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## Comprehensive Discursive Organizing: Rethinking Political Representation and Community Organizing through a Discursive Lens

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**Comprehensive Discursive Organizing:  
Rethinking Political Representation and Community Organizing through a  
Discursive Lens**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Government and Francophone Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA  
November 30, 2009

Currently, grassroots community organizers aim to promote the particular claims of marginalized and oppressed individuals, groups or points of views that do not receive just representation in the political system. This thesis contends that organizers ought to develop a comprehensive practice of democracy in their local communities rather than focus entirely on advancing particularized interests.

By entering into a relationship with the powerless, community organizers find themselves implicated in the representation of these entities, as the institutional representative structure often fails those lacking political power and voice. As such, this theoretical study of community organizers within broader democratic theory must turn first to applicable theories of representation. This thesis will examine three theories in particular: the individualistic approach that dominates mainstream liberal thought; the group-based approach as defended by Iris Young and others on the Left; and the discourse-based approach as advanced by John Dryzek, drawing on a critical or post modern analysis. This thesis will argue that all three of these theories should be seen as “discourses,” insofar as they are all grounded in assumptions that are not themselves defensible by reference to objective facts or neutral philosophical principles.

Particular community organizing nonprofits ground themselves in one of these three theories of representation. Individual-based representation appears in ACORN; group-based in both DART and IAF; and U.S. PIRG exemplifies nonprofits attempting to represent a particular discourse. Despite the differences in these organizations, they all maintain the traditional aim of particularized representation of specific individuals, groups and discourses over this project’s ideal of comprehensive discursive representation. As this thesis contends, instead of restricting themselves to representing

these narrow interests, grassroots organizers should embrace a “comprehensive discursive” position that seeks to advance democracy as a complete whole within local communities.

### **Defining Discourse**

Integral to this thesis is the concept of discourse. Before addressing questions of representation through which this project aims to understand the organizing process, one must first understand what constitutes a discourse. Iris Marion Young, a theorist of group representation, herself offers a definition of what she calls a discourse, describing it as

a system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through the society, which convey the widely accepted generalizations about how the society operates that are theorized in these terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions (Young, 2001, p. 685).

This understanding matches neatly with the Dryzek’s definition. Dryzek conceptualizes a discourse as a “set of categories and concepts embodying specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities” (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 481). Neither individuals nor groups—the two main entities considered in more traditional representation theory—have the capacity to escape from the implications of discourses, as they form the lens through which the world is perceived.

Discourses, while certainly less concrete in composition and more theoretically slanted than either individuals or groups, maintain certain qualities and characteristics. They must recognize and deny certain motives, provide an “account of the relationships taken to prevail between agents and others,” and employ common metaphors and other

rhetorical devices (Dryzek 482). Again, discourses pervade all facets of life and, as such, implicate a variety of aspects in their presentation.

In these definitions, what stands out most is the depth at which the discourses affect the lives of those who hold them. Discourses, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008) claim, “are not just a surface manifestation of interests because discourses help constitute identities and their associated interests” (p. 482). Therefore, more than *affect* the lives of the individuals who hold them, discourses actually constitute and develop those very identities.

Significantly, especially in the context of the particular discussion at hand, discourses and individuals do not associate in a one-to-one relationship. Discourses are shared among many individuals, and individuals are shared among many discourses at the same time. In a key distinction from groups, discourses allow multiple facets of the individual to be expressed (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 483). Instead of foreclosing on the multifaceted identities for which this study seeks to develop a fuller representation at the grassroots level, discourses facilitate an exploration of those different components. As this thesis contends, this understanding of discourse, in light of representation theory and grassroots organizing, necessitates the adoption of a comprehensive discursive approach.

## **Chapter 1: Representation Theory**

Grassroots organizers typically set as their goal the empowerment and engagement of the interests with which they work. However, organizers must also self-consciously address their role as representatives. When entire sections of the population—urban, rural, minority, disabled, etc.—are ignored by public officials, organizers are often the only semi-political agents active in the community who can act on their behalf. Therefore, it proves essential to the organizing process to address the issues raised by political representation and, in doing so, to establish a new conceptualization of representation by which the community might achieve a more just representative structure.

Theorists have advocated the representation of individuals, groups and non-group-based discourses. This chapter will examine each of these and show that all of these approaches ground themselves in constitutive discourses. True political representation, as this chapter will argue, hinges neither on the individual nor even on the group but instead on the comprehensive representation of all relevant discourses.

## **Individual Representation**

The dominant approach to representation today focuses on the representation of individual citizens. As advanced most powerfully by philosophers of the Enlightenment and applied practically in American and French revolutionary governments, the solitary rational individual stands alone as the entity best able to express interests and demand just representation. Displayed regularly through the all-important vote, the participatory act of individual representation, it is argued, overcomes disparities in birth or wealth to equalize all in the eyes of representative government. While a revolutionary, status quo-

challenging force in the seventeenth century, this conceptualization of society as composed of freestanding individuals now itself furthers injustice and fails to meet the high standard its original thinkers established for it.

### **Pitkin's Individual-based Discourse**

No discussion of representation can take place without first considering the work of Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, in which she identifies the four main forms of representation: formalistic, symbolic, descriptive and substantive. Despite her claims of impartiality, Pitkin, a twentieth century philosopher of democratic representation theory, operated from an essentially individual-based discourse. According to Pitkin, substantive representation alone concerns the actual activity of doing substantively beneficial things for the electorate, while the other three refer to states of being. In descriptive representation, "what matters is not their actions...but what they are, or are like" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 81). For example, a Hispanic person can represent a Hispanic neighborhood solely based on their shared physical or historical characteristics. Symbolic representation, on the other hand, insists that a representative hold some meaning for her constituency. Under symbolic representation, a community might elect a war veteran strictly due to his or her affiliation with the flag or other patriotic symbols. The formalistic understanding deals, at its root, with the authorization and accountability of representatives. Formalism acknowledges that representatives must first receive legitimacy, then retroactive support, from those on whose behalf they claim to speak. It does not, however, ground this legitimacy in substantive contributions that representations make to the lives of the represented citizens.



Pitkin ultimately resolves that the active role of substantive representation places it in a more defensible position than the alternatives. Despite her attempts to segregate along lines of action and inaction, Pitkin ultimately bases herself in a discourse of individual representation. Her adoption of an individual-based discourse prevents her from addressing disparities in power from other perspectives. “I am not suggesting an organic group mind. What the public does or thinks must (in theory) be translatable into the behavior or attitudes of individuals” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 224). She discredits the discourses that would point to these disparities, dismissing them as descriptive and symbolic in nature. She suggests instead that substantive benefit ought to be pursued through regular elections that demonstrate voter preferences.

### **The Individualistic City**

To clarify individual representation and the alternative forms discussed later in the chapter, one can take a typical American metropolitan area as an example. The central city has significant racial, economic and gender diversity, as is typical in many cities in the United States, and political institutions typical of such metropolitan areas are composed of popularly elected officials. In the case of individual representation, the city bustles with enlightened, knowledgeable individual citizens, each of whom maintains a strict list of personal preferences that enables rational determination of his or her political decisions. Exemplified most clearly in the Supreme Court’s *Baker v. Carr* decision—“one-person, one-vote”—, individual representation expresses itself in this model city through the voting booth. Elected representatives serve at the whim of other individual voters, and the political unit does not extend beyond that individual-to-individual

relationship. Civic associations—unions, parent-teacher associations, etc.—conceive of themselves as assemblies of individuals with no real political opinion beyond the aggregated mean of their memberships. Life in this city centers on individuals interacting with individuals; from this perspective, representation too follows individual interest.

### **The Shortcomings of the Individual**

The individual model assumes individuality, rationality and systematic fairness and impartiality; in fact, however, the discourse from which our current understanding of representation operates does hold an unarguable number of biases. Culturally, individualistic representation favors bourgeois Eurocentric understandings of the person as a solitary individual, thus dismissing certain more group-based leanings inherent in less bourgeois non-European cultures. Socially, the class that developed the concept of “the individual” into what it is in modern political society was composed exclusively of wealthy white men, and discursive contributions from peasants, workers and others received little attention. In terms of gender biases, individualistic representation values the male traits of autonomy and independence while devaluing the traditionally feminine qualities of cooperation and group-building. Philosophically speaking, Locke’s understanding of men as rational, solitary individuals justifies his system of individual representation, as is the case with many Enlightenment-era philosophers; therefore, strict adherence to individual representation does not produce an unbiased result but instead draws implicitly upon the historical and philosophical contexts—the discourses—that surround it. Ultimately, the allegedly impartial individualistic form of representation reflects its own discourse that holds certain assumptions that favor some parts of society

over others and delegitimizes discourses that seek to call attention to group-based inequities or to relevant discourses that are not subjectively held by voting citizens.

This conceptualization of representation pervades contemporary American society. Representation is addressed in the Constitution through an individualistic discourse. In the electoral processes from which the government claims its legitimacy, the biases mentioned above make themselves evident and challenge the impartiality and fairness of the institutions as a whole. Certain individuals—members of Congress, for example—represent other individuals, and each behaves as a solitary unit. This understanding traces its roots most clearly to the Enlightenment-era philosophers of the likes of Hobbes and Locke, who advanced individualism as an alternative to the group-based injustices they saw in feudal society.

Representation, as considered and practiced currently, reinforces hegemonic perspectives and excludes—both actively and passively—marginal discourses. According to Carole Pateman (1970), representation in its current form simply will not suffice.

In Cole's view existing forms of representation are misrepresentation for two reasons. First, because the principle of function has been overlooked, the mistake has been made of assuming that it is possible for an individual to be represented as a whole and for all purposes instead of his being represented in relation to some well-defined function. Second, under the existing parliamentary institutions the elector has no real choice of, or control over, his representative, and the system actually denies the right of the individual to participate because 'having chosen his representative, the ordinary man has, according to that theory, nothing left to do except to let other people govern him.' (p. 37)

The representative structure of contemporary American political life removes people from the processes that allegedly aim to benefit them.

Even in local, supposedly apolitical systems, the individual defines the decision-making process. Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), church councils and a plethora of

other civic organizations found themselves upon the same principles that shape the workings of the U.S. government. More than a competition between ideas or philosophies, the tallied vote is held to reflect the will of the people. Individualistic representation permeates the entirety of American society and, while opening up democratic possibilities unimaginable in previous centuries, forecloses on innovative understandings of political society and political capabilities.

