

# **Community organization USA:**

## **the view from the movement**

**by Mike Miller**

Beneath the signs of political, economic and social conservatism in America there is a growing movement that contradicts these trends. Inspired by the late Saul Alinsky, and carried on by those who work in the 'Alinsky tradition', this movement offers a serious and growing alternative to the *status quo*. Today there are thousands of community organizations and hundreds of community organizers involved in this movement. However, the nature of the community organization movement is little understood because of its *ad hoc*, local, and pragmatic character. Further, the movement has not been organized nationally, and there has been little elaboration of its values and goals. These factors have been a source of criticism of the movement from left, right and centre.

Critics from the left charge that the movement is 'without ideology'. The sharpest criticism is that it is 'reformist' and misleads people. Friendlier critics claim the movement is so pragmatic that it lacks a broader analysis of what is wrong with American society. These critics argue that the community organization movement is a transitional force that will lead to a new political party or that will give way to more 'radical' organizations.

Critics from the centre are disturbed by the movement because of its reluctance to join traditional labour-liberal-minority coalitions. They are also uneasy about the movement's emphasis on popular participation and confrontation tactics. They charge the movement with being too power oriented and not sufficiently programme oriented. The critics from the centre would like the movement to use its power to support and improve the welfare state. The critics from the left say its power should promote economic democracy and socialism. The movement has been silent on these issues.

Critics from the right are increasingly rivalled by the movement for the same angry taxpayer constituency that feels the pinch of inflation, economic decline, and moral malaise. These critics focus their anger on government, as does the community organization movement; however, the movement disagrees with conservatives who would turn everything back to the 'private sector'. In fact, the community organizations direct their anger, in part, at government precisely because of its failure to protect people from some of the rapacious practices of big business.

Whether from left, right, or centre, the critics have been confounded by the amorphous and pragmatic character of the community organizations. This has been to the advantage of the movement. Its successes are partly attributable to a refusal to be trapped in debate that could alienate it from the people it seeks to organize — the vast majority of Americans. A price, however, is paid for this lack of clarity and perspective. Within the movement there is frequently no purpose that goes beyond the narrow and immediate self-interest of people in particular community organizations and that gives deeper meaning to their efforts. Organizers lose touch with the deeper vision of a democratic society that motivates most of them.

As a community organizer for the past twenty years, I believe that there are some underlying goals and values of the community organization movement that invest it with more substance and vigour than critics claim. The purpose of this essay is to identify some of the underlying values, concerns, goals and methods which guide the community organizations and the community organizers in this growing force in American public life.

## **I Some basic values of community organization**

The roots of the community organization movement run deep in American history and democratic philosophy. The notions of individual dignity and rights, of liberty, equality, justice and community, and of the capacity of people to govern themselves are central.

On the question of liberty, community organizers are committed to a free and open society. Community organizations are rich with debate and they include people from all walks of life and diverse political beliefs. Their internal democracy reflects and strengthens their external commitment.

Community organizations and their organizers value diversity; they frequently support home ownership and small business enterprise; they seek to strengthen the family, the church, the union and other voluntary associations of people. They infuse in these commitments a vision of society that better approximates democratic values than today's America.

On the question of equality, community organizers face one of their most difficult challenges. The stigmas of poverty, sex, age, race and class run deep in the consciousness of Americans. Organizers seek to overcome the sense of personal and community inferiority that flows from these stigmas. To participate fully requires a belief that one has a right to participate. Participatory democratic organization overcomes the feeling of inferiority about oneself. Organizers seek to develop a sense of self-confidence and the skills of civic competence.

Organizers seek to overcome prejudicial stereotypes and the practice of one group blaming another for its problems. A constant goal of community organization is to find ways for the poor and the middle-class, whites and minorities, the young and the old, men and women, to work together and thereby diminish the sharp consciousness of race, age, sex and income that divides the vast majority

of the American people. These divisions among the majority must be overcome if that majority is to focus on the present concentration of wealth, income, and power in the hands of those who run corporate America and whose interests dominate the decisions of our government; these divisions must be overcome if politicians and bureaucrats are to be held accountable to the interests of the vast majority of the people.

