

# Collective Action for Social Change

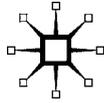


# Collective Action for Social Change

An Introduction to Community Organizing

Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy

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To my daughters, Hiwot and Sheta, who have taught me a great deal about protest and resistance. Here's hoping they channel their great energy, creativity, and poise into a life that helps make our world a better place.

And to my wife, Jessica, from whom I have learned a great deal about compassion and tolerance. Without her support, this book could not have been written.

—**Aaron Schutz**

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—**Marie G. Sandy**

The only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision. . . . [Community] organizing teaches as nothing else does the beauty and strength of everyday people.

—President Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*

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—**Aaron Schutz**

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—**Marie G. Sandy**



## Introduction

I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a “community organizer,” except that you have actual responsibilities.

—Sarah Palin, Republican National Convention, 2008

I’ve had several reactions when I say I’m a community organizer. I had one person say to me, “Oh, you must have really clean closets.”

—Vivian Chang, *We Make Change*

Few people in America know much of anything about community organizing. In fact, when a recent national survey asked people to say what came to mind when they heard the term “community organizing,” few of the respondents understood what this meant.<sup>1</sup>

When Sarah Palin ridiculed Barack Obama in 2008 for having been a community organizer, it seemed like a teachable moment. Discussions about organizing filled the media for the first time in decades. But this coverage didn’t seem to educate people very effectively about organizing. Certainly the pundit columns and TV roundtable discussions we saw exhibited little or no understanding of community organizing. These Washington insiders seemed unable to distinguish the organizing vision from the kind of short-term voter mobilization that they were familiar with.

This book joins a broader effort to address this ignorance about community organizing in America.

While we discuss other traditions, we focus on the approach to community organizing formulated by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s and developed by many others since then. Nearly all established organizing groups, today, remain deeply influenced by this still evolving tradition that we call “neo-Alinsky” or “Alinsky-based” community organizing.

**Alinsky-Based Community Organizing: A Definition**

- Community organizing creates durable institutions and builds local leadership, giving otherwise fractured communities a unified voice and the collective power necessary to resist oppression.

Accusations of revolutionary leftist socialism often arise when the name Alinsky is mentioned in right-wing political circles. But the fact is that, for good or ill, the organizing tradition has always been reformist, not revolutionary. Organizing groups want influence over, not destruction of, the social institutions that affect the lives of the oppressed. And although Alinsky embraced the metaphor of a “war” between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” his work was fundamentally nonviolent. In fact, during the most radical years of the 1960s Alinsky actually became a voice for moderation, disgusted by the incoherent antics of violence-prone splinter groups like the Weathermen.

Community organizers believe that their work is grounded in the core traditions of American democracy. At the most fundamental level, they seek to nurture a more active and engaged citizenry in a nation where passive complaining and perfunctory voting often rule the day.

**Learning to Be an Organizer?**

This book is not, it is important to stress, a “how to” cookbook. A number of other good books exist that explain *how* to organize: how to run meetings, how to develop a governance structure, how to work with the media, and the like (we list a few of these in the Appendix). But before you can “do” organizing, we believe that you need to *think* like an organizer. And it turns out that learning how to think this way can be very challenging.

Between the two of us (Aaron and Marie) we have taught an Introduction to Community Organizing course to a diverse student body at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for more than a decade. This experience has taught us that the organizing perspective is quite alien to most Americans. Learning to think like a community organizer generally involves critiquing long- and often strongly held convictions about social service and civic engagement. Many of our students are planning to pursue careers in a range of social service positions. And it is not unusual for these students to experience a crisis of confidence as they grapple with community organizing’s criticisms of the “service” approach to social problems. It often

takes an entire semester for most students to really internalize how organizers see the world—whether they decide they agree with this perspective or not.

Because of these challenges, we decided that attempting to engage readers in this task of “rethinking” was more than enough of a project for a single book.

Furthermore, while we both use cookbooks and technical manuals, we are also very conscious of their limitations. Can you really learn complex skills from a cookbook or a manual? Would you get in a car with someone who has memorized the driving manual but has never actually driven?

We doubt it.

Thus, while we invite those who are captivated by the organizing vision to move on to more “nuts and bolts” type books, we recommend finding an actual organizing effort to work on while you read them. “Nuts and bolts” knowledge is hard to retain if you aren’t actually *using* it.

### Principles vs. Rules

Saul [Alinsky’s] understanding of the community organizing business was almost as nebulous as [Sarah] Palin’s.

For Saul organizing varied in method, shape, and scope depending on the times and the circumstances . . . .

I doubt that Alinsky would have much use for [today’s “standard” model of community organizing] in the changed society we live in. The least doctrinaire of men, he would in all likelihood be tinkering with new ways to realize the old goal of democratic self-rule.

—Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky*

Alinsky titled his second book about organizing *Rules for Radicals*. “Rules” was an unfortunate choice, because Alinsky also repeatedly emphasized that organizing was more of a mind-set than a set of established strategies or guidelines. A better title would have been *Principles for Radicals*.

Unlike a rule, a principle refers to a general tendency that can help guide one’s actions. It is not a strict law of nature. In every specific situation, a principle will likely play out differently. Sometimes, a particular principle won’t be relevant to a situation at all. For example, Alinsky generally recommended that organizing efforts move slowly, carefully building power over time. But at one point, during the 1960s, he realized that he was in the “whirlwind.” So he threw that rule out the window and rushed organizations into large actions over very short periods of time.

This leaves us in an odd position for people writing a book about organizing. At the same time as we lay out the basic “principles” of neo-Alinsky

organizing, we recommend that you don't take what we say *too* seriously. It is often the case that in real contexts some of the most basic "rules" of any discipline can be broken if you are going to succeed. But people are better equipped to intelligently break rules if they really understand them in the first place.