Scholars in the past century have begun to recognize the shortcomings of such a conceptualization. With new parts of the population—women, minorities and others—obtaining the right to vote over the last century, the slow pace or absence of positive change in their communities demands a reexamination of the way the United States as a country conceives of democracy and representation. While these questions and the subsequent studies have undoubtedly moved the scholarly community in a new direction, further investigation reveals tensions and contradictions that beg greater work on the matter.

## **Group Representation**

Some political theorists of representation suggest that a group-based approach to representation is the best way to further the interests of marginalized communities. Through defining what a group is, examining the need for its representation, exploring what such a representative might look like and then problematizing group representation, this section will explore the strength and weaknesses of this approach to representation. Group representation, like individualistic representation, is embedded in a specific

discourse. Again, democracy will be best served through a comprehensive representation of discourses.

### **The Constitution of a Group**

According to Iris Marion Young, a defender of group representation, groups are established based on meaningful connections that go beyond the individualistic level previously explored. Components of this identity include social status, shared history and self-identification (Young, 1995, p. 186); furthermore, group members express their belonging in relational terms that include exclusion of the “Other” (Young, 1995, p. 187). Such a definition of belonging lacks any scientifically objective classification system but relies instead on subjective perceptions. What may appear as a weakness to some observers fails to alter the existence and operation of these groups, and Young goes even further to show that group identification can find itself in the acceptance and celebration of external stereotypes. Rather than suggesting autodeinition apart from outside influence, Young instead acknowledges the fact that identity often comes from the outside in the form of stereotypes that those subject to them then embrace (Young, 1995, p. 186). According to Young, groups must portray themselves both as similar enough to the majority population to deserve equality and different enough to claim disadvantage (Young, 1995, p. 196-7). A group is thus constituted not by a mere meshing together of autonomous individuals but the recognition of shared histories, among other things, that reach deeper than a simple choice association of people.

## **The Need for Group Representation**

Group representation, though certainly a question of contemporary importance, holds a long history in democratic theory. Thomas Hare, an early proponent of proportional representation—an electoral parallel to the philosophical group standard—, claims that “[a] perfect representation is plainly inconsistent with the exclusion of minorities” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 63). Political actors must thus shape institutions of democratic representation to provide for greater inclusivity, a quality that itself gives rise to significant concerns. The necessity of group representation expresses itself through the corresponding necessity of minority representation; that is, as Hare sees it, political society requires minority inclusivity, an end that is best achieved through the means of group representation. Along the same vein as Hare, Victor Considérant recommends a system in which even the wildest views must be represented. Under this understanding of group representation, there exists a clearly defined need for the legislature to represent the electorate proportionally (Pitkin, 1967, p. 62).

While these traditional notions of group representation rely upon the orthodox discourse of individual representation in existing legislative structures, more recent studies have sought to identify both what makes a good group representative and what fundamental changes to traditional representation are necessary to achieve fuller participation. The proportional representation proffered by past generations of thinkers has assumed group homogeneity and an ability to select representatives through voting. It has, in short, recognized difference to the point of necessitating special efforts to achieve representation but assumed enough sameness to use traditional methods to achieve these ends. As explained in the previous section on individual representation, voting is tainted

by a Lockean individualistic discourse. The act itself holds an unspoken bias, and reliance upon individual electoral population undermines the process of group representation. The more contemporary theorists, having accepted the assumptions of difference of earlier thinkers, turn to challenge the assertions of sameness that led to reliance on individualistic voting.

The role of undemocratic speech in achieving democratic ends has theoretical precedents that suggest a real democratic potential in the incorporation of traditionally antidemocratic voices—from unquestionably marginalized communities—into deliberation. In one theoretical debate, activism and deliberation find themselves opposed one against the other (Young, 2001, p. 671). Deliberation, it is argued, requires rational discussion and an aim toward consensus founded upon shared interests in the general welfare; activism, on the other hand, rejects rational deliberation and opts instead for one-sided shouting that undermines the potential for conversation, according to the conventional wisdom of deliberative democratic theory. Young, however, questions this assumption and arrives at a distinctly different conclusion. Following her logic, protests and confrontation represent not an affront on the democratic process; rather, the act of making one's voice heard in a deliberation from which one is excluded grounds itself solidly in democratic principles. Moreover, this activist voice belongs not to those in power but to the have-nots for whom traditional avenues of participation are not open. Such groups, it would seem, gain representation through oppositional, confrontational means, rather than through the traditional conduits of representative institutions.

In attempting to incorporate unheard group voices into the political structure itself, Young recommends involving special groups in special ways. Groups must (1)

realize collective empowerment, (2) participate in practices of analysis, creation and consideration of policy proposals, and (3) receive the right to a minority veto when policy questions that are particularly pertinent to group's interests arise (Young, 1995, p. 189). In these ways, traditional democratic institutions learn to incorporate marginalized portions of the population and reach for greater inclusiveness than previously experienced.

Theorists of group representation do not seek to give special representation to all possible groups. The need arises when groups are oppressed, either by exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, or cultural imperialism (Young, 1995, p. 188). According to Young, groups require certain rights within the preexisting individualistic structures of representation. Through these special rights, they gain equal access to institutions of power and achieve due representation. According to Young's logic, the role of grassroots organizing rests on promoting the interests of particular groups that meet certain requirements; however, as this project seeks to demonstrate, organizers ought to forego a particularistic politics of minority rights and promote instead democracy more holistically through a comprehensive discursive process.

### **What does a group representative look like?**

Hanna Pitkin, despite her adherence to an individualistic discourse, devotes a good part of her book to this group-related question. Descriptive representation, she argues, requires the possession of certain characteristics and qualities by the representative. John Adams, as cited in Pitkin, claims that a descriptively representative body "should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think,



feel, reason and act like them” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 60). As such, descriptive characteristics determine who represents whom. Pitkin recognizes the obvious questions raised by such a claim, for example by calling into question the appropriateness of different characteristics’ reproduction (Pitkin, 1967, p. 88).

Furthermore, this fundamental query addresses not only the selection of which characteristics to represent but also the manner in which they find themselves represented. One critic argues that descriptive representation holds certain assumptions, many of which may not actually be fair.

Descriptive representation also makes problematic assumptions about who can and who cannot represent minorities. By counting minority elected officials and ignoring majority elected officials, descriptive representation implicitly assumes that members of the majority group cannot represent minority interests (Hajnal, 2009, p. 39).

Faced with this critique, advocates of descriptive group representation simply do not have a convincing response.

Descriptive representation, as conceived by Dovi, does not stand as distinctly separated from substantive representation as Pitkin might suggest. For a descriptive representative to hold true legitimacy, she must not only resemble the population in question but also behave in an appropriate way. Even more basically, Dovi challenges Pitkin’s distinction between states of being, as seen in most forms of representation, and the active representation that is substantive in nature. Dovi, like Pitkin, finds herself embedded in a discourse of representation that limits the philosophical impact of her representation theory. Regardless of these distinctions, the real question falls on the shoulders of practicality and process. Within the framework of the discursive question at

hand, the *goodness* of a group representative remains qualified by the limited scope of the representation to which she subscribes.

### **The Mechanics of Group Representation**

The fundamental claim of many proponents of group representation centers itself on giving a voice to the points of view of marginalized groups. As such, we must first investigate, through the lens of representation, why it is important to do this. According to Young, marginalized groups interpret policy differently (Young, 1995, p. 183). In the deliberative setting, then, the unrepresented voice is not only absent from but also often at odds with the mainstream voice of the dominant community. As the marginalized understand the political world through a different lens than the rest of society, they must then gain special rights in order to make their voices heard. These rights, though, should arise not from the perceived position of inferiority of the affected groups in question but instead as “a positive assertion of specificity in different forms of life” (Young, 1995, p. 200). That is, in order to achieve representation following the logic of the group discourse, society must acknowledge and affirm the differences that exist within the citizenry. Not only is this “positive assertion” key to the realization of representation for minority communities, but it also serves to undermine dangers ever-present in multicultural, socially stratified and gender-differentiated democratic societies.

Without recognizing the importance of differences inherent in a pluralistic democratic society, several dangers can arise to threaten advances made toward the fulfillment of democratic possibility. Cultural assimilation cannot be required for “full social participation” (Young, 1995, p. 202). Truly representative societies cannot simply

seek to reinforce assimilationist tendencies. Following the insufficient logic and discursive challenges of individual representation, it would be adequate to invite poor or marginalized individuals to participate in the structure of representation determined by the hegemonic discourse of the dominant ethnic group, gender or class provides sufficient representation. However, as seen through the lens of group discourse, this view of the political world reinforces sameness at the expense of benefits gained from diversity.

Ultimately, this question rests on the definition of citizenship. As Young sees it, citizenship understood as an expression of the general will asserts a politics of homogenization (Young, 1995, p. 177). Homogeneity, however, is not the end goal of her project, nor should it be; rather, her goal is to better the position of marginalized populations by providing them with the representation they need to defend their cultures and unique forms of life. This practice does not only serve to advantage the disadvantaged but provides for a more democratic space that in the end will benefit everyone. By exposing the dominant groups to new understandings of the political world in which their members live, fuller representation can in effect create more democratically minded, purposefully reflective individuals. “For unless confronted with different perspectives on social relations and events, different values and languages, most people tend to assert their own perspective as universal” (Young, 1995, p. 190). Thus, by confronting the dominant groups with the same reality that marginalized groups must face on a constant basis—the reality of differing ways of seeing the world—, group representation opens society to new possibilities.

For the sake of clarification, it is useful to return again to the model city presented earlier in this chapter. The city has now done away with individual representation and has

adopted a group representation orientation. Where the individual once behaved as the supreme political unit, groups now characterize the political process. As such, the primary struggle is not between individuals' conflicting interests but instead between groups. An ethnic minority group can now speak as a political player in its own right, apart from the interests of individuals who compose the group. For example, Native Americans, who often have a unique perspective on environmental issues, will have the opportunity to speak as a group on questions of environmental policy. Political officials speak on behalf of the groups they represent and work to resolve conflict between groups. When a worker makes known a grievance against her supervisor, the struggle shows itself as one between labor and management; likewise, when a white police officer fires upon a black suspect, the question turns to group relations between the European- and African-American groups—or quite possibly law enforcement and minorities more broadly defined. Group politics, rather than individualistic liberalism, characterize the social discourse, and group representation continues to confront injustices disregarded by individual representation's incomplete understanding of political reality.

