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Conceptions of Power and Role of Religion in Community Organising

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Abstract: Community organising, an approach aiming at building local leadership and empowering local communities, has become increasingly popular in the last few decades because of the crisis of more traditional practises of civil society building and political action. In this paper, the authors first describe the main tenets of this approach, formalised between the 1930s and the 1940s in Chicago by Saul Alinsky, and its history and evolution to the present day. The following paragraphs describe the role played by religious values and religious communities, often representing key institutions in rundown social and urban contexts, in this approach. In the last paragraph, the authors finally discuss the conception of power implied in the version of community organising proposed by the Industrial Areas Foundation (an organisation created by Alinsky) and its affiliates, and the role of religion in it. With this work, the authors argue that the relational and bottom-up idea of power proposed by the IAF and its affiliates, although often focused on the development of a local power base able to place political pressure on the authorities from below and even economic boycott campaigns, has increasingly also relied on soft power after Alinsky's death, especially because of the development of the 'relational' side of community organising, a process where the involvement of religious congregations (with the weight of their moral authority) has played a major role.

Keywords: power; religion; community organising; IAF; political practices

1. Introduction

Although this paper is part of a special issue on soft power in international relations, it adopts a peculiar angle on the subject, by analysing the conception of power and the role of religion in it in a transnational network. The latter is represented by the constellation of national and local organisations inspired, promoted, and coordinated by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), an organisation created in Chicago in 1940 by the activist and researcher Saul Alinsky. This approach, which had already spread to many parts of the United States because of Alinsky's work, has also been adopted in other parts of the developed and developing world in the past few decades, but has especially thrived in Europe where, between the 1990s and the 2010s, several national community organising (insofar CO) networks and local initiatives have been created.

The paper starts with an analysis of the main tenets of the practice of CO, followed by an analysis of the approach proposed by Alinsky and its evolution in the subsequent phases of the IAF history. Particularly, this section also shows the evolution of the idea of power in the community organising tradition, from Alinsky to the present day. Afterwards, the authors analyse the role of religion in this approach, which, although religious communities had already been a crucial part of Alinsky's power base in Chicago, has significantly grown in the following decades with the development of the so-called "broad-based CO", as proposed by the IAF, and even examples of purely "faith-based CO", solely relying on religious congregations. The following paragraph merges the two issues of the conception of power in the CO approach and the role of religion in the latter by discussing the possibility to conceptualise its idea of power as "soft power" as a consequence of the role of

religious institutions and values.[1] In the conclusions, the authors argue that the version of CO proposed by Alinsky, which heavily relied on self-interest and pressures on authorities based on social coalitions and even economic tactics of action (such as boycott), mostly could not be defined as an example of soft power. However, it is shown that, after Alinsky's death in 1972, the broad-based and relational version of CO proposed by the IAF—although retaining a very realistic conception of power relations—has increasingly relied on soft power to build social coalitions: a process enhanced by the growing role played in its network by religious congregations and their moral authority.

This paper is based on 12 interviews with senior and junior organisers working in the IAF-related networks in the US and Europe, as well as on participant observation carried out by the authors since 2019 during the development of a CO project in the city of Turin in northwest Italy, and the subsequent networking activities with Italian, European, and US organisers. The analysis also relied on a wide array of documents and analyses produced by the IAF and its affiliates, and on the already existing academic sources on the network in the US and abroad.

2. The Approach of Community Organising

The CO model stems from a wider tradition of social engagement and community empowerment that specifically addresses the social and economic inequalities that affect poor and destitute people at the local level in the US and Europe (Fisher 1994; Schutz and Miller 2015; Christens and Speer 2015; Coppola and Diletti 2020). The training and the mentoring processes both with people and local institutions and organisations carried out by organisers aim at re-establishing a connection between the need to take responsibility within oneself and the intentional choice to do it through concrete collective actions. The overall aim is political, specifically to re-energise the political culture of being responsible for the promotion of one's condition as a citizen, with the final aim to create a community organisation that represents the common interests of the citizens living in an area. The latter, thanks to its broad base in the territory, will in turn be able to become an interlocutor for both public authorities and economic powers and will obtain the power to influence the choices related to its territory and the flows of money to implement them. In the words of Edward Chambers, "community organising is people in civil society acting intentionally in concert with others to change their lives, powered and guided by their own interests and values." (Chambers 2018).

