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# Community Organizing in the 80s: Toward a Post-Alinsky Agenda

by John McKnight and John Kretzmann

The legacy of community-organizing giant Saul Alinsky has been central to the continuing emergence of a diverse "neighborhood movement" during the last two decades. While skilled and inventive organizers have seldom regarded Alinsky's approaches as divinely inspired, many have continued to work in communities as if the master's most basic assumptions about the nature of neighborhoods and the logic of organizing strategies were more or less immutable.

Reflecting on the actual experience of activist neighborhood organizations in recent years, we want to suggest, first, that the structure of poor and working-class urban neighborhoods has changed since Alinsky first began organizing in Chicago's Back of the Yards nearly 50 years ago; and, second, that given these changes in neighborhoods, a number of the classic Alinsky strategies and tactics are in need of critical revision (which, of course, many good organizers already know).

For Alinsky and his disciples, the

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city was reducible to two basic units: neighborhood and the "enemy" outside the neighborhood. Poor and working-class neighborhoods continually suffered because external decision-makers controlled the internal distribution of services and goods. Fore-shadowing more recent analyses of neighborhoods as units of "collective consumption," Alinsky's approach essentially argued for the building of the first modern consumer organizations—in this case, defined by geography.

Two further assumptions about the nature of neighborhoods and their "enemies" or "targets" shaped the basic Alinsky strategy. First, the neighborhood contained within it a number of vital organizations, even though it was not "organized" to act as a unit. Four basic cornerstones of association were particularly important—churches, ethnic groupings, political organizations, and labor. The organizer's task was to forge a coalition of leaders from these groups. Preexisting constituencies would then follow as the "organization of organizations" model took shape. Because of this existing pattern, organizers could concentrate on pulling together their leaders, a very small percentage of the neighborhood's residents, and could plausibly claim representative community status for their new group.

The second set of assumptions behind Alinsky's strategy concerned the enemy, or target, and focused on three interrelated characteristics. A target, the strategically defined embodiment of the causes of a neighborhood problem, was thought to be: (a) *visible*, and therefore concretely definable; (b) *local*, and therefore accessible; and (c) *capable*, and therefore possessed of the resources and authority to correct the problem.

In summary, then, the basic Alinsky approach emphasized organizing in the consumer mode by assembling preexisting organizations into a kind of dense pack and propelling this aggregate toward a visible local decision-making structure to force it to do what the neighborhood wanted. For many years, this model of Alinsky-type organizing both reflected accurately the nature of city neighborhoods and, more importantly, got results.

Today, however, conditions have changed dramatically in most working-class and poor urban neighborhoods, where the rates of active participation of residents in at least three of the four organizational building blocks seem to have declined. As Walter Dean Burnham and others have pointed out, local identification with and participation in political parties is diminishing. The shrinkage of the older industrial labor unions, combined with the general cen-



tralization and professionalization of their operations, has blunted their local influence. In many cities, the dispersion of second- and third-generation ethnics from their neighborhoods of origin has significantly loosened the bonds of ethnic solidarity. In this context, the fact that a number of organizing networks depend increasingly on the local churches for their base becomes totally understandable.

Further explanations for this decline in organized local participation abound. Higher job and residency mobility rates are often the result of the growing marginalization of the secondary labor market upon which so many of these neighborhoods depend. Local housing markets continue to be manipulated by real-estate interests. Difficulties in the family economy have dramatically affected the number of women in the labor force. Perhaps most significantly, the long-term trend toward the separation of workplace from residence has continued unchecked. (In this connection, it is important to recall that Alinsky's initial conceptions of community organizing reflected a direct attempt to translate his labor-organizing experience with the CIO into a context defined by residency. Today, it is increasingly difficult for the workplace to "teach" the home.)

If neighborhoods themselves have changed significantly, so too have the "targets" of community organizations. Simply put, it has become nearly impossible to identify targets that are visible, local, and capable.

First, targets are not visible and tangible in poor and working-class neighborhoods because they are no longer there. On the entire West Side of Chicago, as well as in old Alinsky-organized neighborhoods like Woodlawn, almost no banking institutions remain—nor do many plants, factories, or retailing or wholesaling operations. (This is, of course, what is meant by disinvestment.)

Second, in those neighborhoods where major economic institutions do remain visible, they are clearly not local. Instead, they are local expressions of large corporations. Accelerating centralization and consolidation of control across economic sec-

tors have left local managers marginal pawns in the high-stakes games run from headquarters in a few rebuilt downtowns. Effects of economic decisions on neighborhoods themselves are not even a part of the headquarters calculations. It is in this light that neighborhood conditions are understood as "residual" rather than direct results of capital movement and investment policies. By now, it is clear that neighborhoods as well as entire municipalities are attaining this dubious residual status. As one midwest banker put it, "I can't do a thing locally. Now we're just a branch city."

Third, those institutions that remain both visible and local in poor and working-class neighborhoods are precisely those publicly funded service agencies that are least capable of producing

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results no matter how hard a community organization confronts them. More and more organizers have come to recognize that neighborhood security, for example, is no longer a function of the numbers of police present. Others have seen that large school bureaucracies are often ineffective in improving education no matter what their intentions.