### **Problematizing Group Representation**

While group representation has provided advocates of social, economic and political equality a conduit through which to criticize unjust practices of representation, with it come several problems that deserve attention. In identifying the weaknesses of the group-level model of representation, the following section will expose potential areas of improvement from which later chapters can build more comprehensive arguments. Group representation, it will be demonstrated, relies upon a particular group discourse.

Iris Young herself acknowledges multiple problems with a group-based approach to representation without offering adequate solutions. For example, since individuals typically have multiple group identifications, how can they be assembled into groups that can have distinct representation? This conception of group representation falls back on the old model of individual representation that has proved inadequate in bettering marginalized communities. Individuals' identification with the group and not on the group itself serves as the primary point of analysis. The representation of groups therefore speaks to another level of organization within the individual-based discourse rather than an entirely new discursive form. While some theorists do offer unique twists—such as the minority veto in policy decisions that affect those groups—, group representation on the whole fails to move beyond individualism in any significant way.

A second, equally problematic theoretical issue finds itself in the possibility of cross-representation between different groups. As most contemporary group representation theorists claim, group identity is founded upon shared histories of suffering; however, in seeking to apply this basic definitional distinction to representation, one comes across the issue of contradictory identities. In short, members of one group can hold perspectives of another; therefore, anyone can represent the interests of any group (Dovi, 2002, p. 732). In modern American society, a Latina who grew up in a predominately African-American neighborhood could identify with and understand intimately the shared history of suffering associated with that minority group, but she would not descriptively represent the community of which she is a part. Her speaking on behalf of the African American community may not be seen as legitimate by some. This scenario grows even more complicated when looking at people's actual ethnic

heritages. In the country's major cities, not only does one observe a wide range of ethnicities but also a great variety in the distribution of those ethnicities. Who descriptively represents someone with as mixed a heritage as many Americans have? Descriptive representation may appear straightforward but simply does not account for the true diversity in modern American communities.

In discursive terms, group representation brings some identities to light while minimizing others. The discourse of group representation forces the same homogenization and hegemonization within "groups" that it seeks to deconstruct amongst different groups. Those who come to represent groups cannot embody the fullness of the discourses contained within those groups and therefore diminish the quality of the representation. In practice, members of the female gender group who come to represent women on the whole tend to represent more specifically white, middle-class women. In group representation, similar scenarios present themselves throughout and call to question the true representative nature of those representatives. Only discursive representation prevents any intragroup hegemonization by giving voice to every perspective no matter how unpopular the view might be.

Most significantly, group representation finds itself making self-exempting claims of discourse influence. When Iris Young points to the unacknowledged biases of systems under individual representation, she is basically proffering a discursive critique; however, at the same time, she fails to recognize the same limitations of the discourse inherent in her proposed account of group representation. Rather than address the issue—although an argument of true impartiality would be difficult to make—, Young is either unaware of the second edge of the philosophical sword she wields or opts to ignore the concern for

simplicity's sake. Ultimately, the unanswered question comes down to this: if the philosopher(s) who developed Theory A did so within a certain discourse, failing to account fully for external discourses, what would lead an observer to believe that Theory B is not subject to the same narrowness of scope as well? In questions of group representation, complex claims are made against the alleged universality of the discourse of liberal-individualistic representation.

Group representation fails to relieve thinkers of these concerns but instead exchanges one set of limitations for another. Where theorists of individual representation find themselves bound by the discourse inherent in Enlightenment liberal thought, group representation theorists find themselves similarly limited by their own discourses, which single out specific historically disempowered groups to favor with veto power and other guarantees. Their analyses do not represent impartial examinations in search of universal truths but instead discourse-embedded examples of biased theory.

With these problems threatening the democratic potential of group representation, another option seems needed. By overcoming the inherent inequality of individual representation, group representation offers new insight into the democratic possibility of society but fails to provide a path by which to fulfill it. This new form of representation must then account not only for the shortcomings of group representation theoretically but also lay a groundwork from which practical expressions of equality can arise.

### **Comprehensive Discursive Representation**

While Pitkin offers multiple conceptions of representation and Young suggests the representation of group identities as a means of addressing social ills, nothing has yet

sufficiently met the challenges of this thesis' discursive critique. Through the representation of discourses, oppressed minorities—and voiceless perspectives, more generally—can find a means of making themselves heard in the public arena. In order to understand better this concept of discourse representation, the following pages will differentiate the roles of different types of discourses, offer a model of representation and then critique its practical forms. The comprehensive form of discourse representation aims not to promote any particularized interests nor does it operate from any single discourse; instead, it takes into account the full range of discourses in its representative equation.

### **Differentiating Discourses**

All discourses conform to a certain mold; they enable and constrain thought, speech and action (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 482). In doing so, discourses serve practically to create frames of reference from which individuals cannot escape. Hegemonic discourses have certain unique qualities that set them apart from other discourses. What stands out is the relation of those who comprise the dominant discourse to others in society and the relation between discourses themselves. Most fundamentally, discursive hegemony oppresses part of society while raising others to positions of power. “Dominant discourses embody privilege and power” (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 488). The subtle but all-consuming role played by privilege in society reaches the very core of injustice and oppression. In democratic policymaking settings, if left unchecked, dominant discourses prevent consideration of all possible interests and promote biases (Young, 1995, p. 177). For the sake of a more democratic society, political players ought



to neutralize these biases through the introduction of alternative discourses to the public debate.

At the other end of the spectrum, marginal discourses find themselves playing an important role. Not only are they important to democratic equality as a balance against forces of dominance, but marginal discourses also present unrepresented perspectives. Embedded in what James Scott calls “hidden transcripts,” marginalized discourses present themselves in brief glimmers on the sideline of society, away from the surveillance of the hegemonic. “Hidden transcript represents discourse—gesture, speech, practices—that is normally excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power” (Scott, 2007, p. 202). Through this differentiation of discourses and the roles they play, it becomes evident that discourses can be the windows into more democratic forms of representation.

### **Representing Discourses**

With an understanding of discourses in place, the student of representation can focus on the act of representing discourses. Through discursive representation, specific political questions find resolution in the intersection of the demands of different discourses. While Dryzek conceives of a Chamber of Discourses to achieve political outcomes, the true work of discursive representation reveals itself in very different terms and very different venues. Of particular interest is the use of discourse representation in the promotion of democracy within American society at the grassroots level.

An important distinction between the comprehensive approach to discursive representation and its more limited form must be made from the start. Comprehensive

discursive representation seeks to bring to the table all relevant discourses. Dryzek's Chamber of Discourses, conceptually at least, serves as an example of the comprehensive approach, as it does not promote any particular point of view but incorporates multiple discourses in the representative process. It is comprehensive in the sense that it aims to be as open and inclusive as possible to all relevant discourses. Limited discursive representation, on the other hand, operates with the same notion of discourses but does not make the necessary leap to adopt a philosophy of inclusivity. It concerns itself only with the promotion of a single discourse. To borrow from Dryzek and Niemeyer, Bono's interpretation of the discourse of African continent can be seen as an example of limited discursive representation. In representing the sub-Saharan discourse, Bono adds another voice to the debate but does not fundamentally change the representative process. This distinction will play itself out further in the next chapter, as some grassroots nonprofits engage in limited discursive representation but none go so far as to adopt the comprehensive approach.

As discourse cuts to the core of both individual and group identities and, as previously discussed, shapes perceptions of reality in significant ways, the appropriation and redistribution of the interests associated with a discourse brings with it a certain level of understandable concern. Discourse representation reflects itself politically on a regular basis in attempts to reconcile conflicting points of view; for example, the modern Right and Left find themselves not only contested substantially but also seeking to represent a plethora of varying discourses. While arguably not discourses in and of themselves, the ideologies typical of the oversimplified political climate of contemporary times do represent discourses. The Left does not embody on its own any lens through which its

members view the world but instead represents a variety of discourses, many of which may overlap onto one another: the labor, civil rights, ethnic minority, social justice, and environmental discourses, among others. Similarly, the Right does not penetrate on its own the very essence of frame-forming discourses; rather, the ideological amalgam seeks to represent discourses of rugged individualism and boot straps, libertarianism, religious fundamentalism and other forms of social conservatism. By attempting to create common ground around such a wide and varied coalition of discourses, these camps tend to represent poorly—if at all—the discourses that shape the perspectives of their partisans. Discursive representation must not submit to the dichotomization present in contemporary U.S. politics but, at the same time, should not relegate itself to strictly academic theoretical inquiries.

The metropolis that has, since the start of this chapter, adopted both individual and group forms of representation turns now to this final theory. Metropolitan politics defined by discourses seeks to answer broader questions, and issues arise as conflicts between competing perspectives. The labor-management question, originally described as a disagreement between an individual employee and her supervisor, does not center around two distinct groups; instead, it brings to light a conflict between two ways of interpreting the world—conflict between two lenses through which all political reality is understood. The labor discourse draws upon a shared history of exploitation at the hands of capital-holders, makes use of class distinctions to explain injustice and inequality and defines political realities in their entirety along those class lines. The management discourse, on the other hand, emphasizes societal efficiency achieved through effective use of human capital, appreciates employees' labor as a component of production.

Without making value judgments, discursive representation permits a recognition of and exchange between these perception-influencing forces. Previous attempts to address these issues through forms of group representation fail to speak to these deep questions and touch instead only on their superficial characteristics. By addressing conflicts within this framework, the city can better negotiate lasting resolution rather than provide case-by-case temporary solutions.

### **A Critique of Discursive Representation**

Discursive representation, as developed by Dryzek and Niemeyer, presents certain insurmountable problems and requires serious rethinking in order to establish a solid theory that is both philosophically and practically sound. The major difficulties evident in their understanding of discourse representation are (1) its level of generality, (2) the operationalization of such a concept and (3) the absence of the human element within the theory's most basic tenets. As such, significant thought must go towards the reconstruction of discursive representation into a theory capable of reaching its full democratic potential.