Among the core elements of the CO model are the development of a relational culture within a local community, the practice of organising and the focus on the power analysis.

The concept of community here is intended in territorial terms, referring to the deep and rooted connection between the people and the area they inhabit, as well as on the relationship among its members due to the shared interests of citizens. The focus here is on the strengthening of the relational bond, which is rooted in the spatial context and can include a wide variety of actors, such as faith institutions, universities, schools, unions, and (formal and informal) community groups, defined by the IAF-inspired organisers as "anchor institutions". Therefore, CO underlines the role of mediating institutions that already exist as crucial for strengthening civil society and the essence of democratic culture (Ritchie 2019). Indeed, in the IAF network, the membership refers to formal institutions and organisations and it is dues-based. This is a crucial element to guarantee and preserve the community organisation's independence from political preferences and public administration involvement, which in turn allows the local organisation to act as an independent player in debates about local policies.

The geographical frame is crucial because, regardless of the individual goals and whatever their reasons, all the actors located in a certain area share the same space. With the common interest to improve their own context of reference, these stakeholders have to face similar challenges and share the political responsibility to address them together. The reference is to the concept of political community, defined by Luke Bretherton as "community of fate":

in a world city you do not choose either whom you live next door to or who lives in the next block or neighbourhood. You find yourself living in proximity with people from whom you may be very different, whether individually or collectively. They may speak a world very differently. But whether one likes it or not, one shares the same fate as them. If the electricity loses power. If gangs rule the streets, everyone is under threat.

(Bretherton 2015, p. 86)

Through the CO methodology, the engagement of people with a shared fate living in proximity pursues the intent of strengthening their role as members of civil society and recognising their potential to achieve change through collective action. Through the comparison of the current picture of the "world as it is" and the desirable future of the "world as it should be", it becomes clear that there is substantial and evident tension between the two (Chambers 2018). This brings out deep reasoning on the meaning and the role of the community, on the goals it aims to pursue, on the ways to achieve them through collective action, and on how to make oneself accountable for the results.

The development of trust among the local leaders and their ability to act together is a core element for the sustainability of this process. This process builds power from the resources of the community in order to ensure the achievement of the long-term goal to develop a sustainable community acting internationally and in concert. It is a slow process but nonetheless concrete actions need to be pursued to acquire a certain level of self-conscience and recognition. These first actions are defined as "winnable issues" because the level of difficulty or the possibility of an undesired outcome should be very low, in order to avoid wasting too much energy, with a risk of deep frustration and renewed distrust in the possibility to change the current situation.

The second core element in CO is the organising practice, which consists in the ongoing process of disorganisation and reorganisation within the community taken into consideration. This activity is usually carried out by one or more persons, the organisers, who engage in "one-to-one" or "relational" meetings with the citizens, organise group meetings to address common concerns, and weave relations among the anchor institutions. Since the minimum common denominator of a local political community is the space citizens inhabit, the practice of organising means that the multiple issues of interest in that space are to be considered (unlike what happens with "single issue" organisations and campaigns). Through the practice of confronting the specific points of view and organising collective actions, it aims at stimulating local leaders to intentionally act together to address their common interests and therefore achieve some level of transformational change. The goal is to make possible meaningful meetings that create opportunities to listen, and to share each other's self-interests and identities, which would be of a multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-interest composition. This inclusive attitude would reinforce the idea that "solidarity rather than prejudice is more contagious when people engage in one-to-one relationships building and common action" (Ritchie 2019, p. 21).

The work with the local civil society in order to create a broad-based organisation consists in developing four main intentional habits. This is a continuous challenge because of the multi-level action that the process needs to address while working on some winnable issues of choice of the community. The four habits that are meant to develop a sustainable community organisation are:

1. *The habit of relating* is focused on the creation of deep connections among people living in a territory, by discovering each other's core stories in order to find points of connection between different areas of self-interest.

2. *The habit of collective action* refers to the creation of a public space of action where people and their institutions would address their self-identified issues. This intention of acting together builds stronger responsibility and accountability towards each other.

3. *The habit of analysing power* is also the third crucial concept of the CO model, underlining the relational dynamics that connect members of civil society and other stakeholders in pursuing social change. This point is discussed more in depth below.