Overall, this book provides an abstract model of organizing written for an abstract world that, Alinsky noted, doesn't actually exist. The concepts and ideas we present, here, must be actively appropriated and sometimes rejected in actual situations of social struggle. So don't come back to us and say, "Well, that's what you told me to do." We don't *know* what to do to solve your problem. It's *your* problem. You need to figure it out.

### **I'm a Conservative. Should I Read Your Book?**

Since the election of our first community organizer president, conservatives in America have become increasingly interested in Alinsky and organizing more broadly. In the "customers who bought this item also bought" list attached to Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* page on amazon.com, for example, you find books written by Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, and Ayn Rand and titles like *Liberal Fascism*, *Rules for Republican Radicals* and *Obama's Plan to Subvert the Constitution*.

Community organizing in America, as we define it, however, has usually staked out a fairly generic center-left political position. Alinsky was a pragmatist, and ideological purists of all kinds creeped him out. So he didn't have much interest in working with fiery-eyed leftists. Even if he had, there weren't enough of them in America to generate the collective power necessary to produce significant social change. He and the organizers who came after him have always understood that any effective organizing effort needs to attract a membership that reaches across existing political, cultural, religious, and other divides. In fact, aspects of organizing have actually become *more* moderate in recent years because of a focus on congregational organizing and a growing middle-class constituency.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the diversity of their membership, organizing groups generally avoid hot-button culture war issues like abortion, gay rights, or school vouchers because they would fracture their coalition. Instead, they focus on problems that a broad range of people can agree on, like improving education, confronting racial discrimination, and getting people access to good jobs. As a result, many conservatives have been able to find comfortable homes within Alinsky-based community organizations. At the same time, of course, community organizing groups tend to avoid issues that are close to the hearts of many conservative activists.

Some components of the organizing model may be of limited relevance to the top-down social action approach increasingly embraced by far right wing movements in America (and, historically, by some radical leftists). Community organizing groups don't, *can't*, embrace any discrete political or religious dogma. Instead of telling people what to think, organizers ask people what they care about. Instead of trying to convert people to particular political or social points of view, organizers champion a very general set of values about caring, equality, justice, and democracy. So if you want to convince people that you already have the answer, key aspects of the organizing approach may not be that useful to you.

### The Tone of This Book

Because the goal of this book is to teach people to think like community organizers, we generally take a fairly partisan stance in favor of organizing in the text that follows. Pedagogically, we believe this is the most effective approach. It is important to note, however, that both of us are also critical of many aspects of the organizing vision. Some of these criticisms can be found in Aaron's "Core Dilemmas of Community Organizing" series on the blog Open Left. We plan to publish a follow-up volume drawing on the Core Dilemmas series that will provide a much more critical analysis of the current state of the field.<sup>3</sup>

### Boxes, Epigraphs, and Body Text: The Logic of Our Presentation

In this brief introduction, you have already had a taste of some of the textual structure of this book. We use three different formats to provide diverse perspectives on organizing while also advancing our own argument.

What we call "body text" represents the traditional narrative that you are reading right now. We use this format for our core explanations of the organizing model. Epigraphs or quotations from a range of different scholars and practitioners often begin different sections of body text, illuminating aspects of the ongoing discussion or adding useful information. Finally, within what we call "boxes," you will find a range of stories, interviews, and advice drawn from our own experience as well as that of a diverse collection of community organizers. The material in boxes may bring in new issues or provide relevant examples or extend the discussion in perhaps unexpected directions. The language in the "box" writings and epigraphs often provide a visceral sense of the way different organizers talk and strategize.

Note that we have sometimes taken minor liberties with epigraphs and quotations—adding extra paragraph breaks, for example—to improve their readability.

### The Organization of This Book

We have split this volume into six separate sections. We begin with an overview section that discusses what community organizing *is* and what community organizing *isn't*. The organizing vision diverges radically, at points, from more common ways of thinking about social action or community change in America. We have found that unless we explain how organizing is different from the visions people bring with them to our courses, they often try to fit organizing into a model that they are more familiar and more comfortable with.

The second section focuses on history and theory. A fairly long chapter summarizes the history of community organizing in America, describing the evolution of social movements and local organizing efforts, as well as the emergence of what some call the “nonprofit industrial complex.” Another chapter goes into more detail about Alinsky’s idiosyncratic but extremely influential vision.

The third section provides case studies meant to give readers a rich sense of the different forms community organizing can take in America today. The first chapter describes Obama’s recent presidential campaign and explains how his campaign appropriated some key organizing techniques for its voter mobilization effort. The next two chapters are written by outside authors. Mark Warren contributes a selection from his outstanding book-length study of congregational or church-based organizing within the national Industrial Areas Foundation, *Dry Bones Rattling*. And Heidi Swarts draws from her equally important in-depth research on the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN (see her book *Organizing Urban America*), to provide an overview of its strategy and an explanation of its recent demise. In the final chapter in this section, Marie discusses a local organizing project she worked with that was unaffiliated with any national organization: a university-sponsored grassroots “think tank” that brought poor and middle-class people together around community problems.

The fourth and longest section of the book introduces a range of key concepts in community organizing, explaining how organizers think about leadership, “cut issues,” come up with tactics, and much more.

### Comments or Criticisms?

We look forward to hearing from readers. We have set up a blog where people can enter a discussion about the book at [www.educationaction.org/collective-action-discussion.html](http://www.educationaction.org/collective-action-discussion.html). Feel free to join us there!

### Notes

1. National Conference on Citizenship, *Civic Health Index 2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference on Citizenship, 2008).
2. Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).
3. See [www.educationaction.org/core-dilemmas-of-community-organizing-html](http://www.educationaction.org/core-dilemmas-of-community-organizing-html), accessed April 6, 2010.