While presenting a compelling case for discourse representation in a fundamentally theoretical framework, Dryzek fails to define the scope for his assertions and creates a theory of uncertain generality. The scope varies from the very broad to the extremely specific. The article begins with the example of Bono's representation of the African continent, thus establishing a broad scope. No particular issue or policy area receives consideration in this first example, but other parts of the article present significantly more issue-specific readings of discourse representation. When describing

the functions of the Chamber of Discourses, the authors give examples of environmental issues and other questions of a more limited nature. Juxtaposed with the all-encompassing scale of a single Irish superstar representing the entirety of the African continent, these issue-specific discursive chambers simply do not compare. The levels of generality vary greatly, and the writers fail to account for this variation.

The extension in scope of discursive representation to the extremely general levels invites other problems as well. The idea of Bono justly representing the interests of an entire continent goes against our considered judgments. Such high-profile acts of representation do not properly capture the heart of discursive representation. Moreover, as argued previously in this chapter, Bono's representation of the African discourse fails to meet the standard of *comprehensive* discourse representation and provides instead only a limited form. As the next chapter will argue, comprehensive discursive representation should deal with all matters of social life through low-profile grassroots channels of political society. The scope of comprehensive discursive representation then ought to be more specific and local, rather than broad and international.

Operationally, the original theorists of discursive representation imagine a Chamber of Discourses in which all discourses—even those without adherents in the area in question—receive equal time and consideration. In short, this would be difficult to implement. For example, the representation of discourses in this setting relies upon the action of individuals who can embody a single discourse and consciously minimize the effects of other discourses on their decision-making. By entrusting the representation of discourses to individual beings, the theory essentially reverts to the individualistic by relying on the rational intellectual capacities of individuals to decide which facets of their

beings—i.e. discourses—to present to the external world. Discursive representation, in this case, grounds itself in an individual-based discourse, which acknowledges discourse competition but leaves it to the individual to decide these matters on an internal basis. What was originally intended to move away from both individual- and group-level representation for the sake of giving voice to unheard discourses undermines its own foundation by relying upon just such a discourse as the hinge pin of its implementation.

Practically speaking, discursive representation is most easily implemented at the local level. Without going into greater detail, as this question will receive further treatment in later chapters, suffice it to say that this form of representation does not require a formal chamber or even a semiofficial exchange of ideas. Discourses, embedded in the very core of both individuals and groups, can be represented in much less formal—and far more useful—ways.

Implementation is further complicated in Dryzek's operationalization of discourse representation by his inclusion of discourses lacking adherents. Even if a discourse has no one in the polity who holds it, Dryzek says that it still ought to be included in the debate. In practical terms, having dismissed the idea of a Chamber of Discourses, only relevant discourses present in the community need representation. How else can a process of representation remain both local and comprehensive? In order to realize comprehensive discursive representation, this thesis abandons Dryzek's otherwise inconsequential requirement in favor of a more participatory process through which discourses are represented by those who hold them. This process will be discussed in the final chapter.

Finally, discursive representation as presented by Dryzek and Niemeyer removes people from the democratic equation. In an attempt to democratize a representative

system that fails to account for the fullness of human identity, these theorists actually eliminate an element essential to the democratic nature of representation. According to a recent critique by Swedish writer Sofia Näsström, the central problem with discursive representation lies in its recognition of the primacy of a nonhuman entity over countable human beings. In her examination of the discursive theorists' choice to represent nonhuman elements, read with some pointed philosophical exaggeration, she points to the very nature of this project's critique of Dryzek.

What gets lost in this model is the essential historicity or openness of democracy. By dismantling the people as the authority of democracy discursive representation banishes the indeterminacy that comes with the democratic experience. Since it is possible to scientifically identify the relevant discourses in society there is no reason to hear people out. In this respect, the experimentation with the meaning of democracy endorsed by Dryzek is a privilege reserved for scientists, not for citizens. Nothing could be more comforting, but also more worrying for the convinced democrats that we are (Näsström, 2009, p. 24).

Näsström claims that their shift from popular to scientific validation of representative institutions undermines democracy and thus endangers the representative process it claims to promote.

Since the discursive representative cannot ascend to power through any kind of popular electoral contest, Näsström contends, Dryzek and Niemeyer assign to analytical scientists the job of determining which discourses receive representation and who represents them. In the same way that the American public has begun to defer to experts when presented with nuanced or complicated policy matters, Dryzek and Niemeyer's discursive representation defers to experts on the most foundational questions of the democratic experience. This fundamental shift threatens representation on the whole and endangers democracy.

As Näsström understands it, people no longer matter under Dryzek's model of representation. Explored above, concerns also loom over the operationalization and generalizability of their proposition. However, the representation of discourses, when removed from the problematic framework put in place by these original theorists, does in fact hold promise in the context of community organizing. Despite these notable challenges, comprehensive discursive representation nevertheless stands out as a jumping point from which the causes of democracy might be furthered.

### **Conclusion**

Many advocates of individual and group representation claim that their positions are grounded in objective reality. However, discourses in fact constitute both forms of representation. While it is not possible to avoid discourses, it is possible to create a democratic arena where discourses are represented. The next chapter explores examples of how individual, group and discursive representation have been embraced by specific community organizing non-profits. It will demonstrate that these organizations should engage in practices of comprehensive discursive representation.



## **Chapter 2: Community Organizing Philosophies**

This chapter will examine examples of how individual, group and discursive representation have each been adopted and practiced by grassroots community organizers. Categorizing these organizations according to the theory of representation to which each is committed provides insights into their understandings of democracy and the strategies for achieving it.

It is important to draw again a sharp distinction between “limited” and “comprehensive” discursive representation. Organizers who represent a single or narrow range of discourses are practicing limited discursive representation; organizers who seek to represent all relevant discourses are practicing comprehensive discursive representation. As argued in the previous chapter, all representatives, including those of both individuals and groups, practice limited discursive representation. However, the goal for organizers should be to represent all discourses—in effect, to practice comprehensive discursive organizing.

### **Three Major Approaches to Organizing**

In the analysis that follows, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) will serve as an example of individual representation. The Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART) and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) will exemplify the group-based representative discourse. The U.S. Public Interest Research Group affiliates (PIRGs) practice limited discursive representation. However, it is important to note that none of these organizations fits its category perfectly, and that some—including the Virginia Organizing Project—draw heavily on all three approaches to representation. The following discussion will include brief summaries of the work of

community organizing groups, thorough explanations of their organizing philosophies, and an exploration of the connections between them and the theories of representation to which each is committed.

### **ACORN and Individual Representation**

Adopting the discourse most common throughout American social institutions, ACORN operates within a fundamentally individualistic understanding of representation. In the same manner that legislative bodies and many civic institutions consider themselves an amalgamation of individual voices with autonomous self interests, ACORN sets as its primary mission the inclusion of previously unheard individual voices into the political debate. Composed of individual community members acting together for shared goals and in their own self-interest, the group seeks to convert that potential into fuel for real, meaningful social change. While maintaining active neighborhood associations empowered to make demands, stage demonstrations and raise lobbying funds on behalf of their members, ACORN focuses the bulk of its work on increasing participation at the individual level. As such, the organization focuses primarily on voter registration and empowerment as its means of achieving social justice.

ACORN explains its fundamentally individualistic mission on the organization's Web site.

Registering to vote is one of the first steps toward becoming a full participant in American democracy and a citizen who can influence change in a community. ACORN members and workers go door to door in low- and moderate income neighborhoods, approach people at shopping centers, grocery stores, and libraries, and visit high schools to talk to voting-age seniors because ACORN wants as many people as possible to participate in the democratic process. ACORN has helped more than 1.68

million citizens to register to vote in past registration drives leading up to the 2004 and 2006 elections. For the 2008 election, ACORN intends to help 1.2 million people register to vote in 26 states across the country. We have already reached 177,000 registrations in 2007 and 2008 in what will be the largest, non-partisan voter registration effort in U.S. history (acorn.com).

ACORN's basic goal is to increase the influence of low- and moderate income citizens by encouraging individual-level electoral participation. This implies both that organizers should restrict their efforts to specific segments of the population and that the best way to represent these groups is through individual-level mechanisms.

The representation of poor and working class individuals is not only a question of nominal commitment. ACORN concerns itself with the very particularized interests of these individuals. In citing the ACORN Community Organizing Model, Gary Delgado (1986) emphasizes the individualistic leaning of the organization. "The model has as its goal the building of a 'mass community organization' able to develop 'sufficient organizational power to achieve its individual members' interests...'" (p. 63). This focus on individual interests leaves little room for the organization to speak to issues of democratic possibility. ACORN organizers seek to embody "both a poor people's interest group and part of a broad populist movement for social change" (Swartz, 2007, p. 134). As an interest group, it can do little to promote democracy more broadly. Instead, it aims to "deliver tangible benefits to members of the organization" (Delgado, 1986, p. 90). In these respects, ACORN resembles other interest groups with little distinction. Interest groups, by definition, are limited in scope. Accordingly, ACORN can engage only in limited representation of individual interests and cannot promote any form of comprehensive discursive representation.

While problematic in light of this project, an organizing philosophy based in an individualistic discourse does have practical benefits. Most significantly, this perspective permits ACORN to communicate effectively with other institutions of similar individualistic leanings. When an organizer or lobbyist confronts an elected representative with the backing of a certain number of individuals—presented physically as a mass demonstration, symbolically through verified signatures on a petition or statistically as a large bloc of committed votes—, the politician and organizer share a common language within the realm of electoral politics. In what often seems a tense relationship, the facility of dialogue that is made possible by the mutual understanding, employment and valuation of individual representation serves to bridge the chasm between grassroots organizer and elected official. Local, state and national representatives understand political reality through an individual perspective; therefore, should an organizer from the group or limited discursive schools of organizing approach those representatives with constituent-backed concerns, the dialogue would not flow as smoothly. In this sense, ACORN maintains a significant advantage over organizations grounded in group or discourse organizing philosophies.

The individualistic approach, while facilitating inter-institutional communication, also forecloses upon some of the possibilities of community organizing. A relentlessly individualistic discourse fails to challenge the status quo in sufficiently meaningful ways. By making the overarching struggle—the organization’s very reason for existence—one defined primarily by individuals, ACORN may have difficulty speaking out against injustice in different forms. While groups like ACORN may not have any problem working against unfair voting laws or demanding higher pay for services its members

provide, the nature of their work undermines attempts to make broader statements on other relevant issues.