4. *The habit of systematic reflections* is focused on a continuing evaluating activity that permeates the whole process of organising. Each moment of reflection is also an evaluation and a learning moment that allows participants to analyse the reaction to the individual and collective action and therefore to understand how to better pursue social change. This practice represents the continuous and circular exercise that communities and people within it need to keep doing in order to develop a deeper and better understanding of the human condition with a political intentionality (Gecan 2004).

According to Alinsky and the IAF, religious and secular organisers do not have the strength to spread and pass on these habits, practises, and norms on how to participate in politics and shape one's own future to people with different opinions; it is only possible on a one-to-one basis. Hence, the institution-based nature of CO as a way to incubate this process in the core places of the community (Ritchie 2019).

As a consequence of the above-reviewed points, the CO approach—although sharing some of their tenets—is critically different from other approaches to social change and improvement, such as the provision of direct services, as a consequence of the so-called "iron rule" of CO, "never do for others what they can do for themselves"; mobilisation, since the latter has a top-down nature that does not usually give a protagonist role to the local leaders; and advocacy, since raising a voice for others would undermine their opportunity to own the achievements (Chambers 2018, p. 102).

3. Saul D. Alinsky and the Development of the IAF Network

As explained in the introduction of this paper, Alinsky's tradition of CO originates in a lifetime of work in Chicago and, later, in several other US urban areas. These experiences brought him to conceptualise broad-based CO as we know it today. The practises and the theories are collected in his two books, Reveille for Radicals (Alinsky 1946) and Rules for Radicals (Alinsky 1971), as well as many articles.

Alinsky's interest in the problems connected to urban life was the result of his career as a sociologist at the University of Chicago in the 1930s. The industrialised cities between the late 19th and the early 20th century were strongly characterised by the need to address the poor conditions of life of the factory workers. Hence, a new field of research needed to develop in order to properly analyse this issue from a sociological point of view, to understand the social transformation processes and the growing public participation of individuals in the urban context (Engel 2002).

From the latter experience, Alinsky started to get closer to the residents of poor neighbourhoods and their conditions of life, and developed a deeper interest in directly engaging people living in poor urban areas. Later, in Rules for Radicals, he wrote about the "dignity of the individuals" as a guiding principle for any organiser:

> when we respect the dignity of the people (we can't deny them their) elementary right to participate fully in the solutions of their own problems. Self-respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises and who are not helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of private or public services. To give people help, while denying them a significant part in the action, contributes nothing to the development of the individual. In the deepest sense it is not giving but taking- taking their dignity. Denial of the opportunity for participation is the denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work.

(Alinsky 1971, p. 123)

During the time working at the CAP project (1934–1941), Alinsky got involved in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood, which arose in the Chicago meat stockyard section, described as the "Jungle" by Upton Sinclair in a famous novel (Sinclair 1906). The experiment that took place in the neighbourhood starting in 1939 looked like an impossible challenge (Norden 1972). Nonetheless this became a crucial case study for the later formulation of the principles of CO. The first people's organisation was created in 1939: the "Back of the Yards Neighbourhood Council" (BYNC) "was composed of the people themselves

working through their own local organisations" (Alinsky 1946, p. 48). The local context was characterised by a Catholic predominance but the local parishes were deeply divided on a nationalistic basis. Thanks to an approach that focused on broad-based, multi-issue, grassroots associations that aimed at representing the interests of the larger local community, the BYNC was able to overcome the nationalistic and linguistic divides by actively addressing common interests, but this was also thanks to the help of the local Catholic hierarchy, which shared the will to make the local Catholic community less fragmented. The BYNC experiment relied mostly on Catholic parishes and the packinghouse union but it also included different types of groups, formal and informal, that had a real following among the people (Schutz and Miller 2015). Thanks to the aforementioned elements this association was seen by many as a truly new democratic model able to promote active and direct participation on the basis of a local community leadership (Horwitt 1992).

Alinsky had a neutral conception of power, as a tool that could be used for both good and bad goals, since "the description of any procedure as 'positive' or 'negative' is the mark of a political illiterate." (Alinsky 1971, p. 17). In this context, in society, there are no definitive friends or enemies, and social coalitions, as well as oppositions, can be constructed and developed. Hence, the development and building of power is not bad per se; according to Alinsky, the lack of power, in terms of ability to act, has deep consequences on the ability of every individual to express their own freedom by envisioning a different world than the one they live in. This situation can however be reverted thanks to the process of organising previously disorganised communities: organising people, in terms of empowering them; and organising money, in order to make the community able to control the flows of resources necessary to implement bottom-up community-oriented projects.