Community organizers believe in more than equality of opportunity. They believe in equality of circumstance as well. They oppose the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of corporate or government elites. They do not think that one million dollar salaries are necessary to motivate the management of economic enterprises. Further, they think that these inequalities undermine liberty because they make meaningless the idea of 'one man-one vote', and the more basic idea of an equality of political power in the citizenry of a self-governing society.

It is on the question of community that the movement makes its greatest contribution. It is deeply committed to strengthening and creating a sense of community — that is, of the face-to-face relations among people seeking to solve mutual problems through mutual effort, support and, yes, love. In this sense the movement fuses the toughness of organization with the vision of community; while it does not articulate a vision of 'the beloved community' in the same way as the civil rights movement in the Deep South did, its best elements struggle with how to build and sustain community in a world that is threatened by the values of the marketplace. Organizers build on such traditions as self-reliance, self-help and voluntary mutual aid. They respect the richness of cultural and religious traditions. They find support for their work in the teachings of Judeo-Christian tradition and in the proclamations of contemporary religious bodies. They challenge Americans to face the conflict between a world of consumerism and one of participation.

Many of these values are summed up in the ideas of democracy and self-government. Self-government requires that people have opportunities to participate in determining laws or rules that govern them. The freedoms of speech, assembly, petition and the press are central to self-government. Minority rights are as important as majority rule. The wide dispersal of power among many people is necessary to ensure the protection of self-government. The concentration of wealth in the hands of the few contradicts the fundamental values of a democratic society.

## II What's wrong in America?

At the core of the political beliefs of community organizers is a sense of anger about injustice and the distribution of power in America. Power is not viewed as an abstract concept. It is the ability to make decisions about such things as rents, health care, jobs, taxes, investment, wages, working conditions, education, housing, public services, freeways and urban renewal, welfare, discrimination, and so on through the decisions that affect the daily lives of the people. Self-government without the power to address such issues is a contradiction.

Community organizers believe that people do not have power to determine their destinies because of the excessive concentration of power in giant corporations and government bureaucracy. A major consequence of this situation is that decisions are often made by these institutions that are not in the interests of low to middle income people. Examples are numerous: red-lining, industrial plant run-aways, urban renewal and freeway bulldozers that destroy neighbourhoods, regulation that benefits big business rather than consumers, taxes that create massive exemptions for those who can most afford to pay them. The list is well known.

As a result of this concentration of power, people no longer believe that their activity can make a difference. They do not participate as citizens in a common community. Even the minimal act of citizenship — voting — is participated in by less than half those eligible by age to register and vote. The people's powerlessness in the face of distant and unaccountable power is increasingly realized. Scepticism and cynicism greet appeals to patriotic values or sacrifice. The experience of the people is that such appeals are usually the mask for either profit or political careerism. Faced with this kind of body politic, most people pursue private interests — and this pursuit is reinforced by the consumer message to Americans that says the sign of your worth as a human being is determined by how and what you consume.

### III What is to be done?

Community organizers believe that to achieve democracy and self-government the majority must organize. They must organize because their power is the only force that can check and reverse the abuses of big business and government. They must organize because through their direct participation in civic life they can shape their own destinies and realize their full human potential. This kind of participation is necessary if we are to have genuine communities — groups of people who struggle together to live a fuller and more rewarding life.

If a small elite has most of the wealth and power, how can the greater majority be organized? One approach is based on the involvement and renewal of the major voluntary membership associations of low to middle income people, particularly their churches and unions. These organizations are themselves adrift and feeling powerless. Yet they remain an important source of resistance to the concentration of power. Their rootedness in 'their people' makes them respond to problems as experienced by their members and constituents. They are historically the bearers of such values as solidarity, love, justice, truth and dignity. The involvement of these mediating institutions in the whole range of issues and problems faced by their members is one of the tasks now being addressed by the community organizers.