For example, racial profiling is not an individual issue. It has no place in an individual-based discourse but is nevertheless a problem that affects the population ACORN targets to mobilize. No individual community member falls victim to this injustice due to his or her personal qualities as a distinct solitary individual; rather, law enforcement targets an entire racial or ethnic group, the members of which are not distinguished one from another. While racial profiling does profoundly affect some of the individuals with whom ACORN seeks to work, this group will always be a minority in the electorate as a whole. By not providing a structure for this section of the population to participate as a group, the electorate as a whole will not be able to benefit from unique minority point of view. The example of racial profiling proves that the individualistic approach does not provide comprehensive solutions to the all of society's ills. The classical liberal understanding of political society as composed of autonomous individuals does not stand the test of community organizing's challenges, neither within ACORN's own understanding of its mission as one focused on the furthering of certain interests nor within this paper's objective to promote democracy as a comprehensive whole. By committing themselves to the sometimes narrow lens of individual representation and interest-influenced oppositional campaigns, such groups cannot speak out on these larger issues.

ACORN's self-definition along the lines of individual representation not only affects its issue selection but also preempts its ability to empower local communities to engage in comprehensive representative exercises. In making the transition from

disparate local groups to a well-oiled centralized machine, one author argues, the organization essentially squashed differing opinions. This move foreclosed on the democratic potential inherent in opposition and challenge and created what is today a top-down activation machine.

The strategy has probably ‘worked’ in terms of success-ACORN retains a great many active members and exercises a certain influence on local policies-but it has failed in Tocquevillean terms. Would-be participants now know, or should know, that dissenting opinions are not welcome; that the lead organizers squandered the chance to examine their own world views; and that the leadership has made it clear that political influence takes precedence over the development of independent viewpoints (Sabl, 2002, p. 14).

The educative function of organizing loses value, as the organization hierarchy chooses to push its own agenda rather than allow for the establishment of different priorities in different localities throughout the United States.

While this approach to the historic transformation of ACORN into a centralized power broker explains the seemingly undemocratic position of the national organization as a product of strong-handed organizers, the root of these problems finds itself in the individualistic understanding of the political process. When an organizer sees the political world through an individualistic lens, it becomes unproblematic for that person to assume that he or she can assume the majoritarian position and lead without constraints. The centralization of decision-making authority undoubtedly contributed to the organization’s top-down approach to community engagement, but only through ACORN’s appropriation of an individualistic discourse was such a move even possible.

Furthermore, in terms of the critical organizing question of mobilization or activation, ACORN’s reliance upon a discourse of individual representation leads it to

fall squarely on the side of the latter. In Steven E. Schier's (2000) account of political exclusivity in the twentieth century, he seeks to clarify the ambiguity between these two terms. Activation, Schier contends, involves elite decision-makers manipulating the masses to gain support for the decision they have already made. This form of popular action is evidenced by the rise of candidates at the expense of parties (Schier, 2000, p. 24). Where local party organizations historically engaged citizens in establishing policy priorities and decision-making activities, candidate-driven campaigns now seek to activate individual citizens on their behalf, without the expectation of a genuine dialogue where the grassroots can have an impact on party positions and strategies.

Mobilization, on the other hand, involves moving people to act for themselves. Accomplished within organization constructs, mass mobilization differentiates itself from activation through its interactive nature; rather than establishing a set agenda, those who seek to mobilize rely instead on a give-and-take in which authority leaves itself open to challenge and opportunities exist for the mobilized to become the mobilizers. ACORN's organizing philosophy, however, most clearly resembles an activation approach to social change. While Schier clearly explains the negative consequences of activation and its incompatibility with democratic thought, his practical assessment of activation speaks against the ACORN approach to community organizing. "[A]bout one-half of all members of the public are difficult candidates for activation. They rank lower in education and occupy social networks far from politics and power. Any activation strategy with such a group is likely to be high in cost and involve modest results" (Schier, 2000, p. 32). The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, an adherent to the individualistic discourse of representation and activation over mobilization, finds



itself philosophically and practically out of step with its stated purpose of real, lasting social change.

### **DART and IAF: Group Organizing Philosophy**

The Direct Action Research and Training Center, founded in 1982, and the Industrial Areas Foundation rely on a group representation in the formation and justification of their organizing philosophy. While local organizations with ACORN affiliations compose themselves of individuals recruited primarily through canvasses, both DART and IAF have adopted a congregational approach to community organizing originally pioneered by Saul Alinsky, the founder of the IAF. The congregational approach seeks to include in organizations' membership local expressions of established religious organizations rather than individual community members. In following this philosophy, organizers move away from the individualistic and more toward group representation theory. The recognition of the group as the constituent unit of grassroots organizing facilitates mobilization and membership growth but complicates the process of representation and ultimately cannot respond to the challenges that arose in the above discussion of ACORN's individualistic organizing model.

As a group-based discourse does not fit well within the dominant American discourse of individualism, past commentators have on occasion failed to convey the appropriate image of DART and IAF organizing practices. In some of the previous literature, theorists have misrepresented the true organizing philosophy of these organizations. In his chapter on the Texas branch of IAF, Benjamin Marquez (1993)

incorrectly grounds his analysis of the Industrial Areas Foundation in a pluralist incarnation of an individual-based discourse.

According to the pluralist school, individuals are independent decision makers who are free to participate in local politics whenever they judge it in their interests to do so. Group membership is overlapping and follows no rigid class pattern, and organizations usually dissipate once the issues that brought the group together are resolved (p. 128).

This picture of IAF organizing does not do the organization justice. It is portrayed essentially as a temporary collection of individuals; however, as shown by Iris Young in the previous chapter, group definition goes far beyond mere association and involves shared historical ties that bind the group together (Young, 1995, p. 186). IAF organizers do not work with short-term, passing amalgamations of individual interests. The groups with which they work are much more deeply rooted than Marquez would make them seem. Despite the failure of some commentators to recognize the group-based discourse in which IAF organizers embed themselves, others are more ready to recognize the role of group representation in IAF organizing. In describing IAF's work, one article claims that "[i]ndividual empowerment, or the empowerment of whole groups, for that matter, is a means for achieving democracy" (Altemose & McCarty, 2001, p. 139). While these writers do recognize the validity of group representation, they acknowledge it only in a limited form.

### **Group Definition**

The congregational approach makes it possible for the organizer to work with concrete, pre-established group in a community rather than being forced to develop her own mental construct of the group with which she intends to work. By composition, faith

congregations meet Iris Young's requirements for groups; the shared history, deep-seeded commonalities and recognition of one another as companions evident between group members form bonds that create opportune situations for grassroots organizers (Young, 1995, p. 186). Furthermore, shared qualities among members of faith-defined groups often create within that community other group memberships. For example, many congregations who participate in community organizing initiatives are predominately African American. Poverty, poor education or substandard housing may, depending on other characteristics of the congregation, characterize the lives of its members. From these vantage points—clearly nonreligious but derived from an unmistakably faith-influenced setting—, organizers can move people to action along group lines.

There are other benefits to this organizational form of group definition. Community organizing philosophies with a stronger emphasis on organizational membership benefit significantly from the pre-existing social structures which provide a foundation for the work at hand. Instead of building an entirely new civic institution from the ground up—membership, reputation and effectiveness, included—, DART and IAF employ institutions already in existence in order to achieve goals of shared interest. In Robert Putnam's (2000) terms, organizers seek out social capital. While the wealthy have privileged access to land and industrial capital, poor communities that community organizations tend to target in their mobilization strategies nevertheless have their own privileged access to social capital. For the organizer, then, it simply makes sense to create campaigns around these useful sources of social capital.

The Industrial Areas Foundation, the institutional grandfather of all community organizing ventures, has experienced transformation over the decades but has maintained

its group-oriented nature throughout. Here, a historical note might help to clarify and sharpen the point. When Saul Alinsky first founded the original IAF in Chicago, labor was strong. An experienced labor organizer himself, Alinsky's work in communities surrounding plants and factories was as an extension of his in-shop activities. The capital at his disposal was labor; now, well over a half-century later, labor has lost its might. Faced with the decline of industry and its associated parts, organizers like Alinsky who originally relied upon union power as their social capital must now turn to different sources. The fundamentals, however, remain the same. "A major revolution to be won in the immediate future is the dissipation of man's illusion that his own welfare can be separate from that of all others" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 23). Like Putnam, Alinsky places an unmistakable emphasis on the power found in people coming together around shared causes. In modern American life, one of the few remaining reserves of such capital lies in faith congregations; accordingly, organizations like IAF and DART have adapted the older philosophies of labor-centered organizing to include churches, mosques and synagogues in the wider plan for social change.

In Texas, a branch of the IAF exemplifies particularly well the philosophy's departure from Alinsky's original plan for the organization. Where Alinsky concerned himself primarily with self-interest and short issue campaigns, Ernie Cortez, one of the most prominent IAF developers of the congregation-based model of organizing, emphasizes self-interest combined with sets of value commitments and long-term community organizations (Warren, 2001, p. 58). Furthermore, the relational organizing taught and practiced by the IAF centers not around action on any single issue but instead aims to engage people's value commitments in their communities (Warren, 2001, p. 51).

Individual citizens' participation and activity within the organization is decided not solely by their individual desire or drive but also by pure group affiliation. By incorporating these deep value commitments into the work of justice, the IAF model seeks to embody the core components that define people's membership in the organization. By taking into account entire sets of value commitments, which serve to define identity and group affiliations at the deepest level, the Industrial Areas Foundations employs a group-oriented organizing model that makes possible long-lasting involvement on the part of member organizations.

Beyond any social capital-derived justifications for the incorporation of faith-based communities into the equation of community organizing, the shared history of many faith traditions does maintain unmistakable social justice slants. Christian churches consistently bemoan the plight of the poor; organizing gives legs to their concerns. In participant churches, the action of the organizer on the streets supplements the words of the preacher from the pulpit, and the two together create and employ a powerful instance of group definition. By embracing a philosophy of group representation, both DART and IAF ensure a ready supply of well-defined groups for its organizing activities and reaches out within those religious communities to address questions of interest in a secular setting. Through group definition, the discourse of group representation makes itself evident in the realm of community organizing.