The success of BYNC earned Alinsky the support of both high-level Catholic clergy, namely Bernard J. Sheil, Archbishop of Chicago, and of the union movement, represented by John L. Lewis, president of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO). This led to the founding of the Industrial Areas Foundation in 1940, with the aim to spread Alinsky's approach throughout the US, thanks to the training of new organisers and the spread of the organising work in other cities across the Midwest United States (Belotti 2011, p. 36), and later, it also led to the involvement of many African-American protestant churches seeking social and moral commitment to social justice (Schutz and Miller 2015).

The effort to create a first informal training program led by Alinsky resulted in the development of many lead organisers who later played a crucial role in the organising movement (Belotti 2011, p. 39; Slayton 1986; Schutz and Miller 2015). The increment of the staff of the IAF was permitted to cover new sectors, such as the study on the "community of transition", referring the great migrations of Black families from the southern part of the United States toward the main cities of the north, which created tensions and needed to address the issues of racial integration and civil rights of Black Americans. Indeed, it was in the 1960s that Alinsky's approach gained new relevance in connection with Black communities.

Alinsky suddenly died in 1972, but Edward Chambers continued his work through the IAF, promoting the development of broad-based citizens' organisations. The implementation of the "modern IAF" became the challenge that Chambers and the rest of the IAF staff had to go through, to develop an institution and a network able to train professional organisers and to face the new historical conditions.

The challenge to reorganise the IAF itself also engendered a general reflection on the organising model and how to address the critical points that had emerged in the past decades. Particularly, Alinsky's heirs were focused on the development of local organisations able to thrive in the long term, not just in relation to short- or medium-term campaigns. Indeed, Alinsky's work had mainly been based on the creation of local coalitions on a self-interest basis, which often had experienced problems that remained after the end of a major campaign. This was also connected to a different conception of power: while Alinsky had mainly been focused on specific campaigns to solve specific situations of injustice and able to attract the public attention, the focus now shifted towards the

creation of *durable* power, made possible by the construction of a cohesive and empowered local community represented by a sound community organisation. To this end, Chambers focused on the relational dimension of power, as the capacity to act together, and the development of long-term bonds in a community through the sharing of people's stories and experiences. In Roots for Radicals, Chambers writes about his time working in Chicago with Dick Harmon and the creation of the "relational meeting" tool. In Chambers' words,

> Saul's way of organising, which we had inherited, was influenced by electoral politics and the CIO labour organising of John L. Lewis. In this approach, where one person equals one vote and all votes are equal, the ability to mobilise large numbers of people is the key. Under Alinsky, organising meant "pick a target, mobilise, and hit it." The new rule of modern IAF is "connect and relate to others". Issues follow relationships. You don't pick targets and mobilise first; you connect people in and around their interests.
>
> <div align="right">(Chambers 2018, p. 37)</div>

The "relational meetings", also known as "one to one", assumed a central role in the entire organising process. This practice is about developing power "with" the others, not "over" the others (Gecan 2004). The latter is typical of hierarchical dimensions with the use of linear power, which is defined as the capacity to influence others either directly or indirectly. The problem of power does not refer just to the outcomes, but to the level of social and individual fulfilment and the kind of conditions under which this kind of experience is created (Loomer 1976).

Since the 1960s–1970s, new experiments of CO grew in number all over the country and the engagement of the middle class as envisioned by Alinsky gradually took place. With the expansion of the network of local community organisations all around the country and the death of the executive director Ed Chambers in 2015, the IAF decided to go through a division in the organisation of the regional affiliation. Mike Gecan and Ernesto Cortes, Jr., became the new national co-directors of the IAF, each one respectively responsible for "Metro IAF" and "West-Southwest IAF".

At the turn of the century, CO was increasingly seen as a tool to also revitalise democracy outside of the US. As a consequence, several international CO networks were created outside of the IAF tradition, such as ACORN International, the Leading Change network, and the European Community Organising Network (ECON) (Schutz and Miller 2015). As for the IAF, it also expanded overseas, first to English-speaking countries, such as the UK, Canada, and Australia, and later to other areas, such as Western Europe.

