

DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND

CHAPTER 11: NOTES FOR THE NEXT TIME

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Chapter 11

NOTES FOR THE NEXT TIME

There is no such thing as society.
British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher

I don't live in a desert. I live with other people.
Sarah Turner, *Buckeye Woodland Community Congress*

Activism did not die out after the period covered in this history. Significant campaigns have been launched, won, and lost since this.

The neighborhood based-activism that has continued since the mid-1980s, however, has been a pale shadow of its former self. Many attempts have been made to restore organizing to its previous glory. Many attempts are ongoing. None of these efforts has succeeded in seizing the public agenda and defining the debate on the future of the city and its neighborhoods as this period did.

Periods of activism cannot be willed into being. The most skilled organizers cannot change the direction of the winds of history. Even the founder of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, suffered through the doldrums of the early Cold War and the McCarthy era. It was not until the civil rights movement cracked the complacency and conformity of the Eisenhower era that space opened for his efforts to come to life. Alinsky's greatest days coincided with two of the most far-reaching eras of social change in American history, the 1930s and 1960s. The community organizing movement in Cleveland was no less dependent on the winds of American history. The movement could not have happened without the ferment and accomplishments of the social movements of the preceding decade.

The impact of the Reagan era's reaction cannot be underestimated. The entire focus of national life shifted from public to private. The primary goal of society was to get out of the way of the new American hero, the heroic entrepreneur.

Organizing today faces a much different world than it did in the early 1970s. The privatization of public services has provided public officials with a means to insulate themselves from blame when something goes wrong. The social safety net has been privatized through the use of nonprofit organizations. In many cases, this has propelled the society back to the pre-New Deal days when charity, not government programs, took care of society's forgotten. Meanwhile, the hyper-commercialization of American life has resulted in a society that looks less like a society and more like a continental theme park. Many corporations today make the average nation-state look like a third-rate fast food franchise. Where formerly it was possible to confront a bank or corporate leader who had a face and who lived in the community, that leader now may live in Atlanta, New York, London, or Singapore. In many cases, a community group would not be able to go to a hit in a van. They would have to obtain passports and airline tickets. If they found a CEO's house, it would be in a private gated community with armed security guaranteeing the CEO's privacy and peace.

The movement in Cleveland benefited from the persons it attracted. Organizers such as Tom Gannon, Karen Nielson, Joe Mariano and others, did not just come out of a training academy and become organizers as one would graduate from law school and pass the bar. Organizing, as Joe Garcia stated, was an art. It benefited from a cultural revolution that legitimized a lifelong commitment to social change. It takes such an alternative cultural refuge to sustain people in a society dominated by commercial values. As Harry Fagan commented, it has to be more than just a question of going into organizing or retailing. There has to be a passion that can come only from cultural movements working in tandem with powerful social movements.

We must be keenly aware of the cultural obstacles facing any project to revive organizing. The recent past and present have not been friendly toward creation of democratic cultures and movements. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant culture returned to the American maxim that the business of America is business. This school of capitalism was dealt a blow by the dotcom bubble bursting and Wall Street scandals but it remains powerful in our society. Now an even more toxic environment has emerged from the smoke and ashes of the World Trade Center. The city on the hill has become a bunker.

We need to consider the peculiar cultural constraints to activism and democracy in Cleveland. Cleveland's population is composed of both international and domestic refugees who have fled fascism, communism, Jim Crow segregation, neo-colonialism in all its varieties, the "perfect dictatorship" of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, company towns, King Coal in Appalachia, and the autocracies of the Middle East. If we define democracy as the right to be left alone and the right to shop, these immigrants have found democracy in Cleveland. If we define democracy as participation in power, then their situation in Cleveland has only marginally improved.

The average Clevelander is born, lives out his or her life, and dies without

experiencing one moment when his or her opinions or desires matter. Families, schools, and places of employment operate as miniature dictatorships. Voting is as foreign to most Clevelanders as books are to an illiterate household. Those who vote experience a brief, superficial contact with democracy. If they vote in every election, they will have experienced perhaps ninety minutes of democracy over their lifespan. The political culture of Cleveland is of little help to them because it is composed of ever-shifting proportions of paternalism, authoritarianism, and populism.

The organizing movement of the 1970s and 80s revolutionized how many individuals saw their lives and how they wanted to live their lives. Future movements must change the way entire communities look upon their collective lives and how they want to live in the future.

A renewed community organizing movement in Cleveland faces other issues beside its cultural milieu. Are the old Alinsky nostrums appropriate for the future? There are the issues of community organizing and politics, and the financing of community organizing, that need to be addressed.

Fundamentally we need to open up the entire field to experimentation and change. This process would revisit such questions as: What is community? What, if anything, do neighborhoods represent today? What is the relationship between neighborhoods and a downtown that is little more than an office/entertainment complex for suburbanites? What are the implications of the suburbanization of inner city neighborhoods with the arrival of McMansions, Big Box stores, and strip malls? Is an organizing philosophy developed in the ethnic neighborhoods of Depression-era Chicago still relevant? What is the purpose of organizing? To provide a cheering section for development projects, or something much deeper? Insurgencies and movements for change do not come from reading the manuals of the past. They arise when those manuals are read and discarded so that the activists and organizers of the future can write their own.