### **The Introduction of a New Intermediary**

While group representation does simplify the job of the organizer by defining and making available a preexistent community with which to work, the practical task of representation becomes increasingly difficult the further the organizing philosophy gets

from the individualistic discourse. In the case of ACORN, wherein the essential citizen-to-representative relationship remains intact, organizers work as individuals to empower other individuals to initiate that relationship without fundamentally altering its nature. Though a brute simplification of the organizing process, organizers could be said to introduce the previously disempowered individual to her representative, provide her with the tools necessary to maintain that contact and then step out of the picture; the representational system remains intact, only briefly disrupted by the arrival and subsequent departure of the organizer from the scene.

Community organizing that draws on the discourse of group representation, on the other hand, operates from a very different world view. Rather than work to make the individual-to-individual connection work more for the oppressed, organizers rethink representation entirely by changing the players; citizen and representative may become “African American community” and “Government,” for example. Rather than individuals confronting individuals—a justice-oriented voter cancelling the vote of a supporter of the status quo or a worker confronting her supervisor—the DART and IAF position themselves to speak more broadly from a group perspective to a social justice or class-critical discourse. In addition, organizers themselves also play representative roles. They will frequently meet with local politicians, albeit joined by “community leaders,” to make demands of and negotiate with local officials. The organizer adds herself to the representative equation; in doing so, the institutionalized form of representation becomes more indirect and displaced.

With that said, this shift to an organization-oriented model of representation initiated by group-focused organizing philosophies does offer certain benefits. In this

fundamental shift, DART and organizations like it gain the capacity to speak to issues of injustice inaccessible through the liberal democratic discourse of individualism. While less compatible with the vocabulary and conceptualization of representation common in U.S. politics, group-oriented organizing does nevertheless win victories that would otherwise remain unattainable. The DART and IAF approach to organizing underlines both the benefits and risks of confronting the hegemonic discourse of individual representation. Group-based organizing falls short of promoting democracy in its fullest sense because it does not account for the role of discourse and continues to promote the particularized interests of specific groups. As such, it fails to support a comprehensive representation of discourses in the community.

### **Limited Discursive Representation and Group-less Movements**

Where ACORN registers voters and DART mobilizes religious congregations for causes of justice, certain movements aim to represent particular discourses. By subscribing to a discursive framework, an organization empowers itself to make broader claims and enter into a more universal struggle; however, the limited nature of this embodiment of discursive representation prevents these organizations from becoming true promoters of comprehensive democracy. The most notable attribute of limited discursive representation in the realm of local activism is its detachment from people. While both individual- and group-based forms of organizing have an intractable human element, the limited discursive approach is characterized by the absence of a connection to people.

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group stands out as an organization grounded in a limited discursive philosophy of organizing. Statewide affiliates of the national organization, state PIRGs seek to promote the “public interest” over private interests. As opposed to the group-based representation theory presented in the previous section, this embodiment of discourse-based representation aims to represent not any particular group but instead the discourse of the “public interest.”

U.S. PIRG is an advocate for the public interest. When consumers are cheated, or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, U.S. PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. U.S. PIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects our health, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government ([uspirg.org](http://uspirg.org)).

While the limited discursive representation of the “public interest” does involve a human element—the “public”—, it nevertheless stands out from both IAF and DART due to its lack of a discernable group. Through their organizing efforts, U.S. PIRG organizers seek to represent the priorities and policy preferences associated with the public interest discourse. A comprehensive discursive approach would bridge the divide between the public interest and private interests, unfair influence and other relevant discourses. Where the state PIRGs succeed in organizing within a discursive framework, they fail to achieve this paper’s stated ideal of a comprehensive approach to grassroots organizing.

A second example, outside the usual community organizing mold, is the environmental movement. As opposed to any of the national community organizing groups mentioned in the sections above, environmentalism has no set hierarchy or institutional affiliations. It stands nevertheless as a movement growing in strength thanks



not to its connection to any particular population but instead through its representation of a broader discourse. The Sierra Club, for example, operates from a discourse of environmental protection. Removed from any human element, this organization represents the discourse in political matters. Other examples of such group-less forms of grassroots activism are found in antiabortion, anti-death penalty, and pacifist movements.

While this form of discursive representation does introduce discourse to grassroots activism, it remains limited by its one-dimensional nature. That is, it involves the representation of only a single discourse rather than the comprehensive representation of all involved discourses. The Sierra Club does not claim to speak on behalf of any particular group of people but nevertheless promotes one discourse's own particular interests—conservation, renewable fuel sources, etc. Comprehensive discursive representation, in contrast, would seek to include the discourses associated with industry, mining and other perspectives with a stake in the issue of environmental degradation.

Both U.S. PIRG and the environmental movement operate within a limited discursive framework. While this model does bring grassroots organizing closer to this paper's ideal than other models have, it does not make the final necessary leap to become truly revolutionary. Limited discursive representation moves the conversation beyond the limits of individual and group representation but fails to promote comprehensive democracy.

### **A Discursive Critique of Organizing Philosophies**

Discursiveness does not only describe a form of representation or organizing philosophies but pervades the entirety of the question in particularly potent ways.

Discourse representation brings to light an important caveat in the discussion. Despite the delineation presented above, individual and group representation do not exist separate from discursive representation; instead, individualism and a group-oriented organizing philosophy serve as discourses in and of themselves. While both may pose as impartial conduits through which society might realize its potential for justice—or whatever end a community organizer may hold—, they actually hold underlying assumptions that may not necessarily be negative but do obscure the claim of impartiality.

Discursive representation acts then to provide a means by which to evaluate all forms of representation and appreciate multiple philosophies of community organizing. Rather than singularly correct interpretations of political reality, discourses remain in constant flux—as democratic theory would undoubtedly have it. As such, comprehensive discursive representation makes possible the fulfillment of democratic potential. By refusing permanence and forcing movement, representing discourses requires actors—individual, group, discourse or otherwise—to consider policy options from a particularly valuable dynamic perspective.

### **Varied Representation in the Virginia Organizing Project**

The three representational theories exemplified above are not mutually exclusive in the realm of grassroots organizing. Remarkably, they can coexist in ways that offer significant benefits to organizers who remain open to each of them. In the case of the Virginia Organizing Project, a 501(c)(3) based in Charlottesville, Va., grassroots organizing involves more than an adherence to any one discourse. In light of the discursive critique offered above, the Virginia Organizing Project acts under an

organizationally discursive framework. While operating from an unmistakably orthodox social justice discourse that falls short of comprehensive discursive organizing, as evidenced in the group's mission statement, VOP does not limit itself to any specific organizing discourse and pushes itself to remain institutionally in a state of democratic uncertainty.

The Virginia Organizing Project (VOP) is a statewide grassroots social justice organization dedicated to challenging injustice by empowering people in local communities to address issues that affect the quality of their lives. VOP especially encourages the participation of those who have traditionally had little or no voice in our society. By building relationships with individuals and groups throughout the state, VOP strives to get them to work together, democratically and non-violently, for change (Virginia-organizing.org).

The organization, in order to achieve these stated goals, refuses the constraints of any single philosophy or discourse and opts instead to address them through situational, pragmatic lenses. VOP organizers presently engage multiple actors in order to achieve common-ground solutions on issues that disciples of less flexible organizing philosophies may find themselves unable to address.

The Virginia Organizing Project shares many common qualities with the other organizations explored previously in this chapter. From ACORN, the prototypical individualistic grassroots organization, VOP has adopted door-to-door canvassing as a significant part of its neighborhood outreach. In its second year, the 2009 VOP Civic Engagement Program sent 40 paid interns to cities across the Commonwealth for 10 fulltime weeks of door-to-door canvassing. Interns asked residents a series of questions, passed out literature and explained how to get in touch with representatives in D.C. and

Richmond. Interns would also invite residents to register to vote, if they had not already done so.

In the example of the 10-week canvass, the Virginia Organizing Project adopts a philosophy of individual representation in order to achieve the greatest impact on the population and among the legislators alike. When organizing a statewide canvass like the Civic Engagement Program, the chosen discourse—that which VOP opts to present organizationally and its organizers and community leaders opt to present individually—must center around the capability of the individual to demand justice through avenues institutionally open to that individual. The discourse of individual representation which other organizing philosophies fail to recognize gives VOP valuable insight into electoral politics. When used simultaneously in concert with other organizing discourses, the individualistic perspective proves effective and addresses important questions in the struggle for social justice.

In the vein of a group representation discourse, this particular organization speaks openly about underrepresentation and misrepresentation of certain demographic groups—the poor, racial minorities, women and LGBTQ individuals, included—in political processes. In this instance, the group discourse partners clearly with a social justice discourse. Most notable is VOP's work to end racial inequalities and address ever-present questions of racial tension. Beyond its internal policy of affirmative action, the Virginia Organizing Project has developed a program designed to empower communities to become capable advocates for equality and understanding across racial lines—i.e. across group divisions. Dismantling Racism workshops, common in progressive circles in the United States, focus attention on recognition of privilege, confrontation of inequality and

action to embrace diversity throughout society. In the same way that the individualistic perspective serves its purpose in a canvass setting, group representation lends itself more easily to questions of social justice.

Finally, pulling strongly from the limited discursive model of organizing, VOP not only subconsciously makes use of varying discourses but embraces discursive representation outright as a means of evaluating communities' needs and forming a public debate. Most clearly embodied in the interorganizational connections the Virginia Organizing Project establishes, a social justice discourse pervades throughout the nonprofit's structure. Along with numerous other 501(c)(3) organizations, VOP acts as a member of the Virginia c3 Table, a coalition of nonprofits designed to frame politics in terms of issues important to people and communities. By bringing together a diverse association of organizations, the Table draws upon shared appreciations of the social justice discourse. Although not "pure discursive"—group-less—in nature, this focus on shared organizations interests beyond a overt human element points to an impure limited discursive element in the VOP organizing philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

While particular organizing philosophies do line up well with the representation discourses described in the previous chapter, none proves capable of achieving their ends in their entirety. Where individual, group and limited discursive representation fail, comprehensive discursive representation offers a fuller embodiment of both organizing philosophies and representation theories. By employing and appreciating these theories of organizing as discourses in and of themselves, comprehensive discursive representation

enables communities to strive for fuller democracy. Despite the success of organizations like the Virginia Organizing Project in creating systems through which attributes and practices of different schools of organizing can coexist in positive ways, they still do not reach the comprehensive ideal.

## **Chapter 3: Discursive Organizing**

This thesis began with the observation that community organizers, insofar as they are speaking on behalf of powerless interests, are always acting as representatives. Further, we have seen that current grassroots organizers fall under three broad categories: individual, group, and limited discourse representation.