Together with the IAF experience in the US, the latter region is the main focus of the research on which this paper is based. This choice is also a consequence of the involvement of the authors in a CO project based on the IAF methodology developed since 2019 in the Italian city of Turin, as an initiative of the local university.

The IAF network in Europe includes multiple affiliates, which in turn include local community organisations and multiple local chapters for each city where there is a CO initiative. In order to put some light on this issue, we give an overview of the experience of these countries where the approach has been developed during the last 20 years under the supervision of the Industrial Areas Foundation, and then we focus on the religious element.

The United Kingdom—In the UK, Neil Jameson, founder of Citizens UK, started to implement the CO approach in 1989. The first local "citizen alliance" (London Citizens) was based in London. It later expanded to create Citizens UK, a network that today counts 15 local civic alliances in different cities across the country. The local citizen alliances are made up of dues-paying member organisations representing faith institutions, universities, colleges, schools, trade unions, and community groups. The intent is to promote more individuals getting together for social change, building teams and groups, and organising (Balazard 2012, pp. 116–17). Matthew Bolton is the current Executive Director of Citizens UK.

In the UK, we can also find a very peculiar CO initiative affiliated with Citizens UK but autonomous: The Centre for Theology and Community. It is an ecumenical centre started by Christian churches in east London, whose goal is to equip local congregations with practises of CO and theological reflection that can reinforce their transformative role in deprived areas of the city. Some of its activities are described more in depth below in the section of the paper focused on religion and CO.

Germany—Building on the experience of Leo J. Penta, an American-born Catholic priest and university professor, who had acquired experience as an organiser in the US, CO started spreading in Germany during the 1990s (Penta 2011). The founding of the German Institute for Community Organising (DICO) and the Forum on Community Organising (FOCO) in 2006 allowed the participation of civil society representatives and students in concrete practical projects.[2] The first experience of CO was developed in the east side of Berlin, where, in 2000, the local organisation "Organising Schöneweide" was founded with 24 civil society organisations meeting to design their own neighbourhood.

Currently, there are six other civic platforms operating in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia (Cologne and Duisburg) under the supervision of DICO. Among DICO's successful campaigns, we can mention improvements in Berlin in the unemployment sector by incrementing the role of the job centre of the District Wedding/Moabi, improvements in the distribution of family doctors and general medical care in Neukölln, the opening of the first burial ground for Muslims in Neukölln, and improvements in the housing situation in Cologne.

The Netherlands—In the Netherlands, another new experiment of CO has taken place since 2018. The organisation De Noord As develops its actions in the north periphery of Amsterdam, sustained by Diaconie Noord, a network of religious institutions, and by the Hart voor Noord Foundation, both with an interest in developing local figures with practical and financial support to address their own problems. The current focus of the action group of De Noort As is the right to affordable housing in a district of the city where fragile people struggle more and more to keep living.[3] The lead organiser of the initiative is Huub Waalewijn, a social worker active in the territory for 5 years.

Italy—Italy's connection to Alinsky's tradition had a first sparkle in the 60s; an "Italian Project" had indeed been proposed by Alinsky as part of the IAF's second front in Europe (Finks 1984), but had been abandoned very shortly. The promoter of the creation of a fully-fledged CO project in Italy was, half a century later, Diego Galli. His first experiment of translation took place in the eastern periphery of Rome, and in 2017, an association, the Community Organizing Onlus, was founded. In 2019, a second Italian pilot project, funded by a local foundation, started to take form in the northern periphery of Turin as an initiative of the University of Turin. As mentioned above, the latter experience, together with 12 interviews carried out among IAF-linked organisers in the US and Western Europe, is the primary source on which this paper is based.