PART I

*Overview*



## CHAPTER 1

# What *Is* Community Organizing?

A People's Organization lives in a world of hard reality. It lives in the midst of smashing forces, dashing struggles, sweeping cross-currents, ripping passions, conflict, confusion, seeming chaos, the hot and the cold, the squalor and the drama, which people prosaically refer to as life and students describe as "society."

—Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 1946

### Community Organizing

Groups seeking social change in American history have drawn from many different sources for their strategies. In this book we introduce you to the tradition of community organizing first formulated by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s. Alinsky's tradition, as evolved by those who came after him, has become a prominent model used by less privileged groups in America to create collective power. Nearly all groups fighting for social change in the United States today are at least influenced by this approach.

The prominence of the Alinsky tradition of social action has grown over the last few years, especially after organizing became a hot-button issue during the 2008 presidential election. During the campaign, the community organizing group ACORN was often in the media and frequently attacked. The public was reminded that presidential candidate Barack Obama had been a community organizer when Sarah Palin belittled organizers during the Republican National Convention. And Obama's opponent and later Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was criticized because she not only wrote her college thesis on Alinsky's strategies, but was even offered a job by Alinsky after college.

Although references to community organizing have become more common in the media, few people in America really know what "organizing" is.

Most people who were asked in a recent survey what “community organizing” meant thought it was somehow related to community service, even though Alinsky developed community organizing in reaction *against* the limitations of the “service” approach.

### What Is Community Organizing?

Organizers develop institutions to represent impoverished and oppressed citizens in the realms of power. Organizing groups conduct strategic campaigns, pressuring powerful individuals and groups to improve the lives of their constituencies. They bring masses of people together in actions where they make demands through their leaders in a collective voice. Successful campaigns have forced banks to support low-income housing, lobbied city councils to pass living-wage laws, and pressured legislatures to lower class sizes in public schools, among many other accomplishments.

In the most general sense, community organizing seeks to *alter the relations of power* between the groups who have traditionally controlled our society and the residents of marginalized communities. Organizing groups shift the relations of power by

- increasing their membership,
- nurturing and training leaders,
- gaining a reputation for canny strategy,
- raising money to fund their infrastructure and staff, and
- demonstrating their capacity to get large numbers of people out to public actions.

Ideally, over time, success in individual campaigns increases the public reputation of an organization so that it will increasingly be consulted on important issues *before* decisions are made.

In contrast with more cooperative approaches to community change (like “community development,” discussed in Chapter 2), organizers believe that significant social change only comes through conflict with the entrenched interests of the status quo. In fact, organizing groups usually *seek out* issues that are likely to generate controversy and tension. Vigorous, nonviolent battles for change draw in, energize, and educate new participants, enhancing a group’s public standing in the community.

### The Invisible History of Power in America

Few of us consider how much our environment is filled with the remnants of forgotten conflicts. As we go about our daily lives, it is easy to forget that what

is familiar and unremarkable today was often unusual or forbidden not long ago. The social struggles that created much of the infrastructure and many of the institutions we depend upon have become largely invisible. To note just a few examples, today:

- Women can vote because generations of “suffragists” fought for equality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- People grow old without fear of destitution because “Townsend Plan” clubs across America agitated for social security during the 1930s.
- People with mental limitations participate in public life instead of being hidden away in asylums because of the disability rights movement.
- Children from impoverished families eat for free in public schools because of the work of antihunger activists in the 1960s.
- AIDS research and treatment receives federal funding because thousands of activists fought against discrimination in the 1980s.

We could go on.

In your own neighborhood, wherever you live, you are almost surely surrounded by the consequences of social struggles, both small and large. The location, size, and contents of your local park, for example, likely represent the power of different collective efforts in the past. Don't have a nearby park? Well, that is likely the result of your neighborhood's *lack* of collective power. Is your park clean and sparkling, or unkempt and littered? Either way, it likely reflects your neighborhood's influence with the local public works department.

It is no secret in our country that public schools in low-income areas are badly funded, or that millions lack health care. It is no secret that if your skin is dark you have a much greater chance of being convicted of a crime or ending up on death row. It is no secret that our central cities are crumbling, or that children still go hungry every day.

The problem is not that we don't *know* about social problems in America. The problem is not that no one *cares* about these problems. The problem is that most of us have no idea how to do something concrete to solve them.

### **Cleaning Up a Local Park**

When the pastor of the congregation one of the authors attends first arrived, the land behind the church was overgrown and full of trash. He didn't realize this space was actually a park until he asked around. Of course, this church is in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

He called the local alderman to complain, and nothing was done. Then he asked thirty or forty people in the congregation to call and complain. He asked them to tell the alderman that if something wasn't done they would show up at his office, next. The parks department showed up the next day to clean up the park. Today, the space behind the church is a place for children to play, not a dumping ground for neighborhood trash.

An argument didn't win the day. A plea for help didn't win the day. A demonstration of collective power won the day.

The shiny play structure and trimmed grass of the pastor's park, today, is a testament to the work of community organizing. But the struggle that produced this nice place to play is largely invisible. Few, if any, of the children and families that visit the park know why it looks the way it does today.

### Civic Miseducation in America

You come to school to get the abilities to learn and to strengthen yourself, but you don't learn how to fight. In fact, you learn how *not* to fight. They teach you just the opposite. Don't make waves, don't make noises, don't take any risks.

—Dolores Huerta, *Dolores Huerta Reader*

On the first day of our “Introduction to Community Organizing” class, we often ask a simple question:

How many of you, after more than twelve years of schooling, have ever complained to a teacher or an administrator about some problem you are having and had that person say, “Well, why don't you get together with some other students and see if you can do something about it?”

Few students ever raise their hands. And those few who do invariably have pretty unique stories. With very few exceptions, what we learn every semester is that in all of our students' years of schooling, *no one* has *ever* taught them about power—how it works or how to generate it.