Therefore, today's community organizers cannot assume that either their assumptions about local structures or the tactics handed down from earlier generations are appropriate to the kinds of neighborhoods in which they work today. What is needed is a heightened commitment to exploration and invention at the neighborhood level—experiments that adapt the classic Alinsky model to drastically changed conditions.

What might these experiments look like? To this question we can offer some tentative responses—new directions based primarily on conversations with organizers themselves, and coming out of their own probes and experiments in neighborhoods.

In the kinds of neighborhoods we are concerned about, it becomes less and less likely that strategies stressing either the consolidation of existing associations or the confrontation of an outside enemy make much sense. Socially atomized and increasingly cut off from centralized, unresponsive mainstream economic institutions, these neighborhoods and their residents present a new challenge to organizers.

It seems clear that new strategies must stress an organizing process that enhances and builds community, and that focuses on developing a neighborhood's own capacities to do for itself what outsiders will or can no longer do. Taking neighborhoods seriously in their current condition means building social, political, and economic structures at the local level that re-create a space for these people to act and decide.

This shift involves, first of all, a reconceptualization of neighborhood as a locus for production as well as consumption. Organizations originally oriented to the goal of equalizing consumption patterns between and within neighborhoods are increasingly turning toward an agenda that centers on building internal neighborhood productive capacities. With this shift comes a parallel reorientation of strategy—from organizing confrontation over service distribution issues to organizing confrontation over production and the resources necessary to produce.

Experimenting with this new agenda for community building has focused some organizers on three different centers of activity—the local neighborhood, the public sector, and the private sector.

First, within the neighborhood itself, taking production and community building seriously involves:

1. Continuing to push the good work in commercial, industrial, and housing development already begun by large numbers of local development corpora-



tions in the last decade.

2. Expanding greatly the number of cooperative, neighborhood-owned, worker-owned, and joint-venture enterprises for the production of both exportable and locally useful goods. As technologies develop and economies of scale reach and surpass their limits, food and energy production, waste management, and other enterprises dealing with the basics of life may in fact be more usefully efficient and economically pursued at the local level.
3. Similarly, community-based and -owned enterprises in the still expanding services and communications areas need further exploration. Neither service contracts nor the implements of the "wired community," replete with cable TV and interactive microcomputers, need be owned and controlled by outsiders.

Second, an agenda centered on building local productive capacities requires new relationships with public-sector bodies so that both resources and real authority are transferred to the neighborhood. Such an approach involves:

1. Taking a thorough look at the public dollars already being spent in the neighborhood and devising strategies aimed at shifting their uses away from traditional transfer and maintenance functions toward investment approaches.
2. Developing strategies designed to direct public resources to neighborhood development groups. For instance, organizations might work toward a version of a "neighborhood check-off" program, in which the city is persuaded to return a small percentage of a neighborhood's taxes to the local neighborhood organization. Each household would be entitled to a "chit," which could be expended with the neighborhood organization of its choice.
3. A variety of neighborhood-based forms of governance car-

rying significant local authority. Such bodies are emerging in a variety of shapes in a number of cities. Admittedly, the task of tailoring their jurisdiction to the particular needs of a neighborhood remains a tricky one. But without increased local authority, neighborhood strategies will be forced to remain primarily reactive.

Third, and most difficult, any serious approach to community building *must* devise ways to reroot business, to insert locality into the equations by which businesses make decisions. This is a national, even international, policy agenda, calling for a coalition politics that we have not seen in the last 15 years. However, without the successful pursuit of such an agenda, any movement toward building local productive capacities will remain peripheral to the ever increasing mobil-

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ity of both producers and capital. The directions in which this agenda might move are already emerging from a variety of networks across the country, and might be seen as embracing two connected strategies:

1. Organizations might agree upon the basic outlines of a "Corporate Accountability Act" that provided a variety of incentives and penalties related to the needs of communities for jobs and location commitments as well as local representation on boards or regulatory bodies. Such an act would incorporate the most universal elements of current and pending plant-closing legislation, and could model itself on the organizational groundwork laid by the Community Reinvestment Act campaign.

2. Concurrently, organizations might agree to pursue something like a "Community Banking Act," designed to define the obligations of financial institutions for local credit allocation. It has become dismayingly clear that the local availability of low-interest, long-term money from local savings institutions and other sources has all but dried up in most neighborhoods, and that local borrowers now compete directly with the United States government, United States Steel, and the government of Brazil for investment capital. Reestablishing the very existence of a local credit market is essential for the community-building agenda.

Taken together, these initial suggestions define the emerging shape of a post-Alinsky agenda for urban neighborhoods. They argue for an organizing approach aimed at building community through the restoration of localized political economies.

To join politics and economics at the neighborhood level is to do both an old and a new thing. Analyzing "political economy," after all, was what both Adam Smith and Karl Marx thought they were about. But reigning orthodoxies have succeeded in segregating economics from politics in both theory and practice. In our neighborhoods we have often practiced politics as if economics didn't exist, and economics as if politics didn't matter. The practice of either is diminished by the absence of its counterpart. Even wise and committed neighborhood commentators tell us about "neighborhood government" or "neighborhood economy," perpetuating the compartmentalization.

But effective organizers are learning quickly that restoring the practice of an economics in which place matters, and in which production builds rather than destroys community, involves a major political challenge. We can only imagine that if Alinsky himself were still around to growl his advice at us, he would admonish us to take up that challenge while we still have neighborhoods left to build. ■