4. The Role of Religion in Alinsky's Work

Alinsky's attitude towards religion and his relation with it is a complex issue and must be put in the context of his activity as a community organiser. On the one hand, although identifying himself as a Jew (Norden 1972), he wasn't known as a practising person and probably not even as a believer. He also did not refrain from adopting deliberately shocking statements in this domain, by declaring that between Heaven and Hell he would pick Hell "because that's where the have-nots are", or by mentioning Lucifer in Rules for Radicals, as "the very first radical [. . .] who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that at least won his own kingdom" (Alinsky 1971, p. ix). On the other hand, on a purely strategic and pragmatic plan, he very frequently engaged with religion, at both the rhetorical and the organisational levels. In rhetorical terms, his frequent use of religious references and metaphors was linked to his well-known rule according to which a good organiser should "never go outside the experience" of his or her people (Alinsky 1971, p. 127). Therefore, in order to speak to citizens imbued with a religious worldview, "the

organiser should have a familiarity with the most obvious parts of a people's traditions" (Alinsky 1946, p. 99). This does not mean that he refers to this tradition with an orthodox approach; on the contrary, his references often clash with common wisdom and are very clearly Alinskyan in their interpretive keys. A very clear example of this practice is his reference to Moses as "a great organiser", able to outmanoeuvre God, by relying on the latter's self-interest, to dissuade him from destroying the Jewish people after they had started to worship a golden calf (Alinsky 1971, pp. 89–91). This story is also a key to understanding some of Alinsky's central concepts of Community Organizing: conflict, negotiation, compromise and reconciliation. However, it was his knowledge of the Bible, resulting from his Jewish education, that gave him the ability to cooperate effectively with religious organizations like the Christian Churches (Szynka 2001).

Indeed, he also enjoyed good personal relations with believers: for example, his decades-long friendship and correspondence with the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain (Doering and D'Ubaldo 2011) is frequently recalled. However, it was at the organisational level that his reliance on institutional religion often became crucial to organise neighbourhoods, such as his first CO endeavour, the Back of the Yards neighbourhood in Chicago. Therefore, "of the major organisational categories and groupings in the Back of the Yards [. . .] the most important to the success of a broadly representative Neighborhood Council was the Churches" (Horwitt 1992, p. 69). Even in this context, however, his approach always appears very pragmatic; indeed, he openly declares that it would be pointless to appeal to most religious people in terms of religious ethics or law, because "Christianity is outside the experience of a Christian professing-but-not-practicing population". On the contrary, the correct approach must rely on "their own self-interest, the welfare of their Church, even its physical property" (Alinsky 1971, p. 88).

This point of view seems coherent with the recollection of Alinsky's attempts to involve the Catholic community in the creation of a neighbourhood council in the Back of the Yards. Indeed, the main resistances against this effort were not religious in nature but were connected to other factors related to the identity of priests and their parishioners. On the one hand, while young pastors educated in US seminars and inspired by the Rerum Novarum encyclical of Pope Leo XIII[4] were easier to involve, the old guard, still imbued with theological rigidity and old continent prejudices, were much more reluctant. On the other hand, ethnic identities represented a major divide within the Catholic community itself, between Irish, Latino, German, Polish, Slovak, and Lithuanian parishes, which scarcely communicated among them (Alinsky 1946, pp. 103–4). Alinsky partly managed to override such rivalries by "playing rivals off against each other" (Horwitt 1992, p. 71), thanks to their fear that other communities might get an advantage from their participation in the project. However, a major breakthrough was represented by the involvement in the neighbourhood council of Archbishop Sheil, who was interested in the project not only because he was progressively oriented, but also because he also had a stake in the attempt to overcome ethnic rivalries among Catholic parishes.

Alinsky's relations with US religious people did not end in 1940s Chicago. In the early 1950s, Alinsky even engaged to write a biography—which, however, was never published— of Monsignor John O'Grady, an Irish-born socially engaged Catholic prelate with whom the IAF founder had become friends since the previous decade (Horwitt 1992, pp. 160–62). In the following years, until Alinsky's death, religious institutions—and particularly, Catholic priests, who represented a crucial actor to reach the poor immigrant communities living in many underdeveloped US neighbourhoods—played a major role in most of his organising efforts: from the Chelsea neighbourhood in New York in the late 1950s to Rochester where, in the mid-1960s, a group of church leaders invited Alinsky after major racial unrests had taken place in the city (Horwitt 1992).

