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## Rousing the People on the Land: The Roots of the Educational Organizing Tradition in Extension Work

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### Abstract

Recent calls for "engagement" have land-grant institutions searching for ways to develop "two-way" partnerships between universities and communities for broad civic purposes. The renewal of a powerful but little understood tradition of educational organizing in Cooperative Extension work can help place Extension on the front lines of this important work. In this article, the author traces and discusses the roots of the tradition of educational organizing, shedding light on one of the most inspiring forgotten chapters of cooperative Extension history.

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### Introduction

When the question of what Extension educators do is asked, the answer typically includes a list of such things as planning and developing programs, nonformal teaching, facilitating meetings and community forums, providing technical expertise, and applying research-based knowledge to the problems of individuals, families, businesses, and communities. But something important is usually missing from such lists.

Extension educators often also work as *organizers*. In their organizing role, they develop leadership and build relationships between and among individuals and institutions in order to engage people in the work of identifying, understanding, and taking action on a variety of public issues and problems.

Today, the view that Extension educators are or ought to be organizers could charitably be described as unusual. Organizing sounds scary--even inappropriate--to many in the Extension system. It sounds too "political." "Politics," as many people have come to understand it in the United States, is corrupt and negative, something to avoid at all costs. Moreover, many people in the Extension system hold the view that Extension is supposed to be "nonpolitical," that it should be above or apart from politics. Our work is education, many educators and administrators tell themselves, not politics.

But what if there were a way of understanding and practicing organizing that is deeply educational, that fits squarely within the historical tradition of Extension education, and that involves a practice of politics that is not negative and inappropriate for Extension educators to engage in?

Our ability to answer this question has a special urgency in connection with recent calls for "engagement" that have land-grant colleges and universities searching for ways to develop partnerships between universities and communities for broad civic purposes. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities recently defined engagement as "two-way partnerships, reciprocal relationships between university and community, defined by mutual respect for the strengths of each," where the "purpose of engagement is not to provide the university's superior expertise to the community, but to encourage joint academic-community definitions of problems, solutions, and success" (Kellogg Commission, 1998, pp. 30, 29).

What kind of work is it to "encourage" two-way academic-community partnerships, and who will do

it? I suggest that this work is best understood as organizing, and that Extension educators are uniquely situated to do it. Interestingly, however, the Kellogg Commission appears doubtful that Extension will be able to effectively do this work. They wrote that our "inherited" ideas of Extension "emphasize a one-way process of transferring knowledge and technology from the university (as the source of expertise) to its key constituents. The engagement ideal is profoundly different" (Kellogg Commission, 1998, p. 11).

The Commission appears to believe that their call for "two-way" engagement would send Extension off in a bold new direction that wholly departs from its past (and present). However, I believe that the path of engagement requires reclaiming and strengthening a tradition that is deeply rooted in Extension's history: a tradition of *educational organizing* that develops civic leadership skills and capacities, and builds respectful, reciprocal relationships between universities and communities through concrete public work initiatives and projects. In the Department of Education at Cornell University, we have begun a long-term research, teaching, and staff development program designed both to gain a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary nature of this tradition and to illuminate the ways it might be strengthened.

I discuss some of the findings of our work to date in two separate articles. In this article, I review the historical roots of the educational organizing tradition in cooperative Extension work. In my second article (to be published in the August 2002 issue of *JOE*), I look at the shape of this tradition in today's world, drawing from interviews of Extension educators my students and I have conducted over the past few years.

### **The Central Role of Organizing in Extension's Early History**

In recent decades, Extension education has frequently been understood as a one-way process of transferring knowledge and technology from universities to communities. But in my study of hundreds of Extension-related papers, reports, and books published during the first four decades of cooperative Extension's history (roughly 1904-1945), I have consistently found that *organizing*--not one-way knowledge and technology transfer--was the heart of both the theory and practice of Extension agents' work.