Others have taken a different approach. Recognizing the profound alienation that exists even from these institutions that have held the allegiance of low and moderate income people, these organizers have begun the creation of new popular forms of participation. Typically they obtain initial support from local institutional

leaders. They then go door-knocking seeking to involve people in 'grassroots' organizations. Experience among organizers indicates that 25% to 50% of neighbourhood residents respond positively to an organizer's appeal to get involved, if the appeal makes sense and the organizer is presentable. What many call 'apathy' is simply the recognition on the part of people that they lack an effective vehicle to change things. Given a believable proposition to the contrary, many people become participants.

Community organizers believe that neither participation nor unity among the majority will come about purely as a result of rational analysis or appeals to basic values. These goals will be accomplished through the integration of these ideas with people's immediate experience. The application of this principle in the community organizing tradition is simple yet profound. The economic and social problems of people must be translated into specific proposals for solutions. Such proposals must be believable if people are to participate in an effort to secure their adoption. They must deal with problems that are immediate in people's daily lives. There must be clear action that can be taken to obtain implementation of the proposals. Alinsky's dictum was: 'immediate, specific and winnable'.

Following this principle, community organizers encourage local leaders to begin by selecting a problem whose solution could be realized with a relatively small effort on the part of a relatively small number of people. Such initial experiences of winning are necessary if the belief of powerlessness is to be overcome. Through initial victories isolation can be broken down, personhood and dignity established, a sense of community can develop, citizenship skills can be learned, and self-confidence in one's capacity to make decisions may grow. The very essence of community organizing is this process of developing people so that they can act effectively on matters of concern to them, their families, and their neighbours. This process is both therapeutic and educational. It breaks down isolation and the sense of powerlessness; it teaches people how to act in their own interests in a complex society.

Community organizing must also be understood in another and perhaps more typical sense of the word 'political'. Community organizations, when successful, act as major new forces in the cities in which they operate. Operating outside the political parties, this new force is consciously seeking to empower the majority of the people through the development of autonomous organizations controlled by the people themselves. The movement has already made forays in regional, statewide and national arenas of power. It offers the potential of becoming a new force in national as well as local politics. It can, if successful, force the political parties to respond to issues and problems with more than platform rhetoric. It can generate new programmes to meet the needs of the majority. It has in some local settings shown a capacity to generate candidates for public office as well as programmes for politicians to address. It can begin to provide a countervailing power to the power of big business. It can ally with labour and other 'progressive' forces who now are responding to crises rather than taking initiatives to resolve them.

A great debate is underway in this movement as to the proper form of organi-

zation, the balance between neighbourhood and larger issues, the relative importance to be assigned to existing popular institutions versus the creation of new instruments for popular expression, and if and/or when to participate in the electoral arena. Wherever they might disagree on these questions, there are some shared assumptions among most of the community organizers. They are building multi-issue organizations; these organizations are democratically organized so that the members run them; they seek to develop ongoing massive participation from the people in whose name they act. They do not shy away from conflict and confrontation; they seek to become financially self-supporting through a combination of dues and membership based fundraising activities.

For whatever the 'school' involved in organizing, it is the immediate problems of people in their communities that are the focus for the development of organizations. This is not because the organizers are unconcerned about the bigger picture or unaware of the national sources of local problems. It is because their experience has taught them that the initial participation of the uninvolved rarely comes about in response to broad national problems and issues whose resolution is off in a distant future. The development of initial organization structure, mass participation and leadership requires local victories in the relatively short term.

The community organizers are the agents who bring community organizations into being. But the agency of change is the organized people whose lives are not within their control precisely because of the way in which the country is now organized. The role of the organizer is indeed that of an outside agitator; like the agitator in the old washing machine, he wants to get the dirt out. What the organizer does can be summed up as listening to the people, stirring the people to act, and thinking through with the people how to build the power to enable them to act effectively and in a manner consistent with democratic values. The kind of society organizers wish to create cannot be separated from the way in which they behave. A democratic society cannot come about without a people capable of self-government. The skills and confidence for self-government must be developed within the people's organizations. Therefore the tendency towards bureaucracy and oligarchy within mass organizations of low to middle income people must be countered.