They have, of course, heard about some of the social struggles that occurred in American history. They may have read about abolitionists who fought slavery before the Civil War or about the struggle for women's voting rights. Most have seen black-and-white newsreels from the Civil Rights Movement: lines of black people walking to work alongside empty buses

in Montgomery, or children bravely facing snarling police dogs and water cannons in Birmingham. These stories, however, have largely become part of our American mythology. Students learn that these events *happened*, but they do not learn how people *made them happen*.

Social change in America is usually explained in quite sanitized ways. Martin Luther King, for example, has become an icon of peace and reconciliation. We often hear the “I Have a Dream” speech, where he spoke of his hope that people would learn to get along with and love each other. We almost never hear King’s much more typical speeches where he exhorted masses of people into often brutal (if nonviolent) confrontations with inequality. And, of course, we rarely hear about the speeches of Malcom X, Stokely Carmichael of the Black Power Movement, or other leaders who didn’t speak as much about love and compassion as King.<sup>1</sup>

In school we are mostly taught that *truth matters* and will win out in the end. In school we learn that, in the end, people are mostly reasonable and willing to cooperate.

Of course, there is some truth to this. Most people are not evil. Most people at least *want* to do what is right.

What is missing from these lessons, however, is the fact that if one group of people is to “get” something, in most cases another group will have to give something up. We are not taught that truth, alone, is rarely enough to produce significant change, or that cooperation usually only works between people who already respect and understand each other.

These omissions are no accident. It is simply not in the interests of people in relatively powerful positions to teach the less powerful how to resist them. This, we will argue, is a basic fact of human society, not some elaborate conspiracy. In fact, in our community organizing classes we often use the course itself and our relationship with students to make this concretely visible.

#### **Why Teachers Don’t Teach Students How to Be Powerful**

“Why,” Aaron asks his class at their first meeting, “would I teach you how to make my own life difficult? If *one* of you goes to the Dean and complains about me—my grading for example—that wouldn’t really matter. In fact, if I wanted, I could make an example of that person, showing other students why they better not cross me. But what you probably don’t realize is that if *most of you* go as a group to complain, I could have real trouble on my hands. Because the Dean doesn’t want the headache. He’ll put a lot of pressure on me to ‘solve the problem’.

“The truth is that if you stick together, you have quite a lot of power to make my life difficult. So the last thing I want is to teach you how to act collectively. In fact, it’s in my best interest to keep all of you fairly isolated from each other. Sure, I can put you in groups to chat and work together on projects. But I don’t want you to start seeing yourself as a collective.

“What is the most effective thing I could do,” he asks, “if one of you gets upset with me and starts getting people together to do something about what a terrible teacher I am?”

Students often make suggestions like “grade the student even harder,” “threaten the student with a bad grade,” or “threaten the whole class.” At some point, however, someone will usually suggest the opposite, that Aaron might just “give in and raise the complaining students’ grades.”

At this point, Aaron jumps in with a “Yes!” While he acknowledges that some of the other approaches might work, he argues that the most effective approach is probably just to “buy the complaining student off.” This is a classic strategy that powerful people use to short-circuit collective resistance. “If I ease off on the grades for anyone who might become a leader,” Aaron says, “then I probably don’t have to worry about the rest of you. The rest of you are sheep! I only need to worry about potential shepherds.”

“In any case,” Aaron emphasizes, “the last thing I want is for you to figure out that you actually do have some power. I want you to think that I am all powerful, that I can give you whatever grades I want, can make you complete whatever assignments I demand, and you don’t have any choice about it. If my ‘buying the student off’ strategy doesn’t work, then I may even preemptively eliminate a few assignments for everyone to make your lives easier and cut any organizing off at the pass. If I make things easier for you and it’s *my* decision, then I haven’t given up any power.

“But if you actually go to the Dean and complain, I’m not necessarily going to just give in. In fact, that may harden my resistance, even if you are asking for changes I don’t really care about.

“Why?”

“Because the last thing I want is for students to get the idea that they might have any power over me. At this point the key issue shifts from what you specifically want to a contest over who has the real power over this class. If I lose, who knows what you might demand next time?”

### The Lack of Support for Organizing

The antiorganizing position of teachers and schools is only magnified in the world outside of schools. Corporations and the governments have no incentive to support collective empowerment that generates resistance and produces conflict. It makes a lot more sense to sponsor service activities. They'll give money to a homeless shelter or a food pantry, but not to an organization fighting for more housing or to a group seeking to increase food stamp allocations. Even philanthropic foundations generally shy away from social action. They don't want to endanger their status in the community or future contributions from donors. Giving money for service avoids controversy and makes everyone happy. It's the "feel-good" approach to social change and civic engagement.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, it is the exception that proves the rule. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, during a short period in the 1970s the federal government actually did fund locally controlled groups engaged in collective action that disrupted the status quo. In response, mayors and other established officials flooded federal offices with complaints. Local officials couldn't understand why the government would fund people to threaten *their* power. Not surprisingly, the democratic aspects of this program quickly ended. Today, few community organizing groups receive government funding.

When we are given opportunities for civic engagement in school, on the job, or more generally in the community, then, these are generally restricted to charity or service. We join a walk to raise money for the local children's hospital; we tutor once a week in a low-income school; we help build a home for a single mother. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these activities. On some level, however, many of us likely know that the amount of money raised by a pledge walk probably won't pay the cancer treatment bills for even a single seriously ill patient. What cancer patients really need are not small pledges, but better health insurance. On some level many of us must realize that a couple of hours of (untrained) tutoring is not what children in bad schools really need. What they need are better schools. And it seems hard to ignore the fact that spending an enormous amount of energy building a single house is a not a particularly efficient way to respond to the needs of the hundreds of thousands of homeless and ill-housed families across America.

But we don't know what else to do. At least we are doing *something*.