The first county agents who pioneered in Seaman Knapp's demonstration work, begun in the south in 1904, spent most of their time organizing relationships between farm families, small-town merchants and bankers, and government experts (Martin, 1921/1941; Bailey, 1945). Organizing was at the center of the work of the early home economists, especially as practiced by such leaders as Jane McKimmon of North Carolina and Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose of New York (McKimmon, 1945; Babbitt, 1995). And organizing was the main work 4-H agents did as they pursued youth development through the establishment of 4-H clubs (Farrell 1926; Smith 1926; National Committee 1935; Reck 1951).

Reflecting the centrality of the organizing role, M. L. Wilson, USDA's national Director of Extension Work, flatly declared in 1940 that the Extension agent's "primary job is to help the community analyze its problems in the light of all available information and so to organize itself that the necessary action can be taken" (Wilson, 1940, p. 4).

One of the sources of the view of Extension work as organizing was President Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life. In their final report, which included a call for the establishment of a national Extension system, the Commission wrote:

It is to the Extension department of [the land-grant] colleges, if properly conducted, that we must now look for the most effective rousing of the people on the land. . . . It is of the greatest consequence that the people of the open country should learn to work together, not only for the purpose of forwarding their economic interests and of competing with other men who are organizing, but also to develop themselves and to establish an effective community spirit. (Commission on Country Life 1909/1911: 128)

Following the Commission's view, in the first several decades of the Extension system, agents' core work was to organize rural people across the nation in efforts aimed at addressing a wide variety of practical problems and issues of public significance. Pulling campus specialists and community members together, Extension agents organized campaigns and initiatives to accomplish many goals, including:

- Improve crops and animals,
- Develop cooperative marketing,
- Fight diseases and pests, beautify homes and communities,
- Set up 4-H clubs,
- Advance public health and nutrition,
- Establish community gardens,
- Develop community arts and recreation programs and events, and
- Respond to the emergency relief needs of both war and depression.

This remarkably diverse organizing work, which was often metaphorically described as a "leaven," was richly captured in the first paragraph of the first comprehensive book that was published on the Extension system:

There is a new leaven at work in rural America. It is stimulating to better endeavor in farming and home making, bringing rural people together in groups for social intercourse and study, solving community and neighborhood problems, fostering better relations and common endeavor between town and country, bringing recreation, debate, pageantry, the drama and art into the rural community, developing cooperation and enriching the life and broadening the vision of rural men and women. This new leaven is the cooperative Extension work of the state agricultural colleges and the federal Department of Agriculture, which is being carried on in cooperation with the counties and rural people throughout the United States. (Smith & Wilson, 1930, p. 1)

While it is clear that Extension agents did a great deal of organizing in Extension's early decades, we must ask what *kind* of organizing they did. What were the immediate and larger purposes of their organizing, and which people and interests benefited in what ways? What kind of politics did their organizing involve, and what kind of learning did it facilitate? Drawing from a variety of historical materials as well as recent scholarship on the history of agriculture, land-grant education, and rural life, I have found different answers to these questions, reflecting two main traditions of organizing in the early decades of the Extension system: "technocratic" organizing and "educational" organizing.

### **The Technocratic Organizing Tradition**

One of the most notable developments of the era that gave birth to the national Extension system was the rise of a technocratic politics that aimed at achieving economic and political efficiency through scientific expertise and techniques of scientific management (Haber, 1964; Aikin, 1977; Smith, 1991; Fischer, 1990). As a political idea, "technocracy" can be defined as "a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant political and economic institutions" (Fischer, 1990, p. 17).

Following this kind of politics, technocratic organizing in Extension work was often patronizing and manipulative, seeking to force rural people to adopt new methods, technologies, and even points of view--against both their will and their judgment of what would best serve their interests and values (Danbom, 1979; Jellison, 1993; Neth, 1995; Babbitt, 1995; Scott, 1998; Beeman & Pritchard, 2001). The titles of two of the published histories of Cooperative Extension--*The Resisted Revolution* (Danbom, 1979) and *The Reluctant Farmer* (Scott, 1971)--reflect the negative attitude of rural people toward this tradition of organizing in early Extension practice.