One flaw in the ideology of community organizing is the centrality of self-interest as a prime motivator for popular mobilizations. Self-interest organizing is attractive because it carries with it the aura of hardheaded pragmatism, a willingness to look at the world as it is and to act accordingly. This is a tonic for the disappointed idealist. Self-interest organizing also dovetails nicely into the rationale for capitalism. The way forward to a good society is for everyone to look out for number one.

The problem with self-interest organizing is that it is like the old tale of the blind men describing an elephant. It only describes part of what motivates individuals or communities to make the leap into activism.

Self-interest organizing has a long history of missed predictions. Prior to World War I, leaders of labor and socialist movements confidently predicted that the working classes of the industrial world would not go to war for the profits of their bosses. It was not in their self-interest. These leaders watched in horror as their working classes marched to the recruiting stations singing patriotic anthems as they went, and then slaughtered their fellow proletarians on the western front. The classic left

never recovered from that shock.

The ideology of self-interest cannot explain a poor, unemployed factory worker who votes Republican because he is afraid of terrorists and doesn't want gays to marry. The ideology of self-interest has nothing to say about the importance of religious faith in the households of many Americans. The ideology of self-interest cannot explain the affluent leftist, or the dirt poor devotee of free-market dogma. The ideology of self-interest denies the importance of the varied and contradictory impulses that motivate our strange species. It is time to call into question the centrality of self-interest to community organizing theory. If self-interest is to have a future in that theory, it will have to be demoted to just one of many factors that motivate Americans to organize.

One motivation to organize is politics. We live in a world where one is either a participant in politics or the victim of those who do participate. Abstention is not a reasonable alternative for future efforts of community organizations. They cannot be credible in their declared mission of empowering the powerless while maintaining political chastity. This was the great tragedy of the Kucinich disaster, where natural allies failed to coalesce in a viable political coalition. Kucinich could have provided that political arm needed by the community organizations. It was not to be, but that does not mean that the issue is off the table.

The problems of involvement are obvious, but the consequences of participation are not nearly as severe as the consequences of not participating. Community organizations who abstain are the hostages of the prevailing political status quo.

How this could be implemented is only limited by the imagination. Community organizations could form political action committees. They would not need to join, but their leaders, staff, and rank and file could. They could found their own local party without depending on the political charity of the dominant parties. The very act of taking a political stance could aid in a process of self-definition. It would force organizations to ask tough questions: Who do we represent? What are we about? Who are our friends? Who are our foes? What is lacking in not the ability. It is imagination.

The next challenge is the linchpin, the challenge of funding community organizing. In Cleveland during the 1970s and 1980s, organizing was funded by foundation grants or by government programs such as VISTA. This was the Achilles' heel of the movement.

A constant question that hounds non-profit organizations is their degree of independence and, thus, their legitimacy in the face of outside funding. The much-heralded Third Sector may only be a colony of the powerful in the private and public sectors who use nonprofit organizations to hide or legitimize their agendas before the public.

Compounding this problem is the very nature of Alinsky-style organizing. It is expensive. Alinsky developed his ideas for organizing through involvement in the organizing of packing house workers in Chicago. They were funded through the

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and member dues. Who funds professional organizers for communities? In Chicago it was the Catholic Church, followed by philanthropists such as Marshall Fields, the heir to the department store fortune. This reliance on the church and philanthropists established a dependency on outside sources of funding. It is the fatal flaw in the idea of community organizing as it has developed since the 1930s.

A number of paths may solve or minimize this dilemma. The first is to rethink the entire architecture of organizing by developing forms that do not rely on expensive organizers running professional organizations.

The second solution is diversifying of funding sources to a mix of dues, internal fundraising projects, and foundation grants. The goal is to protect the organizations from having to turn off the lights and close up the office the moment one source of funding ends.

The third solution would be internal fundraising from dues. Community organizations could become true unions of community residents. Many balk at dues, saying communities would never support it. If this is true, it calls into question whether there is even a purpose to the groups, a purpose deemed important enough for the constituency to pay the price of having a community union.

A fourth alternative is for community organizations to seek a relationship with institutions that do have internal fundraising abilities. An alternative might be a relationship with the labor movement. Some veterans of the nonprofit world have even proposed that nonprofits form for-profit subsidiaries that could help fund the parent group. Again, the only resource in short supply is imagination.

Activism is the pulse of democracy. The future of community organizing is linked to the future of democracy. Since the founding of the republic, there has been an ebb and flow of democratic progress, a ceaseless, at times quiet and at times explosive, civil war between a democracy of wealth and a democracy of the people. Organizers must be willing to take the struggle for democracy into new venues without being trapped by the recipes, rhetoric, and strategies of the past. Social change, justice, and democracy have never had the upper hand, are seldom "practical" and are never where the smart money is bet. It is a hard road to travel, but we cannot forsake the dream of a democratic, just Cleveland. Community organizing's story in Cleveland is both history and prophecy, and the legacy of the movement of the 1970s continues to live on in Cleveland's people and their communities.