This chapter proposes that organizers adopt a comprehensive discursive approach to grassroots engagement. Discursive representation, as presented by Dryzek, takes place in a Chamber of Discourses at the international level. Problematically, this approach is exceedingly abstract and impractical. Moreover, it is potentially undemocratic, as it removes the popular element from the representative process. This chapter will show that it will be far more practical to initiate comprehensive discursive representation at the local grassroots level, where forums can be created explicitly for discursive deliberation. In this setting, organizers can answer the challenges of discursive representation as presented in the present literature.

### **The Status Quo**

Before normatively evaluating the wider purpose of community organizing in terms of potential or possibility, it would serve this chapter to delve deeper into the way in which organizers carry out their missions in the present. Every school of organizing, regardless of its take on representation, focuses almost exclusively on increasing or bettering the representation of the individuals, groups or discourses with which it works rather than striving toward the creation of a generally more representative—or democratic—society. ACORN seeks to introduce more marginalized individual voices to the political process; DART and IAF focus on the specific groups it deems worthy of



special attention; and U.S. PIRG promotes the discourse of the “public interest.”

Similarly, the Virginia Organizing Project, through its myriad of organizing practices and foci, addresses the needs of the poor and oppressed without moving to speak more broadly to needs of comprehensive discursive representation.

### **Organizing for New Representation**

For the other schools of organizing, the dilemma presents itself in more real terms. As discursive representation has proven to resolve many of the challenges to more orthodox forms of representation, the real question becomes how *ought* community organizers to translate discursive representation from an endeavor of targeted, or limited, representation into one of a comprehensive nature. The answer is two-fold: organizers should first adopt the principles of open-table organizing and then seek to promote broader participation. In following these two practices, which have their roots in the theoretical realm explored previously, organizers commit themselves to sustainable approaches to community engagement and social change.

### **Open-Table Organizing**

The widening of the scope of discursive representation lies not in the confrontational tactics of past generations of community organizers but instead in a form of organizing that seeks to create an open table at which all parties—in this case, discourses—are welcome. Even in discourse-based community organizing, organizers can often hold “us v. them” mentalities in which issue campaigns are shaped as a struggle between one discourse and another. The open-table approach to organizing, on the other

hand, refuses the oversimplification of issues and requires fair and just representation of all concerned discourses. Possible only in comprehensive approaches to community organizing and political representation, the open table provides the means through which all discourses receive just representation.

This concept of tabling has an extensive background in grassroots organizing. DART holds public forums, and IAF organizers regularly hold public accountability meetings. While holding public discussions of important issues is not new, community organizers have always done so in a limited manner. Limited tabling cannot promote the comprehensive representation of discourses. This new conceptualization of open-table organizing must then seek not only an expression of one or a few discourses but instead foster the representation of all relevant discourses.

Tabling also plays a role in Coles' work on the Industrial Areas Foundation. In his discussion of an IAF practice of changing locations for local chapter and public official accountability meetings, the organization expands the participatory space of local democracy beyond its normal confines of city hall. This practice, the author claims, promotes democracy in ways an exclusive centralized practice cannot. "Democracy will not be or become solely or primarily at a central table of fixed being and location, but only from tables that let themselves be moved and move us to very different spaces and modes of relation" (Coles, 2004, p. 694). It is from this concept of inclusiveness through physical displacement that the present theory of open-table organizing develops.

Without a necessarily physical component, open-table practices recognize the need to bring different discourses into dialogue with one another in order to achieve democratic goals. Not only do the discourses that comprise human identities vary, but so

do the ways these discourses interact with one another. As Mansbridge sees it, society should stop minimizing and ignoring these complexities and instead foster institutions that explore and celebrate the intricate nature of human identity.

Sometimes our identities articulate relatively harmoniously with one another; sometimes they conflict and we need consciously to insist on their multiplicity or craft social situations that reinforce their multiplicity; sometimes we can compartmentalize and emphasize our different, perhaps conflicting, identities in different places (Mansbridge, 2001, p. 6).

As members of society hold different combinations of discourses, it becomes essential to seek a full representation of these discourses in a pragmatic way. Dryzek and Niemeyer's international Chamber of Discourses fails to provide such a framework.

By bringing people of different backgrounds together and emphasizing the discursive nature of their disagreements, community organizers can fundamentally change their field for the better. By avoiding oppositional and confrontational tactics, community organizing that includes an open-table element promotes democratic values more broadly. Open-table organizing, as opposed to the internationally-focused Chamber, provides a markedly local approach to conflict and cooperation. In doing so, it responds to the charge of impracticality levied against Dryzek and Niemeyer in the first chapter. Comprehensive discursive representation is no longer a lofty abstract principle operationalized at the international level. Through local open-table organizing, it gains the necessary practical compliment to its important theoretical claims.

## **Participation**

The second key to implementing comprehensive discursive representation finds itself in a careful examination of the concept of participation. To this point, the discussion

of organizing approaches has revolved predominately around a study of representation, but it is also important to think both theoretically and pragmatically about participation. Through participation, comprehensive discursive representation is democratized, and discursive organizing is thus implemented.

### **As a Contemporary Danger**

Participation, despite its immediate positive connotations poses challenges in the modern political context. Carole Pateman, one of the most influential modern scholars of participatory democratic theory, calls attention in particular to the argument of cooptation. Citing Sydney Verba, Pateman states that “pseudo participation” comes to pass when people are invited to discuss decisions after the fact; the danger lies in the false sense of participation bred through such a process (Pateman, 1970, p. 69). Systems that create in their constituent citizenries feelings of efficacy without actually permitting—much less fostering or encouraging—participatory activities themselves stand in the way of democratic ideals and, ultimately, pose threats to authentic participation wherever it exists. If, for example, within the current individualistic understanding of participation, the president of the United States was actually selected by a council of powerful corporate CEOs, the votes of millions of individual citizens would instill a sense of participation without giving them an actual voice in the decision-making process. Similarly, in an industrial setting, management may delegate smaller decisions to workers; however, when it comes to more fundamental questions of output, wages or working conditions, it is far less likely that management will give real power to its

employees. Pseudo participation prevents the development of meaningful civic skills and instead breeds pseudo satisfaction and complacency with a nonparticipatory system.

Pseudo participation proves especially worrisome at the grassroots level. In any part of political society, such a misconstrued understanding of participation can undermine the very fabric of political life. Its potential consequences in the realm of community organizing stand out in sharp distinction to the practice's purported aims of inclusion, empowerment and mass mobilization. Herein lies the great risk of invoking participation in the formulation of a new mold of comprehensive discursive community organizing; with claims of grassroots transformation and reimagined participation come also the ever-looming possibility of abuse, misinformation and a defeated, disheartened public.

The threats inherent to a participatory ethos do not limit themselves to the possibility of a manipulated or manufactured sense of involvement. Another major concern arises in the form of instability in the process of participation. "In recent years, the inability to [strike the proper balance among various forms of political participation] has led to growing incivility and occasional threats to overall system stability" (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 72). For example, the coexistence of participation through vote-casting and more unorthodox or socially unacceptable forms of participation—protest, boycott, etc.—promotes instability. The citizen who understands her participatory role in political society as one of lever-pulling every other year will find it difficult to avoid conflict with another citizen who believes that true, effective participation must necessarily be strident and confrontational.

Not all theorists of participation agree that instability is an inevitable product of a more active citizenry. According to Pateman, the concern over participation-induced instability is overblown. As she understands it, participation does not exist as a single destabilizing force in isolation from the rest of society but as a pervasive characteristic of a new kind of political culture. Citizens learn to participate by participating; therefore, stability is not threatened by participation. As people begin to participate, they have already been “educated” for it and are therefore not caught off-guard by any “new” phenomenon of participation (Pateman, 1970, p. 105). The educative function of participation can thus minimize destabilization. Modern worries about the revitalization of democratic participation, while well-founded and worthy of consideration, do not obscure the fact: participation in an engaged society—and in a comprehensive discursive style of organizing—is not optional but absolutely necessary.

### **As a Transformative Element of Democracy**

Given such a daunting task and the aforementioned risks inherent in the organizing setting, one must question the reasons for invoking such potentially destructive issue as participation in the discussion at hand. Pateman, again, sheds light on this query; according to her understanding of participatory democracy, grassroots-level participation is a necessary component of effective political systems. Participation serves an important purpose in the development of civic skills that ultimately yield stronger democracies; at the lower levels of government, it creates a stronger sense of political efficacy (Pateman, 1970, p. 73). For Pateman, the national political scene simply does not

offer the same opportunities to the individual citizen to feel that her voice matters as county, city and even neighborhood political bodies do.

For this transition to effective participation at the grassroots level to take place, Pateman claims that the modern understanding of politics must expand to include previously apolitical components of the social landscape. “The notion of a participatory society requires that the scope of the term ‘political’ is extended to cover spheres outside the national government” (Pateman, 1970, p. 106). Accordingly, where the even-year voting booth and communications with Congressional representatives may have at one time been the sole spaces for political participation, contemporary needs require that observers recognize the local expressions of political life as found in public squares, community posting boards and the editorial sections of the local newspapers.

Beyond this, even, lies the participatory potential of urban alleys, front porches and corner markets as spaces where citizens can engage with the political world around them. More significantly, the failure to recognize these unorthodox participatory practices exhibits an unmistakable middle-class bias. The traditional forms of participation ground themselves in a bourgeois discourse that assumes education, literacy and access to adequate information. Even a participatory democrat like Pateman, by focusing predominately on modes of participation accessible to and predominate among the middle-class, rejects the value of marginalized forms of participation. What distinguishes a conversation on someone’s front porch on the poor side of town from the written opinion published in a newspaper with a largely white middle-class readership? Steeped in European philosophical tradition, this understanding of participation fails to convey the full picture of engagement in the political process. As one author claims, “classical

liberalism” excludes notions of community and participation (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 16). Participation as a common community activity, then, receives only minimal attention when considered through the dominant Enlightenment-era discourse. Modes of political dialogue unorthodox in form, despite their historical exclusion, nevertheless provide other avenues by which participation can transfer from the national to the local level.