The larger purpose of technocratic organizing in Extension was to industrialize agriculture, using science and new technologies to make it more productive and efficient, in order to further a national "cheap food" policy that mainly benefited urban industrialists and consumers. As Rodgers (1998, p. 321) has argued, "The early-twentieth-century agricultural market was a classic marriage of economic efficiency and unpaid social costs: cheap food at the expense of education, health, and ambition among its myriad small producers." But the technocratic organizing tradition was not limited to the pursuit of cheap food. It was also practiced to pursue other public aims, such as preventing soil erosion and exhaustion, and fostering better nutrition and sanitation.

Regardless of the ends, agents' job within this tradition was not education, but training. Their work was to "induce" behavior changes and the adoption of methods and innovations along predetermined lines, to meet predetermined ends. The talents, capacities, knowledge, thoughts, and ideals of rural people themselves were of little interest or value in such work, except to the extent that they might be used to further the goals that had been predetermined by government experts (i.e., Extension agents and specialists). If this sounds harsh, that is because it often was. If it sounds surprising, it is because the scholarship showing this side of Extension's history has not been widely read or understood.

### **The Educational Organizing Tradition**

While there is a great deal to learn from an analysis of the technocratic organizing tradition, my main interest is in understanding the nature and promise of the second tradition: educational organizing. While this second tradition existed in tension with the first, and while it was eventually marginalized in actual practice, in the early years it was clearly the "official" tradition, at least with respect to the rhetoric of Extension leaders.

Over and over again, Extension leaders at the state and national level described Extension work in educational organizing terms. That is, they wrote and spoke of Extension work as work that builds deeply cooperative, respectful, educational, democratic, and participatory partnerships among land-grant colleges, government specialists and experts, and ordinary people. Such partnerships were built not only for the instrumental purpose of solving a broad range of specific public problems and issues rural people faced in everyday life, but also as a means of political or civic education that would develop the capacities, spirit, and confidence rural people needed to work together to pursue their own values and interests. The civic learning came not through abstract lectures about citizenship or democracy, but through participating in both the shaping and the doing of actual public work.

Three excerpts from statements published in 1934 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act (Cooperative Extension's national enabling legislation) provide representative samples of

the espoused theory of educational organizing held by Extension leaders. The first is by C. B. Smith, Assistant Director of Extension at the national level:

Probably the largest result of Extension is that it has taught hundreds of thousands of farm men and women how to study their business, how to analyze their problems, and how to develop a local or farm program to meet the needs of the farm or community, and how to work together to accomplish the ends sought. When farm men and women take part with the technically trained Extension agents in gathering facts, studying and analyzing these facts, and formulating a betterment program based on those facts, you have builded (*sic*) something into their lives that is far reaching and of permanent value. That is what Extension is doing now and has been doing for 20 years. (Smith, 1934, p. 82)

The second is by R. J. Baldwin, Director of Extension in Michigan:

The program of Extension work in agriculture and home economics for 20 years has been based on the policy of personal participation on the part of farm people in the analysis of economic, social, and other problems, and in the carrying out of the solutions of them. Through these experiences they have discovered and developed their own capacities for learning and leadership. Studying, thinking and acting together has stimulated growth, nourished initiative and inspired self-dependence. Out of their achievements in farm, home, community, State, and national programs have come much confidence, courage, and understanding. . . . This development of people themselves, through their own efforts, I believe is the Extension Service's most valuable contribution to society. (Baldwin, 1934, pp. 89, 95)

The third is by A. E. Bowman, Director of Extension in Wyoming:

The Extension Service, while seeming to deal chiefly with the economic problems involved in helping the producer secure a greater income from his farm, and his wife to manage the home with greater economy and less effort, has contributed to rural society something vastly more important than a knowledge of improved practices and greater income. To induce men and women and boys and girls to come together to think collectively, plan collectively, and then act collectively to bring about desired conditions, does something to the individual. It gives opportunity, the greatest boon to mankind, for self-expression and development. It is not the acquisition of more lands or more cattle or more home equipment that brings greater happiness. It is the "finding of one's self," the development of leadership, improved skills, increased knowledge, broadened understanding, and greater appreciation attained by the individual taking part in community activities set afoot by the Extension Service that measures its value to rural people. (Bowman, 1934, pp. 88-89)

The aim of Extension work these excerpts reveal closely matches a view of the aim of community organizing published in the 1930s:

The aim of community organization is to develop relationships between groups and individuals that will enable them to act together in creating and maintaining facilities and agencies through which they may realize their highest values in the common welfare of all members of the community. (Sanderson & Polson 1939: 76)

What we can see from the above excerpts is a view of Extension education that is not only sharply at odds with the technocratic approach, but also with the Kellogg Commission's claim, noted above, that "inherited ideas" of Extension emphasize a one-way process of knowledge and technology transfer.

