Radicalizing Community Practice and Education

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We write this article on radicalizing community practice and education in the midst of an ongoing global economic crisis related to the neoconservative and neoliberal strategies that have dominated the world stage for more than thirty years. As the Scottish referendum recently demonstrated, participatory forms of grassroots social change have become a possibility again. The referendum revealed that making the case for democratic initiatives which recognize the failures of neoliberal policies has become easier in the contemporary context. We are not, however, naïve about the prospects of change. Crises can result, as with the origins of neoliberalism in the 1970s, in simply new forms of a reasserted class power. And crises can, and certainly do, bring about surges in reactionary and xenophobic (usually anti-immigrant) politics and social movements. The lessons we proposed five years ago in *Contesting Community* are timelier than ever. The opportunity exists for the development of new theories and practices in and about community efforts.

And yet, even if the neoliberalism of the post-1980s world is newly vulnerable and more open to contestation, community-based efforts continue to be embedded in a form of global capitalism in which the primary arbiter of social relations, processes, and outcomes is the market. It is certainly not a given that neoliberalism will be replaced. Therefore our central premise remains. Communities are vitally important, but inherently limited, arenas for social change and social change organizations. The

limited capacity of community remains, as does its centrality. Accordingly, the debate over the place of community development in social change should continue to locate both the possibilities and limits of practice at its core. Below, we advance a series of six proposals to advance theory and practice, and to push debates about the potential role of communities and community organizing in the struggle for progressive social change. We do not see the propositions as utopian. We do not claim to be providing a definitive guide to contemporary community organizing, one appropriate for all types of community organizations in all types of settings. We are not convinced such a guide can be done well, and therefore we have not set out to do so here. Rather we propose steps that have been, and can be, developed and for which there are historical precedents and current examples.

Understand the Importance of Community

Our first proposition is the fairly simple: that in order for people working in communities to realize the potential within communities, they must first properly understand that potential—and its limits. We must understand that communities and local organizations are not inherently Left or Right, progressive or reactionary. In ways similar to how E. P. Thompson conceptualized class as "making itself," community is created through the practices of individuals, organizations, and institutions (Lustiger-Thaler 1994). This is not, by any means, to reject the important limitations placed on communities by their structural context or the language and invocation of community <u>for itself</u>. Rather we would argue that the space is there for people concerned with social change to claim and make, if they are willing, able, and moved to do so.

Community is a central realm in the organization of the larger political economy. It is where we live, and build many—if not most—of our most significant social relationships. And it is also where labor is produced and reproduced, and where political meanings and understandings of the world take root. These are not, by any means, small components of life. Building local organizations based on a sense of solidarity and belonging can be essential steps in the creation of a broad social movement that has strong local roots. Local work in community organizations or

trade unions that looks beyond the traditional boundaries of these organizations creates a base from which larger movements and campaigns can grow. Without the local work, the wider efforts cannot be sustained and will ultimately be without a base of either members or place.

But the analyses and understandings that currently inform most community efforts are problematic. In short, they are both too ambitious and too modest. They are too ambitious because they turn inward, into local efforts that inherently assume community problems are rooted in the characteristics of the community (and the people and organizations that constitute the community). That leads to community organizations promising too much, and thereby setting themselves up to fail, and disappoint funders and others who wonder why community-based efforts "don't work." But they are also, and conversely, too modest, in that they implicitly downplay the potential role community-based efforts can play in changing the larger political economy. In so doing, they lose sight of the fact that while communities may not be able to control the local-level manifestations of larger social problems, they can be a central part of changing the larger-scale social problems in the first place.

Organize beyond Community

Community-based efforts need to understand their work as transcending community boundaries. We see the political potential from community emerging when there is an emphasis on working "within a place," rather than "about a place." The focus of too much of the theory and practice in the contemporary world has been on community as solely "about a place." It is limited by boundaries, usually geographic but sometimes based on identity or specific interest. Local activities are thereby limited to local processes, and there is little interest in going beyond these boundaries.

In contrast to this position, we suggest that an understanding of community should be "within a place." Local work is the starting point, but it is not the ultimate goal. The community as a geographic place serves as a point of entry, but the effective community organization understands that the issues go beyond the local. Therefore community-based efforts must address and confront issues and problems within a

community <u>and</u> create linkages beyond the local. If there are not these kinds of connections, community organizations will not be able to engage in anything beyond working to improve, in a limited way, local conditions.