### Sometimes, People Do Act

Sometimes an injustice strikes enough people with enough force that they get together to do something about it. It can be something as small as a plan to

chop down a beloved neighborhood oak tree. Or it can be as large as a threat to close the largest employer in town, or, more broadly, a president's refusal to end an unpopular war.

But since most of us don't know much of anything about collective action and power, we end up reinventing the wheel. Without access to the strategies and tactics developed by those who came before them, groups frequently make the same greenhorn mistakes again and again.

Partly as a result, these efforts often fail. The tree gets chopped down. The employer leaves. The war doesn't end.

Highly experienced community organizing groups often fail. It is always difficult to win against the powerful. Inexperienced groups are at a greater disadvantage. This is partly why so many believe that "you can't fight City Hall." As this book will show, you can fight City Hall. But you need to know what you are doing.

Sometimes, even when an inexperienced group *seems* to win, it ends up losing in the end. The city may agree to save the tree, wait a few months until things die down and protestors go home, and then chop it down anyway when nobody is looking. An employer may agree to accept tax relief from the city, but then ship its jobs to another state the next year anyway, happily pocketing the extra tax money and leaving the community in even worse shape.

Those who can't hold decision makers accountable over the long term often find that short-term "wins" don't get them much.

In this book we introduce many of the lessons that organizers have learned in their efforts to contest inequality and injustice over the past century. We lay out the core principles that guide many of the most sophisticated groups engaged in collective struggle in America today.

We refer, as we note in the introduction, to "principles" and not "rules," because there are no certainties in our changing world. Yesterday's strategies must always be adapted and transformed to meet the needs of the unique challenges of the present. Expertise at any task always involves combining knowledge drawn from the past with insight about contingencies encountered in the present. There is no simple "textbook" for power. Anyone who tells you otherwise is living a fantasy.

Rinku Sen describes this tension another way. She calls organizing a "craft" that lies somewhere between "art" and "science." Only when you can actually put art and science together creatively amid struggle have you learned the *craft*. And you can't learn this craft from a book. You need to go learn it on the streets.

### Social Service vs. Strategic Social Action

Alinsky often told versions of the following parable to help people understand the difference between the way we normally think about social problems and the way community organizers think about social problems.

#### The Parable of the River

One warm summer afternoon, a group of five friends gathered around a fire on the banks of a small river in the woods. Sprawled on the grass or sitting on logs, they drank cold beer from a cooler, chatting lazily amidst the sounds of rushing water, birdcalls, and the buzz of crickets.

Suddenly, one of them stood up with a cry. Dropping her beer, she skidded down the muddy bank into the river. The rest of them watched, bemused, as she waded in up to her waist, grabbed something floating there, and carried it back to them. As she came out of the water, the others heard something crying.

“Oh my God!” one of them said. She held a baby in her hands.

“It was drowning,” the woman with the baby said, “I don’t know if it’s okay.”

Then someone else in the group shouted, “There’s another one!” He rushed down into the water as well, followed by the others.

As they waded in to get the second baby, one of them happened to look up the river. “Oh no,” she said. As far up as she could see, babies struggled in the water.

The group began frantically rushing in and out of the river, trying to catch the babies as they went by. At first they managed to get all of them before they went by, but after a while they started getting tired. Babies started getting by them. They saw some babies go under without coming back up. Crying and shaking from the cold river water, they couldn’t stop. The riverbank became littered with more and more babies, some crawling around, others not moving. But there wasn’t time to check on them. There were always more in the water.

Finally one of the rescuers stopped. She stood for a moment, thinking, and then she took off running up the river, away from the group.

“Come back!” cried one of her friends.

“What are you doing?” yelled another as he struggled toward the bank with a baby in both arms.

“I’m going to find out who’s throwing all these babies in the river,” she shouted back, and she kept running.

The woman running up the river, Alinsky would tell his audience, was thinking like an “organizer.” She realized the futility of trying to rescue an endless torrent of drowning babies. What they needed to do was prevent babies from being thrown into the river in the first place.

Alinsky often complained about social service workers who tried to solve problems “downriver” but never looked “upriver” to think about how to prevent problems from happening in the first place.

A central aspect of this story is that the woman running upriver assumed that babies are not just *accidentally* in the river. She was going to see who was *throwing* the babies in. Versions of this parable in texts for social workers and other service professions often miss this point. A textbook for public health professionals, for example, has the person running upstream say: “I’m going . . . to see why so many people keep *falling* into the river.” It continues the story little farther, reporting that, “as it turns out, the bridge leading across the river up stream *has* a hole through which people are falling. The upstream rescuer realizes that fixing the hole in the bridge will prevent many people from ever falling into the river in the first place.” Note the passive voice in the textbook version. The bridge just *happens* to have a hole in it. No one in particular is responsible.<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of a community organizer, this textbook completely misunderstands how the world works.

Bad things, organizers argue, rarely just “happen.” Most “babies” in “rivers” around the world are black babies, poor babies, babies of undocumented immigrants, and the like. This is no accident. Real people and the institutions they control are responsible for a world that allows so many of these babies to drown (or go hungry, or get a bad education, and so on). Elected officials fund bridges in their own districts and not in others. Rich voters don’t want to pay money for repairs in someone “else’s” community.

Unless you are individually powerful or come from a pretty privileged community, you can’t just call the people “in charge,” tell them that you have a problem, and expect much to change. Like the inner-city pastor with the trash-filled park, you can rarely just say “pretty please” and get the support you need. The *fact* of a crisis is not enough.

Most crises like these are not new or unknown. If people were going to do something about them, they already would have. Instead, what we usually get are excuses. “We’d love to give all babies life preservers, but we just can’t afford it.” “It’s someone else’s responsibility.” “We’re too busy fixing holes elsewhere.” “Yes, we know, we’ve got a team working on that.” “We’re waiting for the results of a feasibility study.” “We’ll get to it. Just trust us.”