While the rhetoric of educational organizing was strong and consistent in Extension's early decades, we must ask whether or not there was an actual *practice* of educational organizing. In my research, I have found a good deal of evidence that there was. For example, Mary Mims, an Extension specialist in community organizing at Louisiana State University, helped agents organize communities across the entire state of Louisiana in a wide variety of public work initiatives during the 1920s and 30s (Mims, 1932). Her counterparts in many other states, such as B. L. Hummel from Missouri and E. L. Morgan from Massachusetts, did similar work (Hummel, 1926; Morgan, 1918).

One brief example from West Virginia provides a glimpse of what this work often involved. In 1933, Gertrude Humphreys, a home demonstration agent in Randolph County, West Virginia, organized local citizens in a planning process that gave them, in her words, "an opportunity to visualize their own community with its existing conditions and problems, to study these problems, and to discuss as a group the steps which need to be taken to improve unsatisfactory conditions" (Humphreys, 1934, p. 134). The citizens designed and conducted their own survey research of conditions in their county and then held a 2-day farm and home economic conference where people from all parts of the county joined with a small group of state and national Extension staff to discuss and analyze the data. They then divided into committees to discuss a number of issues the data revealed and possible strategies for dealing with them.

Out of this work, which took several months, specific objectives for the next several years were

identified, and groups of citizens rolled up their sleeves and developed a number of projects and initiatives to pursue them. Humphreys noted that the organizing approach the county agents used for this effort "meant a great deal of work," but that it was worth it "because of the interest created among the farm men and women of the county in working out a long-time program which these people themselves recognize as a product of their own efforts and thought" (Humphreys, 1934, p. 134).

## Conclusion

A much fuller analysis of historical documents and records is needed in order to understand the complex dimensions of Cooperative Extension's early organizing work. This work was sometimes quite troubling, especially with respect to issues of race, class, and gender (Danbom, 1979; Babbitt, 1995; Neth, 1995). However, one broad positive conclusion can be drawn from the brief discussion provided in this article: there was, indeed, a mainstream tradition of organizing in the first few decades of cooperative Extension work that was deeply educational and that involved a positive, constructive politics that was (and is) appropriate for Extension educators to engage in.

In educational terms, this organizing tradition fostered three kinds of learning (Habermas, 1971; Cranton, 1998):

1. *Instrumental* learning that helped people improve their technical skills in farming, nutrition, and other areas;
2. *Communicative* learning that helped people understand each other's views, problems, hopes, and interests; and
3. *Emancipatory* learning that developed people's leadership, confidence, and courage and enabled them to act together to change the world in ways that furthered their values and ideals.

The example from West Virginia cited above fostered all three of these through people's own participation in practical public work.

The politics of the educational organizing tradition was neither partisan party politics nor manipulative technocratic politics, but rather a positive politics of practical problem solving, of relationship and capacity building for collaborative public work. This "small letter p" politics, which Boyte and Kari (1996) describe as a citizen politics of public work, is deeply important. It is the kind of practical, everyday politics that "built America," to quote the title of Boyte and Kari's 1996 book. By "rousing the people on the land," Extension agents were a major force for teaching such a politics in rural America in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There is a great deal of additional research that still needs to be done to better understand the historical foundations and evolution of the educational organizing tradition in cooperative Extension work. This research is not trivial or irrelevant. It has the potential to transform our understanding not only of the story of what Extension was and what agents did in Extension's founding period, but also the story of what Extension is and does today.

This is especially important if Extension is to be seen as relevant to the calls for "engagement," for the building of respectful, two-way partnerships between land-grant institutions and communities. The call for engagement is a call to open an exciting new chapter of educational organizing in land-grant education. If Extension does not seem relevant to this call, it will be relegated to the sidelines instead of the frontlines, where it clearly belongs.

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