5. The Role of Religion in Post-Alinsky Community Organising

After Alinsky's sudden death because of a heart attack in 1972, the IAF's religious orientation became even more prominent, both because organising efforts were often

carried out in contexts where faith made the difference—such as the Latino immigrant communities in the Southwest and Texas (Interviewee #8)—and because of the personal religious background of many IAF leaders. Among them, we must necessarily mention Ed Chambers, who was Alinsky's successor at the head of the IAF and led the organisation until 2009. A son of Catholic Irish immigrants, Chambers had studied for priesthood, but had been ousted from seminary because of his modernist ideas. After being involved in Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement in Harlem, he was hired by Alinsky and played a major role in structuring the IAF, especially by establishing more structured training programs for new organisers (Freedman 2015). Under his leadership, the IAF's congregation-based efforts increased, and the organisations more and more relied on religious groups "in a way that Alinsky never did". Indeed, the involvement of religious institutions was no longer, as in Alinsky's strategy, only a powerful tool, but it started to also be perceived as a way "to provide a set of value commitments to combine with practical self-interest" in order to build long-term campaigns (Warren 2001, pp. 57–58).

In his works, Chambers also highlighted the strong connections between faith and democracy in the pursuit of hope and the improvement of conditions of life:

> Like religious hope, democratic hope empowers citizens to act for the good with confidence that they are part of a larger whole. [. . .] Because both of these sources of hope are available, members of religious institutions can stand shoulder to shoulder with those of secular organizations like labor unions, business groups, and civic associations in seeking change in their communities. Citizens and people of faith [. . .] stand on common ground named hope.
>
> (Chambers 2018, p. 26)

A new approach towards religion can be seen, for example, in the work of Ernesto Cortes, the IAF's current co-chair, who, since the early 1970s, has played a crucial role in expanding its activities in other areas of the US, such as California, where a massive Hispanic immigration wave was taking place. During his efforts in favour of San Antonio's Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), he had at first strictly followed Alinsky's tactics. However, he had subsequently started to adopt new models of organising, and

> began to make a profound innovation. He went beyond the priests and the usually male presidents of parish councils and began to reach more deeply into the networks of lay leaders that spread out from the church. Parishes on the south and west sides served as the center for a variety of social activities. Cortes met with over one thousand residents active in some way in the community. He started with priests, got the names of potential supporters from them, and moved through the community. He recruited leaders, now mostly women, from the ranks of parish councils, fund-raising committees, and churchgoers who were active in PTAs and social clubs.
>
> (Warren 2001, p. 50)

While previous organising efforts had been, first of all, focused on issues, this new approach—as mentioned above—privileged the construction of a network involving the commitment of people with values to their communities. Only after a dialogue among the latter about the needs of the community, specific issues to be targeted and specific plans for action were laid out. With the involvement of lay community leaders, women now often took the place of the mostly male community leaders who had been previously involved in Alinsky's organisations.

This new course of action was strengthened when Cortes moved to East Los Angeles to coordinate the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO), with the understanding that, because of the power of religious symbols and values in motivating people to action, the IAF organisers could not simply "draw from them in a utilitarian, 'outsider' fashion". As a consequence, "over the course of the next 20 years, retelling stories from a largely Judeo-Christian tradition and identifying potent symbols of community building became central organizing tools for the IAF" (Warren 2001, p. 59).

The IAF was not alone in pursuing this new approach, which became known as "faith-based" or "congregation-based" CO. Several other organisations, either stemming from Alinsky's organisation and tradition, or autonomously developing their organising efforts, started to increasingly rely on religious institutions and communities (while on the contrary, other CO associations such as ACORN relied on a more secularly-oriented door-knocking approach). Among them, the most relevant are the Gamaliel Foundation, which, since the late 1980s under the leadership of Gregory Galluzzo, a former Catholic priest, has developed CO projects and training programs in several US cities, in the UK, and in South Africa[5]. Another organisation adopting a similar approach was the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO)—based in Oakland, California—which has recently significantly rebranded Faith in Action[6] (Wood 2002).

As for Europe, although the continent is supposed to be a more secular context in comparison to the US (Berger et al. 2008; a fact also acknowledged by our Interviewees # 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9, see Appendix A), the religious component is also quite evident in several local organisations across Europe developed under the IAF umbrella.

