# Community Organizing and the Next Stage of Democracy

Posted: 05/04/2015 2:31 pm EDT Updated: 05/04/2015 2:59 pm EDT

[**Harry Boyte**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harry-boyte/)**, Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy, Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College**

Mike Miller, long time organizer and intellectual leader in community organizing, and Aaron Schultz, a theorist of the field who also is a practitioner, have edited a collection entitled People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky (Vanderbilt University Press). Like the recent death of Ed Chambers, director of the Industrial Areas Foundation community organizing network which Alinsky founded, the book prompts reflection on the strengths and limits of community organizing and also on "what comes next?"

The book describes Alinsky's methods and those of associates who adopted and modified his approach, including Fred Ross, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta in the United Farm Workers, Chambers, Nicholas Von Hoffman, Dick Harmon, Ernie Cortes, and Johnny Ray Youngblood in IAF, Wade Rathke of ACORN, and Heather Booth of the Midwest Academy, among others.

"When people are organized, they move to the central decision-making table...on the basis of power," Alinsky said in a 1969 interview. "[They] say, 'We are people and damn it you are going to listen to us." This idea comes through all the variations. As Miller and Schutz put it, "Community organizing brings powerless and relatively powerless people together in solidarity to defend and advance their interests and values" (p. 2).

Through community organizing millions of people in the US and other countries have developed hope and power. I greatly appreciate this collection and its wisdom. At the same time, People's Power highlights how much we need to open up for work, debate, discussion, exploration new approaches and strategies for democratizing change in institutional and professional life.

Education, government, businesses, health, the media and cultural institutions like museums, historical societies, orchestras, dance and theater groups and associated professions need to be re-imagined as human creations which can be re-created in democratic terms. This means a shift from seeing them simply as "targets," in the language of organizers. But it is easier said than done.

Miller, in his introductory piece, contrasts community organizing with "elite democracy," based on elections, and "strong democracy," based on participatory governance mechanisms like advisory groups. Community organizing, he says, is part of "'civil society democracy' which emphasizes the importance of voluntary associations outside the formal structures of government...without a vibrant and strong civil society, money and the self-perpetuation of elites will be the controlling factors in government" (p. 42).

There are reasons for the map. Schutz in an essay in Educational Theory, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm" (2011), compares the "power-building" methods of community organizing with what he sees as the idealized and apolitical approach of progressives like John Dewey who sought to create democratic schools. Schutz argues the latter reflected "experiences of restrained dialogue in the new middle-class realms of the college seminar, professional association, and emerging forms of child-rearing" (p. 491).

Schutz argues that "almost universally, progressives [like Dewey]...avoided dealing with the challenges created by the painful, messy, dirty, conflictual, interest-driven, and antagonistic realities" of public life (p. 493). He quotes two teachers in Dewey's famous Laboratory School, Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards, who observed that graduates, trained in collaboration, experienced "shock and conflict" when they attempted "to use intelligent action for social purposes" and found themselves "thwarted and balked by the competitive antisocial spirit and dominant selfishness in society" (p. 496).

Community organizers like Schutz have insight into the limits of social change strategies which avoid politics. But their model flattens "power" into a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources. As Schutz argues, "significant social changes...are usually concerned with disagreements over the distribution of limited resources" (p. 503).

Community organizers see two main forms of power, people and money. "Knowledge power," if noted at all, is seen as abstracted from human relationships. Thus Alinsky in his 1972 book Rules for Radicalsdeclared that "Our alleged educational system...[produces people] trained to emphasize order, logic, rational thought, direction, and purpose. . . . [with] a structured, static, closed, rigid, mental makeup" (166).

Alinsky had shrewd insights, but his fatalism about change in knowledge-based systems is disastrous.

Expert-led knowledge power is on the march, embodied in "Big Data," predictive technologies, and movements like translational science. All seek to fix people and problems from the outside, and view everyday citizens as largely ignorant and passive.

As Peter Levine, a leader in the emerging field of civic studies, [observes](http://peterlevine.ws/?p=15205" \t "_hplink), "impersonal politics" - another name for expert-led or technocratic power - contrasts with the "relational politics" of community organizing. Technocratic politics is delivered from the outside; it is abstract; its purveyors ask "what should be done?" by experts, rather than, as fellow citizens, "what should we do?" When it displaces relational politics, it dis-empowers most knowledge workers themselves. As long time organizer Gerald Taylor has observed, professionals are losing their autonomy and power in many fields.

"Only in relationships can we learn from other people," concludes Levine, "build networks that are sources of power and capacity, and act with agency..[and] seriously ask the question 'What should we do?'" Dewey, despite his aversion to rough and tumble politics, has much to offer here. He understood that knowledge power is not zero-sum but is increased through sharing transactions, calling this "social" knowledge. Though practitioners have to be clear eyed about conflicting interests and structures of unaccountable power in ways which go beyond Dewey, a democratic politics of knowledge also requires organizing broad alliances, making work practices more public, interactive, filled with meaning and developing new public narratives about the democratic possibilities of institutions. This approach is far different than targeting enemies and issue campaigns, the stock and trade of community organizing.

In 1946, Alinsky [wrote](http://www.amazon.com/Reveille-Radicals-Saul-Alinsky/dp/0679721126" \t "_hplink) that "the world is deluged with panaceas, formulas, proposed laws, machineries, ways out, and myriads of solutions." He argued that these displace "the eternal truth of the democratic faith that the solution always lies with the people" (p. 40).

As technocratic politics becomes transformed by a relational politics of civic agency, we will see a rebirth of the democratic faith.

**Harry Boyte edits the recent book collection, also from Vanderbilt University Press,Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities, with many stories of institutional and professional democratization.**