Community organizers have developed a number of techniques to address the problems of oligarchy and bureaucracy, such as making a sharp distinction between their roles as organizing staff and the elected leadership, the development of ongoing leadership training, the emphasis on team or collective leadership, and the principle of rotation of professional organizing staff within a three to five year period. Above all, organizers see themselves as trainers, teachers, facilitators, servants, and strategists for people who retain the ultimate source of power.

#### **IV The community organization movement's platform**

While the community organization movement does not have a formal national

platform, though some of its particular organizations now do, it is guided by a number of values and concerns that have already been identified. In some communities, it has included efforts to develop public ownership and control of the means of production: either feasibility studies or direct acquisition of utilities. Yet, it has also included defence of the private market and entrepreneurial capitalism: in most anti-urban renewal and freeway fights, the defence of small and medium size business is one of the central themes of a community organization's platform. Similarly, the fight against red-lining is frequently a fight to maintain local family or small business firms that are threatened by big business. The movement's 'platform' has included support for and extension of programmes of the welfare state: child care, government-sponsored cooperative housing, job training with real work at the end of the training. It has supported programmes for tax reform based on the principles of relief according to need and taxes based on the ability to pay.

If the movement lacks an overall statement of what ought to be done to create the good society, it is because this movement is not going to adopt a programme or platform unrelated to its ability to struggle meaningfully for it or beyond its membership's understanding of what such a programme or platform means or might mean. It is because this movement is so committed to democratic values that its organizers are not going to impose their own versions of the good society on the emerging mass organizations which must define such a society if it is genuinely to express the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the American people and if it is to begin to create a society of citizens who join together in governing themselves. We are now at a stage in which these mass organizations are only being created.

The community organization movement is a uniquely American phenomenon. It is built upon our democratic values. It is, in the view of many of its participants and practitioners, the major hope for the building of democracy in our country. It comes directly to grips with the two central problems of our time: economic and social inequality on the one hand, and the alienation of the people from civic and community life on the other. It is growing both numerically and in self-confidence. If it continues and avoids some of the mistakes of the past, it offers the promise of becoming a major new force in American public life. The likelihood of this happening is increased by America's continuing economic and spiritual crisis and by the growing competence of the organizers and organizations that are now part of this movement.

Those of us who are in the movement imagine ourselves to be in the great tradition of American democracy. Our hopes and dreams are based on our confidence in the people as a whole to govern themselves. We have seen nothing in past or present experiences to persuade us that any other approach will bring us closer to liberty, equality and community.

*'Organize' Training Center, 1208 Market Street, San Francisco, USA*

Cet article discute certains des buts et des intérêts du mouvement communautaire aux Etats-Unis. Démocratie et autonomie sont les pierres angulaires de son idéologie de même d'ailleurs qu'un certain ressentiment au niveau de la justice et de la répartition du pouvoir à l'intérieur du pays. Diverses approches au problème de l'organisation sont analysées.

Dieser Artikel behandelt einige der grundlegenden Ziele und Wertkriterien der Gemeinschaftsorganisationsbewegung in den USA. Im Mittelpunkt des Denkens stehen die Konzepte der Demokratie und Selbstverwaltung, sowie der Ärger über die Ungerechtigkeit und die Machtverteilung im Land. Verschiedene Möglichkeiten zur Lösung des Organisationsproblems werden besprochen.

Esta ponencia examina algunos de los valores y metas básicas del movimiento de organización de la comunidad en los Estados Unidos. Los conceptos de democracia y autogobierno son céntricos en su pensamiento, como también un sentimiento de cólera respecto a la injusticia y la distribución del poder en el país. Se examinan diversos enfoques del problema de la organización.



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