Integrated into community practice must be an analysis of the context of a community organization's work. And fundamental to this analysis is an understanding of the limits of local work and the need to build an analysis that connects local work with wider social, economic, and political forces. Community organizations need to understand their work in a larger context in a threefold manner. First, given that the conditions in communities are the products of larger-scale social forces and processes, there are real and significant limitations to what can be achieved solely through a focus on internal community-scale issues. The scale, in short, is insufficient to solve the problems because the problems themselves exist due to processes that operate at larger scales. Second, in a politically hostile or reactionary context, internally focused social reform can seem like revolutionary work. But unless organizations are outward-looking, insofar as their efforts have a focus that includes and goes beyond the local, they are often just providing modest relief that legitimizes the larger system. That is, by staying within the community, the larger system remains unchallenged. The cliché of "think globally, act locally" is an extremely disempowering one because it discourages action beyond the local. Third, and emerging directly from the first two, is the problem that focusing community-based work solely on the level of the community enables—encourages, even—a blaming of the victim of larger-scale problems. That is, if community-focused work is predicated on the ability to solve problems locally, then the inability to solve those problems locally (which is inevitable, since those problems are not themselves rooted in any individual community) becomes a very useful way for critics to blame poor and marginalized communities for their own poverty and marginalization. Thus not only are the larger institutions of the private and public sectors let off the hook, but the communities themselves become the object of blame for failures evident within those communities.

Emphasize Conflict and Power

If community organizations must remain focused on processes and structures that occur beyond their community, so too must they maintain a full range of strategies and tactics to draw upon in their work. If their goal is make things better in their community, then a proper understanding of the causes of the conditions in their community must include a recognition that social change is needed to ultimately make things better. And for social change to happen, conflict over power must be a key orienting direction of community organizing. The most successful efforts in the United States, past and present, understand that conflict is central to their practice. This does not mean that all or even most of their activities are confrontational, but rather that conflict is part of an analysis, an overarching strategy, and a tactic to obtain desired results.

Conflict defines the opposition. It defines who benefits from the current set of power relations, and thereby is in a position to deliver the changes demanded. It also means understanding what is necessary to mobilize against those who are in positions of power. The specific tactics can vary from street-level actions to lobbying officials, but at the core there is a we/they dynamic in place, at least on the specific issues being contested.

Conflict is also expressed through an analysis of social issues. For example, organizations must understand that power relations and structurally rooted interests are central, and problems emerge because of unequal power relations. Therefore, political education and analysis is a key part of their activities. Organizations need to be asking questions of who benefits and why, when issues are confronted. Organizing is a means of challenging structural power, whether it is based on class, gender, race, or sexuality. We recognize that stating things so starkly and nakedly is decidedly unfashionable, and that much of contemporary academic and community work masks analyses of power, runs away from conflict, and turns to partnerships in unequal power relations in the name of pragmatism. The idea of power relations being transformed and made more equitable through organizing disappears in both how these groups act and how they analyze power. But this, we would argue, is a

fundamental reason why the gap between those who are in positions of power and those who are not has grown so dramatically in the last thirty years.

The challenge for oppositional organizations is to sustain this stance over time, that is, to keep their vision over the long term. Many organizations have a conflict perspective in their origins, just as many originate as part of a social movement, but this dimension is lost over time—particularly in a political economic context that is fundamentally hostile. For example, it is argued that by 1975 the decline of dissent and conflict in the neighborhood movement of the 1970s led to their becoming instruments of conservative politics.

The significance for contemporary practice is clear. Conflict against enemy targets that further economic, political, and social injustice is not something to be discouraged or feared.

Organizers and community organizations should be angry over what Piven and Cloward (1979) referred to as the "new class war" of the past thirty years. Ernesto Cortes, lead organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in the American Southwest, likes to note that people should be angry about injustice, and by anger he refers to the Norse origins of the word, angr, which means "social grief." That is, anger which is not individual anger or rage but collective anger over what has been done to society, anger over a social problem or injustice. Community efforts in our current context need to keep this conflict perspective, need to understand the legitimacy and importance of social anger, need to keep putting pressure on a system not used to such pressure.

Unite Community and Social Movement Efforts

Community organizing efforts and social movements are almost always treated as different species, both in the literature and by practitioners. We think a critical element in moving toward a new theory and practice of local work is recognizing their common origins and elements, as well as seeing them as parts of the same overall social struggle. Social movements almost always start out as local efforts but, if the

conditions and issues are right, they metamorphose into movements that are far greater than the sum of their parts. Similarly, local efforts often start out as parts of or offspring of social movements, but a change in conditions or problems in the movement usually encourage more local effort. The two clearly take on different forms and appearances, and play different roles in the struggle for social change. Because we see them as highly interconnected, we propose that outward-looking community efforts should consider movement-building practices as well as building connections with existing, broader social movements. And social movements, if they seek greater and more long-term success, must understand the need for an active base in local communities in order to contest power effectively and to bring demands for social justice forward with the possibility of victories. Our study of community organizing in the US, UK, and Canada underscores how critical community and movement efforts are to each other.

