 AM CDT

[[Parent](#)]

Co-Option of Community Organizing (4.00 / 2)

Starting in the mid 80's most of Community Organizing got co-opted by local governments. Organizing became a line item in CDBG budgets. The end result is that it's lip service that is paid to "empowering the community". Meetings are held, low paid "organizers" manage the meetings, (the biggest consumers of butcher paper and colored markers) people come for the food and in the end the community based non profit and the local government can check off the "community outreach box". The CDBG grant, keeps the community quiet so that local politicians can make the deals with developers and the "connected agencies" in their city.

The reality is that most Organizers come to communities with short term work goals and have little or no cred in the community. Legitimate organizing can only be organic and spontaneous from the community. So, now there is an industry that sustains itself that is called community organizing.

I agree with the things you say are not organizing, which is the bulk of what people define as community organizing.

Can you link to some effective examples of the kind of organizing you are talking about?

by: *Stellaa* @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 00:06:22 AM CDT

Right, most organizing isn't "organizing" (0.00 / 0)

that's why I'm trying to lay out what I'm talking about more specifically. Most "organizers" in non-profits create block clubs or wander around trying to solve people's problems individually. They don't organize against power--because this would result in negative consequences for their home non-profits. And these "organizers" don't even know what they aren't doing in many cases (I know, I've had them in class).

There are lots of examples of successful organizing groups. Mark Warren's *Dry Bones Rattling* is one of the better books on organizing.

Organizing groups have won fights against red-lining from banks, money for low-income housing, programs for small class, and plenty more. My own group recently won 24 new school nurses to cover the local schools that don't have any nurses from the state. We forced the County Executive to make good on his promise to provide funding for drug treatment. Etc.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 07:17:45 AM CDT

[Parent]

UPDATED DIARY (0.00 / 0)

If anyone is still reading, I've updated the diary post a little, adding a couple more "organizing isn't" sections to give a broader feel for what other options there are. Again, some of these other options are quite promising. The point of distinguishing them is not necessarily to critique them (although I do, some) but to emphasize that post-Alinsky organizing is a discrete and identifiable tradition in the history of social action in America.

Also, let me say that if post-Alinsky organizing models were so great, then we'd have a lot more social action and effective action in America. So it seems obvious that it needs to be improved and that we need to pursue other approaches as well. How and what? Those are bigger questions. I only have my own limited experience, reading, and perspective to draw on.

--Aaron Schutz (*Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing*)

by: *educationaction* @ Mon Mar 24, 2008 at 13:23:47 PM CDT

thanks (0.00 / 0)

I only have my own limited experience, reading, and perspective to draw on.

Which has served us quite well. :) Thanks.

by: *dr anonymous* @ Tue Mar 25, 2008 at 02:42:27 AM CDT

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