Here, attention must turn to the raw mechanics involved in the creation and maintenance of a participatory ethos. As Rimmerman sees it, the realization of participation requires not only positive growth but also a deconstruction of certain social influences. “From the vantage point of participatory democrats, the political socialization process impedes meaningful and effective participation because citizens are socialized to embrace the values of privatism and radical individualism that are rooted in liberal democracy” (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 17). The paradox emerges that, in order for an essential democratic practice to flourish, society must be willing to unlearn the very foundation of the earliest Western democracies. Socialization, as Rimmerman understands it, trains Americans to conceive of democracy as the institutionalized government and its principles as discussed in the Constitution (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 18), as opposed to a more open-ended concept perpetually open to challenge and constantly benefiting from debate. Rather than embrace this particularly conservative American form of representative democracy, it would serve the population better to train its attention instead on some form of engaged participatory democracy. The discourse of liberal individualism discourages participation to this radical extent and, as such, must be viewed critically by democracy-promoters in modern American society.



In the setting of grassroots organizing, participation plays an integral role in the creation of community. In much of the contemporary grassroots political landscape, a well-defined “community” simply does not exist. Post-industrial metropolitan centers pulled people from their roots and now, in the wake of factory closings and population shifts, central cities seem to be little more than grouping of unrelated people with divergent interests. This image of urban America is not, however, the end of the story. “In a true participatory setting, citizens do not merely act as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests, but instead, through a process of decision, debate, and compromise, they ultimately link their concerns with the needs of the community” (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 19). For an organizer confronted with the challenge of an atomized neighborhood or city, participation serves as a tool through which the private and public—two arenas that stand in stark contrast one from the other—might come to mutual recognition. Participation, it thus seems, is not only a characteristic of democratic society but also a provocateur of social change following democratic principles.

Rimmerman, following his evaluation of participation, explains what he understands to be the two contrasting conceptualizations of the role of the citizenry. In the first of these, which some would argue more closely resembles the citizenship of this chapter in American history, citizens center around an

electoral-representative democracy, which emphasizes the importance of elections and the lobbying of interest groups at the national, state, and local levels. Bargaining and compromise typify the decision-making process. Citizen participation is assumed to be the same as voter participation. It is this conception of citizenship that grows out of the democratic theory of elitism (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 75)

The alternative form of citizenship, preferred by Rimmerman and like-minded theorists of engaged democracy, emphasizes the central role of public action. “A second conception, steeped in participatory democratic principles, emphasizes grass-roots organizing and mobilization rooted in community building, cooperation, alliance formation, and self-help” (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 75).

The practical side of this concept shows itself most clearly in Rimmerman’s discussion of the Kettering Foundation’s *Politics for the Twenty-First Century: What Should be Done on Campus?* The Foundation proposes four approaches to citizen education: “learning by doing—the public service component”, “learning by talking—acquiring deliberative skills”, “learning by practicing—democratizing the campus”, “learning by learning—a classical academic model” (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 100-101). This chapter, while an exercise in the final approach of learning by learning, seeks to expose the benefits to organizing gained through an emphasis on these four practices. Particularly through the comprehensive discursive approach, grassroots organizers can work to realize the democracy-promoting benefits of participation.

### **As a Fundamental Component of Discursive Organizing**

Upon first assessment, discourse representation may seem to undermine participation in very fundamental ways. According to Dryzek’s operationalization, the representation of discourses requires minimal participation. The only active participants written into the theory are the representatives of different discourses; furthermore, these discourses do not reflect proportionality in society nor is their inclusion in the Chamber

of Discourses dependent upon their having even a single adherent. His theory, as is, further increases the gap between people and representative decision-making.

Comprehensive discursive organizing, while drawing strongly on Dryzek's theoretical groundwork, fuses previously opposing forces of participatory democracy and discursive representation. The importance of knowing fully the characteristics and intricacies of varying discourses necessitates participation. For this reason, discursive representation at the grassroots level relies heavily on engaged participation—on the ability of affected community members to constitute and convey discourses in their fullness. As Dryzek conceives of it, a discourse receives fair representation when a single individual representative proves capable of embodying that discourse, a problematic assertion addressed in earlier chapters. This “One Man, One Discourse” mantra may well serve the theoretical purposes of the Chamber of Discourses at an abstract international level, but its practical application is problematic at best. Discursive organizing must then turn to a new instrument of representation through which different discourses gain recognition and communicate one with the other.

Discourses, by their definition, shape people's understandings of the world in which they live. In order to grasp the full meaning and implications of a discourse, an outside observer—one who does not share that discourse—must see it from a multitude of vantage points. In consensus-oriented discursive organizing, great value lies in the interaction of different, even conflicting discourses. Rather than rely on individual representatives, which harkens back to the same insurmountable obstacles evident in individual representation itself, discursive organizing uses widespread participation to

inform these open-table conversations and make for a more vibrant, truly representative society.

Rimmerman, in making his case for participatory citizenship, cites a study that explains the attractiveness of participation through the chance of change.

The study *Main Street America* (Hardwood Group, 1991) found that the key to citizen participation by those who actually participated was the possibility of change, not the certainty of success. If this study is at all accurate, then Americans can overcome participation obstacles if they perceive that their participation may have a meaningful effect... (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 45).

Within the framework of comprehensive discursive organizing, it is this possibility of change that drives citizens to get involved. Where other organizing philosophies have failed and political institutions fallen short, discursive organizing offers a new hope—a hope that can be achieved only through active participation. It is for this reason that participation serves an integral role in the comprehensive discursive model of grassroots organizing. A non-participatory model would contradict its own purposes. In this sense, participation is not only a necessary component of comprehensive discourse-based organizing but also a mark of its success.

### **Democratizing Discursive Organizing**

With this understanding of discursive organizing as a two-fold process of open tabling and participation in place, one must also recognize the democratization of comprehensive discursive representation. Dryzek and Niemeyer conceive of discursive representation in a fundamentally antidemocratic way. An expert-driven exclusionary Chamber of Discourses removes the human element from the representative equation

(Näsström, 2009). This thesis seeks to reformulate discursive representation in more democratic terms. This task rests upon discursive organizing's ability to promote democracy more broadly. In combination with the local comprehensive discursive organizing presented in this chapter, it does so by emphasizing the importance of subjectively held discourses and relying upon the plurality of discourses held within the individual self.

This thesis, in a democracy-bolstering move, places significance on discourses as they are subjectively held. Dryzek and Niemeyer require all discourses to be represented in the Chamber. Even if not a single individual holds a particular discourse as a constitutive element of his or her identity, it must receive equal representation in the assembly. The human element is extracted from the representative process. In the local setting, this requirement is unnecessary, impractical and misguided. Within a limited demos, "comprehensive" refers not to all imaginable discourses but instead only to such discourses as they are subjectively held by those within that area. Comprehensive discursive representation, as made practical through grassroots organizing, has set boundaries within which to operate; accordingly, organizers more completely represent the community by only representing the discourses found within that community.

The outward comprehensive representation of discourses also mirrors the inward deliberation typical of democratic theory. As this paper has argued uncontentiously from the opening chapter, individuals are composed of a multitude of discourses. When an individual casts a vote, the most fundamental of orthodox democratic practices, it is not a question of forthright presentation but rather a show of representation. That individual is representing the results of an internal deliberation that the individual conducted on his or

her own. Through a comprehensive public representation of discourses, discursive organizing allows for this deliberation to move from the private to the public sphere. The inclusion of other discourses makes for a more comprehensive representative process, and better policy options are thus pursued. As argued above, a participatory form of comprehensive discursive representation ensures this democratic element.

Through open-table organizing and an emphasis on participation, discursive organizing fulfills the demands of democracy. Related to this concept of grassroots organizing is that of deliberative democracy, which similarly promotes deliberative groups both small and large through which individual citizens form their political opinions. The keystone of this theory rests in deliberation.

When talking to one another in their small and large groups, Americans will be not encountering one another as consumers or coreligionists or even friends—but as citizens searching for common group, engaged in the great task of reconstructing a thin but precious civic bond that ties us all together in a common enterprise (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2003, p. 22).

Deliberative democracy literature proposes a similar positive process through which to achieve a more comprehensive democratic ideal. However, the process does ultimately rely upon an individual-based discourse of vote-casting, which engenders inconsistencies and difficulties for the promoters of deliberation (Pettit, 2003, p. 148-149). Regardless of this criticism, deliberative democracy nevertheless points to a theoretical groundwork upon which practical discursive organizing can establish itself.

## **Conclusion**

An ACORN organizer knocks on a fragile duplex door, and paint chips rain down on the recent college graduate's worn sneakers. An elderly Latina woman answers the

door. In a combination of broken Spanish and English, the two enter into a conversation about turning the neighborhood around for the better. After a few minutes, the woman is handed a voter registration form and told where to find information on the organization's issue priorities. The organizer thanks her for her time and moves on to the next door. As this woman thinks about how she will vote in that fall's election, she works through her different interests in her head. A fellow Latina is running for a state house seat held by someone who attends her church. She deliberates and reaches a conclusion.

The following Sunday evening at mass, the priest introduces an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation to speak about the concerns of that faith congregation. The same old woman, already having mailed off her registration form and decided how to vote, hears this man speak about the social gospel and about what Jesus did when confronted poverty and need. She joins a discussion after church to draft a group letter to the city council. Following the conversation, the final draft of the letter expresses what the church body as a group feels about a particular zoning ordinance perceived to be biased against poor families.

This woman attends IAF meetings regularly and continues to vote in line with ACORN's agenda, but little changes. Conditions continue to deteriorate. Politicians enter and leave office. Both ACORN and IAF claim victories here and there, but this woman sees little fundamental change. It is in response to cases like these that this thesis was written. Discursive organizing, rooted in comprehensive discursive representation, addresses not only the fleeting policy questions of day-to-day political life but works to reshape the very way public citizens influence their government. It moves the

deliberative process from the individual- or group-level to the broader public by adopting comprehensive discursive representation.

Discursive organizing, a new form of grassroots engagement, finds itself on the combination of comprehensive discourse representation theory with practices of open-table organizing and participation. While this project's opening chapter explores the benefits inherent in representing discourses, it is only through the above examination of the practices themselves that this approach to organizing demonstrates its democratic potential. Departing from historical norms of organizing as an oppositional endeavor and infusing participation and consensus-building into an otherwise scientific discursive process, this chapter's claims lay the groundwork for practical application and further study. Community organizers have a great deal of potential on their sides; through its proper application, the communities with which they engage can realize the democratic promise and set the standard for what American democracy can truly mean.



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