Babies *are* in the river, today. Prison construction, for example, is often based on third-grade reading scores. By the time they reach the age of nine,

then, we *already know* how many kids are likely to end up in jail. They are already in the river heading toward incarceration. And we do, in fact, know about concrete changes that would both pull many of them out of this river and prevent other kids from ever falling in. But we lack sufficient political capacity, sufficient *power*, to make them happen.

### Internal Tensions and Problems with the River Parable

Alinsky wasn't under the illusion that the choice made by the woman running upstream was easy, or simple, or unproblematic. In fact, he sometimes used this story to make a further ethical point. When the woman abandoned her role as a savior on the bank, there was now one fewer person to help "those poor wretches who continue . . . to float down the river." In a world with limited resources, the woman who runs upstream is, in fact, allowing some babies to drown in the hope that she can deal with the problem in a different way. Hers is a tragic choice.<sup>4</sup>

Social workers and other service providers will always be necessary in our world. No matter how much power we generate for positive social change, there will always be some babies in the river. So we don't mean to denigrate service in this book. The problem is not that some people provide services. The problem is that so *few* people are organizing to reduce the need for these services. So many babies are in the river that there is no hope that we could ever rescue them all. Most will continue to float down the stream. Many will drown. Service workers, in prisons, child welfare agencies, inner-city emergency rooms, police stations, and elsewhere, face the same growing hopelessness experienced by those in the parable. They catch a few babies here and there, but watch most of them drown.

(At the same time, however, organizers note how dependent the livelihood of service workers is on a continuing stream of drowning babies. In fact, it seems at least possible that the very structure of the "service industrial complex" may play a role, however unintentional, in perpetuating this suffering. Think, for example, of the many jobs provided in rural areas by prisons filled with people of color from urban areas. There is solid evidence that the need for jobs for prison guards is part of what drives an increasing tendency to incarcerate people of color. There is the potential for a destructive cycle in many different areas, here, supported by service providers' need for jobs providing services.)

From an organizing perspective, there are also problems with the way Alinsky tended to present this parable. First of all, the people that organizers try to help are rarely "babies." Those who suffer the effects of inequality are almost always capable of acting for change if they can develop the right tools and

resources. Organizing is not about doing *for* others. Instead, organizers are supposed to work *with* people to produce social change. A key tenet of organizing is that those affected by a particular social problem are usually best equipped to figure out what changes are most likely to make a real difference.

Second, the parable implies that organizers worry a lot about who has *caused* a particular problem. In fact, however, causation is frequently unimportant. The key question is not who dumped PCBs in a lake, for example – that company may be long gone. Instead, organizers try to figure out who can be *held responsible* for cleaning it up, now. From an organizing point of view we live in a world where some people have enormous privilege and resources, while others have little or nothing. Unless those with resources and decision-making power are pressured to act in different ways, the core challenges of our society cannot be addressed.

People with no boots cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

### How Do Organizers Think?

In this section we introduce some of the key concepts that organizers use to make sense of the world around them. We lay these out here in fairly simple form. When you get to the second half of the book, you will discover that these concepts are more complicated and challenging to apply than they may initially seem.

Every tradition of social action has a different perspective on social problems. Social service professionals, for example, look into oppressed communities and see masses of suffering people who need their help. Organizers, in contrast, see not victims but potential actors in the same communities. While service professionals learn skills for helping people in crisis, then, organizers develop strategies for helping people come together to demand change.

### *Building Power, Not Just Winning Campaigns*

In our experience, people who are new to organizing often struggle to internalize organizing's focus on power. Novices generally understand organizing, at least initially, as a set of strategies for *winning* on particular issues. The ultimate goal, they often think, is to win things like wage increases, more low-income housing, more resources for schools, and the like. Of course, they are right to some extent. Winning is critical. An organizing group that never wins is clearly not accomplishing much, however much effort it puts into its work.

Experienced organizers, however, understand that winning specific social changes is really a *means* for achieving a more important goal: *power*. Organizing groups do not simply want to win, they want to win in ways that enhance their capacities for winning *even more* in the future. This means that *how* groups organize around particular issues is at least as important as *what* they win.

What do organizers mean by power? In a simple sense, organizers define power as:

The capacity to influence (or affect) the actions of powerful people and institutions.

Power for a community organizing group is the product of many things:

- how many people it can bring out to key actions,
- how many leaders it has,
- how effective and savvy its leaders are,
- how much money it has, and
- how strong its reputation is.

These are the kinds of capacities and resources organizers seek to build up over time.

When you have real power, other powerful people and groups are

- more likely to keep their promises to you,
- more likely to consult you before they do something your constituency might object to, and
- less likely to make decisions that might hurt your constituency.

The two central goals of organizing are: building collective power and developing leaders who can sustain that power over the long term.

### ***Organizers and Leaders***

Community organizers in the Alinsky tradition make a distinction between two critical roles: organizers and leaders. In more established organizations,

“organizers” are usually paid staff. They do the day-to-day work necessary to keep an organization going, seek out and train leaders, and support the work of emerging or ongoing campaigns. Their focus is on enhancing the overall power of the organization and on helping leaders become more effective. Organizers may come from outside a community or emerge from within it.

“Leaders,” in contrast, govern a community organizing group and decide what issues it will work on. Unlike organizers, leaders are almost always unpaid volunteers. Leaders, not organizers, speak for and provide the public “face” of an organization. Some leaders may serve on a central board that takes care of administrative issues and fund-raising, while others work on issue committees that plan and conduct campaigns. Becoming a leader does not necessarily involve taking on some formal position within the organization. Instead, due in part to a chronic lack of sufficient leadership, anyone who reliably participates in the central tasks of the organization is generally considered a “leader.”