This is not to suggest that the relationships between social movements and local community organizations are not complex and filled with tensions. There is a built-in strain between much contemporary community-organizing and movement-building practice, which we do not want to downplay. But there has always been a dialectical relationship between social movements and community organizations. History shows us that local organizing gives birth to, galvanizes, and sustains social movements, such as the labor, civil rights, women, or gay movements. There is not a logical progression for grassroots work to simply evolve into larger efforts; usually they just remain local. But when connected to a social movement, that dynamic can change. Historically, social movements begin in local social-movement organizations such as an organizing committee, but truly burst onto the scene on a larger scale. These larger-scale interventions fuel local efforts, providing more power, sparking and giving confidence to an oppositional imagination, legitimizing claims and grassroots work, and sustaining and galvanizing community efforts. Relatedly, local/community efforts often start out as social movements, whether the "backyard revolution" of the 1970s that followed on the heels of the antiwar and student movements (Boyte 1980, Fisher 1994), or the origins of local feminist consciousness-raising groups as a product of both the New Left and civil rights movements (Evans 1979).

Problems ensue when community and movement efforts ignore each other. The "anti-corporate globalization movement" emerged in the 1990s with many groups and smaller movements coming into the streets. It was filled with potential. The year 2000 was even dubbed "the year of global protest" (Bello 2001). The movement was undercut by the repression associated with September 11, 2001, along with the shift of some of the organizations toward anti-war efforts. Nevertheless, the failure of the movement to be a current force, despite the widespread crisis of global capitalism—a crisis that the movement's critique of global capitalism largely predicted—results in part from the movement's failure to work extensively with community organizations and plant local roots (Axel-Lute 2000, DeFilippis 2001b, Fisher and Shragge 2001). This was certainly true for Occupy Wall Street and a primary cause for it being, thus far, more a moment than a movement.

Critical Analysis and Political Education Are Important

For community organizations to be part of a wider, larger-scale, and longer-term movement for social change, social analysis as well as its dissemination through political education are critical. Both contribute to understanding that the specific gains made and the struggles organizations undertake are part of something larger, but so is the broader political economy that structures organizational choices. Within the neoliberal context, there has been a tendency for community organizations to back away from making demands not only on corporations that engineer neoliberalism but also on the state. Economic globalization has profited the few at the expense of our communities, especially poor and minority communities. At the same time, community efforts have become an active ingredient of state policy, and neoliberal policies reduce the role of the state in certain spheres through the use of community initiatives. The Community Organiser Programme in England is an excellent example of such intention. Thus the analysis of the relationship between community, corporations and private capital, and the state becomes of critical importance. The implication of contemporary theory and practice is that community organizations 'deresponsibilize' both the state and the market. In so doing, the importance of state intervention to either regulate the market or provide programs to improve social and

economic conditions is lost from view. One of the consequences has been to reduce demands on the state for improvements and greater regulation of the market from community organizations.

Clearly, one of the barriers to long-term change, in addition to the basic power relations inherent in the system, is the pragmatic and adaptive strategy of community work, which, without naming a radical politics, undermines a longer-term and more fundamental social change. Fisher (1994) talks about ideologies that shape community practice which cover the political spectrum—reactionary, conservative, liberal, and radical—as a way to name the underlying beliefs of different organizing efforts. Community organizing needs to name its politics and name the problem. And community organizations, when working on and often achieving specific and short-term gains for particular people, too often do not convey a broader and longer-term perspective on organizing. They fail to adequately ask and answer basic questions such as: What is the organization's vision? What are its politics? Who and what do they see as the fundamental problem, and what, more or less, is the overall solution?

Given the current political-economic context, it is important for organizations to build an analysis of political economy and how it relates to the structures of economic inequality and inequities, growing poverty and unemployment, middle- and working-class downward mobility, and related issues. Properly understood, we would argue that the causes of these problems are rooted in the exploitative dimensions of contemporary capitalism, and the state enables, produces, and reproduces the political-economic system. Even our focus on neoliberalism runs the risk of obscuring the fact that what makes neoliberalism so damaging to poor and politically marginal people is that it is a nakedly ruthless and unregulated form of capitalism. Historically, analysing problems and structures and proposing alternatives has been the forte of the Left, although this is less so for community organizations, many of which, in the United States at least, still think they must be "non-ideological." It is well past time to break free of the limitations imposed on community organizations by the goals of being non-ideological and non-political, and for them to take their place in the great

tradition of examining the world as it is, and using that analysis to imagine and help create a better world.

Make History

History is made by ordinary people in multiple ways and at multiple scales - that is, both by the powerful, who make most of the decisions, and those who choose to make history by challenging their received world (Flacks 1988). We agree with new social movement theorists that since the 1960s the local geographic or cultural community is the dominant means and the primary locus of contemporary history making. People make history when they challenge the existing power and when the times are right. But those right times are few and far between, and they do not last very long. Community organizing has a critical role to play in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. The current moment is filled with potential, but only if people learn and act. The future of democracy and the wider egalitarian project depends on both an oppositional imagination and effective organizing. Mary Ellen Lease, in a similar historical moment, working with American agrarian populists, is said to have challenged her fellow history makers to "raise less corn and more hell". It was an idea and strategy in the finest traditions of democratic dissent. It would do us all well to heed the varied lessons of the past, understand history better, and seek to become the history makers feared by those who have narrowly controlled the forces of history for more than a generation.

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