Organizing groups strive to be democratic, and important decisions are usually voted on in large public meetings attended by many members. Usually, however, these meetings ratify decisions made by fairly small groups of active leaders. Many day-to-day decisions are, of necessity, made without much broader consultation. To ensure that leaders stay connected to their constituencies, leaders run house meetings and conduct one-on-one interviews with members. These strategies help them stay in touch with the interests and desires of the larger mass of less involved participants. In the ideal, leaders develop relationships with a wide range of members, seeking to draw them into more active participation in campaigns and actions.

Given the absence of pay, competition for leadership positions is generally less of a problem than the lack of sufficient leadership to get all the work done. As a result, the core task of an organizer is identifying and developing new leaders.

While people may sometimes move between leader and staff organizer roles, the roles themselves are usually kept separate. While there are examples of organizer/leaders (e.g., Cesar Chavez, discussed in Chapter 3) usually one cannot be both a leader and an organizer at the same time.

### ***Problems vs. Issues***

Another basic distinction in community organizing is between *problems* and *issues*. Problems are broad, vague challenges in the world. *World hunger* is a problem. *Bad schools*, collectively, are a “problem.” *Police harassment* is a problem. Problems are so enormous, ill defined, and overwhelming that just thinking about them can be disempowering. Nobody really knows how to deal with a problem. Instead of motivating people to act, thinking about problems can

make people want to go home, pull the covers over their heads, and take a nap. Thinking about problems usually just makes people feel hopeless.

To make life more manageable, community organizers “cut issues” out of problems. When you “cut” an issue, you carve a discrete, achievable goal out of an overwhelming crisis. Here are some examples of “issues” that community organizing groups have cut out of “problems” in the past:

<i>PROBLEM</i>	→	<i>ISSUE</i>
World hunger	→	Provide 3 million dollars from the county budget for a local food pantry.
Bad schools	→	Reduce class size to 16 in grades K – 3 in high-poverty schools.
Police harassment	→	Put automatic video cameras in squad cars to record traffic stops.

**What “Counts” as a Good Issue?**

In a Chapter 13, we discuss how to cut a good issue in more detail. At this point it seems helpful to emphasize just a few of the most critical criteria.

First, notice how specific each issue is in the table above. Whenever you cut an issue, you should know *exactly* what you are trying to achieve (even if you may eventually have to compromise). Otherwise, you leave decisions about what should be done in the hands of your opposition. If you make a general request for “more money” to the city for a food pantry, for example, they could give you \$1,000, or \$100. “We gave you ‘more’ money,” they might say, “What’s your problem?”

Second, you want your demand to be crystal clear to your constituency and other potential supporters. Instead of distributing 10-page documents filled with complex specifics, you want to communicate the key aspects of your demand in brief, simple language.

Similarly, third, you want your audience to immediately grasp the injustice of your issue. They need to feel it viscerally, in their “guts.” You want to show people what it is like, for example, to have 35 children in a classroom with one teacher, or what it is like for hungry families turned away from empty food pantries.

***Locating a Target***

A *target* is the person or, sometimes, group of persons that can make the change you want. You need to know who your target is, because you can only

begin to strategize about effective actions after you understand your target's goals and motivations.

As we noted in “The Parable of the River,” at the core of organizing is the conviction that inequality and injustice are not simply the product of anonymous forces in the world. Organizers believe that we are all responsible in one way or another for the fact that so many problems in the world around us have not been solved. Again, organizers are less concerned about who *caused* a problem than about who can legitimately be *made responsible* for it.

Health care is a good example of a social “problem” out of which a group could cut many different, specific “issues.” Each issue would likely have a different target, and figuring out what the target should be in each case will inevitably require extensive research.

If you wanted to get a new dental clinic in your neighborhood, for example, the “target” might be the dental school in the city, or the local health department, or even some part of city government. The right “target” would depend upon what your research discovered about the kinds of responsibilities these different institutions have generally taken on in the past, whether they have the actual resources to support a new clinic, and whether you can figure out how to put enough pressure on them to win. Choosing the right target from the beginning is critical, because you don't want to spend a whole lot of effort pressuring the dental school only to find out that it's the health department that really has the resources to create a dental clinic.

It's important to remember that institutions like dental schools or health departments are always made up of people. Within or at least connected to every institution is a person or group with the power to decide what it will do. Ultimately, therefore, targets are always *persons*.

Sometimes you find that you cannot locate a target that you can put sufficient pressure on to get what you want. In these cases, you need to find a different issue.

If you don't have a target, you can go out in the streets and wave signs or hold an angry rally to raise public awareness, but you can't “organize.”

No target = no organizing.

### ***Tactics***

In part because we are so uneducated (miseducated) about how power operates, when we get upset about something our first inclination—if we do

anything concrete at all—is usually to put together a “protest.” In the next chapter we discuss “activist” groups that “do” protests. Groups like these get together and plan out events where they wave signs on the street. Or they hold rallies where people speak passionately about the need for change—usually to other people who already agree with them. The media doesn’t usually bother to come to events like these.

Organizing groups don’t simply “act” for the sake of action. Instead, as the following story shows, they develop “tactics” or “actions” (we will mostly use these terms interchangeably) carefully designed to put pressure on their specific target.

#### **Putting Pressure on a Target**

A few years ago, a conservative talk show host on a local radio station referred to Latinos in our community as a bunch of “wetbacks” from across the border. Some outraged community groups responded by protesting in front of the station.

During this time, a community organizer came to talk to one of our classes. He belittled the protestors for their failure to think strategically.

“What does the radio station *really* care about?” he asked the class.

After some silence and different answers, like “audience numbers” and “reputation,” someone said “Money!”

“All of the issues you mentioned are important,” he said, “but the core issue is usually money. In the end, however, it’s an empirical question. A good organizer always explores a range of possible motivations for the actions of his opposition. But let’s assume money is the key for now.”

Then he asked, “Given their core motivation, how much do you think they will care if some people walk around with signs in front of their building?”

Students thought about it for a while, and then agreed that it probably wouldn’t make that much difference to the station. “Everyone already knows they are conservative,” one student pointed out. Another speculated that it might actually *increase* their audience.

“Okay,” the organizer said. “So let’s think about this differently. Do you know who the biggest advertiser on that radio station is?” No one knew. “Well, see, you would need to do some research instead of wandering around in front of the building yelling. I happen to know that it’s Durable Motors.” Many students nodded. Some had heard commercials from about this dealership.

“Okay, then. Let’s think about the station’s motivation instead of just running off to hold another protest. Now that you have this information, what kind of action would you suggest?”

One student came up with the idea of having groups go to the dealership every day to test-drive cars without buying them, tying up the dealership’s staff until the station agreed to pull its ads.

“Now you’re thinking like an organizer,” our visitor said. “If a radio station has to choose between a talk show host and a key financial supporter, who do you think is likely to win?”

As with “issues,” there are specific criteria in the organizing tradition for what counts as a good “tactic.” One basic criterion is that a tactic must be doable, something you can actually carry off. Other criteria, as in the story above, involve more strategic concerns about whether an “action” will really put significant pressure on a target. As with issues, however, the most important criteria for organizers are the ones related to *building the power of an organization*.

And as with issues, the power-building criteria for tactics can be somewhat counterintuitive. For example, actions that don’t require you to bring that many people together usually don’t build your power very effectively. Sometimes you can run an effective “action” simply by taking a few powerful people who are sympathetic to your position to a meeting with the target. But a tactic like this doesn’t excite or activate or engage your members. Nor does it provide opportunities for a wide range of leaders to learn more about organizing by actually doing organizing. It doesn’t give you a public space where you can educate your members or the larger public (through speeches at a mass event, for example). The media can’t report about how effective you are at mobilizing people and putting strategic pressure on targets—you didn’t *do any* mobilization.

In other words, drawing on a few powerful allies doesn’t enhance your capacity to win campaigns in the future. It may “win” the day, but it doesn’t build power. Experienced organizing groups, then, usually employ tactics that force them to use the range of people and resources they have at their disposal. In fact, community organizing groups sometimes even put together more expansive actions than they actually need to win.

### The Real Action Is in the Reaction

Being invincible depends on oneself, but the enemy becoming vulnerable depends on himself.

—Sun Tzu, *Art of War*

The less powerful rarely have the capacity to *force* the powerful to do anything. Community organizing groups are almost never “invincible” in Sun Tzu’s terms. All they can do is act and then see how the opposition responds. This is why Alinsky frequently emphasized that “the real action is in the enemy’s reaction.” If you are unlucky, the opposition will be smart in their reactions. They won’t overreact or do something stupid that you can take advantage of. As a result, organizers often seek out targets whose reactions they think they will be able to exploit.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, chose to organize marches against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, precisely *because* he knew that the chief of police, Bull Connor, and the city’s other leaders were virulently racist. He knew they would aggressively resist any efforts to contest segregation. If Connor had done nothing, if he had simply let the black citizens of Birmingham march where they wanted to march, maybe even handed out coffee and doughnuts, then the Birmingham administration might have contained the rebellion. In fact, something like this had happened earlier to King in Albany, Georgia, with the result that the civil rights forces largely failed to achieve their aims. Because Connor pulled out his water cannons and attack dogs, because people all across America saw vicious attacks on peacefully marching black children, the Birmingham campaign generated the horrified public response King wanted. The powerful in Birmingham *gave* power to King through their reactions to his tactics.

A good tactic, then, is based on a depth of knowledge about the opposition. Organizers and leaders need to understand what kind of people are in opposition, what their interests are, what they care about and despise, what kinds of constraints they work under, and more. This knowledge helps an organizing group understand what kinds of actions are likely to provoke a response. More generally, organizers seek to employ tactics that the opposition is not prepared for. In the example of the racist talk show host, above, the radio station knew how to deal with a picket—almost everyone knows how to deal with pickets these days. But it would likely have been thrown off guard by the disruption of one of its key sponsors.

Any tactic may suffice if it puts the opposition off guard. In fact, the truth is that most organizing actions really aren’t that creative. The key is that a tactic must target an opposition’s specific weaknesses; it must, in Sun Tzu’s words, “attack where they are not prepared,” by going “out where they do not expect.” Actions like these are the ones mostly likely to provoke reactions that can be exploited.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, the opposition actually tells you it is willing to do something stupid. For example, at one point during a farm worker strike led by Cesar Chavez in California, the local sheriff told the strikers he would arrest people who shouted “huelga!” or “strike!” to the workers in the fields. Of course,

the leadership of the farm worker's union immediately arranged for a large number of its supporters to shout "huelga!" in front of a large group of the media. Chavez had arranged to speak to student activists at the same time at the University of California, Berkeley, just after their successful fight for free speech on campus. The announcement of the arrests angered the students, who collected a large donation for the union. More broadly, the arrests put the growers on the defensive for their attack on basic constitutional rights. Later on, one of the growers made a similarly self-destructive move, having Chavez arrested for trespassing, after which he was shackled and strip-searched. Outraged farm workers streamed to the union after this insult.<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

1. On the limits of the "I Have a Dream" speech, see Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2001).
2. See this webpage for more information on foundations that do support organizing: <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/node/7>, accessed November 30, 2010.
3. Larry Cohen, Vivian Chávez and Sana Chehimi, *Prevention Is Primary: Strategies for Community Well-Being* (Washington, D.C.: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 5.
4. M. Huxley and O. Yiftachel, "New Paradigm or Old Myopia? Unsettling the Communicative Turn in Planning Theory," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 19, no. 4 (2000): 336.
5. Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1946).
6. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Huynh, *Sonshi.com* (2001), <http://www.sonshi.com/sun1.html> (accessed July 17, 2010).
7. Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).