For example, the local chapters of Citizens UK, probably the oldest and best-known IAF-related CO initiative in Europe, show a very significant presence of religious groups among their members. In 2007, 59% of the group members of London Citizens represented religious institutions (Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches, and mosques) (Balazard 2012, p. 121). In Germany, the development and implementation of the CO initiative started with the support of the Catholic University of Berlin and was led by a catholic priest, Father Leo Penta. Nowadays, there is still a strong representation of religious group members in DICO-affiliated organisations, although the number of secular groups has increased (a fact which prompted Interviewee #2, a German organiser, to declare that "congregation-based organising", in its pure form, "is kind of over"). Similarly, one of the three founding members of the Italian Associazione Community Organizing Onlus, based in Rome, is a Catholic priest. His parish, along with a local Baptist Evangelical Church, were among the main supporters of the initiative in Rome (Interviewee #5).

Moreover, in the UK, it is worth mentioning the presence and activity of the above-mentioned Centre for Theology and Community based in London; this is an inter-religious umbrella organisation aimed at "developing congregations and leaders in deprived and diverse contexts through the practises of community organising, rooted in prayer and theological reflection", with a specific focus on churches activities, and at the same time carrying on research activities on CO.[7] The Centre carries out several programs, mainly involving different types of Christian communities (especially Anglican, Catholic, and Pentecostal). On the one hand, some programs aim at congregational and religious leaders' development with the aim to provide them with better tools to face contemporary society; on the other hand, there is an effort towards the creation of relationships between and among religious communities and other organisational sectors. This happens through several methodologies that belong to the tradition of CO, such as individual meetings and focus groups (Interviewee #12), and through theological reflection and the publication of materials targeted on religious issues and specific religious communities.

According to Interviewee #10, this activity is particularly important, because "you need to use appropriate theological materials" when approaching a community. Of course, materials need to be adapted to the specific contexts (Interviewee #12), since their impact also depends on the specific lived experience of that group, as well as on the appropriate behaviour of the organisers who approach the group (Interviewee #10).

Once congregations are involved in a CO effort, a major problem encountered in Western Europe is the need to merge their presence with that of a secular civil society that is often very developed: a situation very different from the US context, where secular civil society is weaker, while many major social movements (such as, for example, the civil rights one) has a religious identity (Interviewee #8). During the development of the authors' CO project in Turin, the diffidence and mutual mistrust between religious and secular local leaders was indeed sometimes a major issue, rather than the coexistence among different

religious communities. As recollected by our Interviewee #7, an independent organiser active in France, this problem was so significant in French society, that he chose not to directly engage religious communities, but only religious charities not directly performing religious services. As acknowledged by Interviewee #4, this problem is also common in the Netherlands, but anti-religious sentiments can weaken in case of non-exclusive religious congregations, which propose an "open spirituality". In Germany, where the DICO CO effort is instead strongly based on religious institutions, the secular nature of civil society can lead to the choices not to pray before meetings: a practice that is instead widespread in the US (Interviewee #3), and to "leave religious out of the issues" that the CO groups pursue (Interviewee #9).

Another major stake in the development of CO initiatives among religious congregations in Western Europe is the presence of massive immigrant religious communities, particularly Muslim ones. Although, because of their strong relational bonds, they could be a very promising ground for organising efforts (Interviewee #3), given the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences in place, it often proves difficult to involve the latter (for a reconstruction of the issue, see Ali et al. 2012). The problem with actively involving Muslim religious communities was very evident during the development of the authors' CO project in Turin, and it was also acknowledged by several of our interviewees. This is particularly true about Germany, where, according to the organisers we interviewed, the Muslim community is not only divided in terms of nationality (as in the case of the Catholic immigrant community in the 1940s Chicago). Even within national groups, for example, the large Turkish diaspora community, deep political divides between mosques emerge, which creates for the organisers an unmanageable situation of crossed vetoes, where the participation of all actors is virtually impossible (Interviewees #2, 3, 6, and 9).

Broadly speaking, these differences in the role of religious congregations in the US and Western Europe must also be framed in terms of different public cultures, marked by a different role and conception of the state and the public institutions, which are usually stronger than in the US (a point especially highlighted by our German interviewees) and can sometimes engage in the development of civil society through funding and initiatives (in the words of Interviewee #4, "a top-down thing creating something bottom-up"). In relation to religious congregations, this is particularly true, considering the less neutral role played by the state toward faiths and the open (also financial) support for their activities, which is in place in several European countries. This context creates a different opportunity structure for CO networks, which, in some cases, have to consider the possibility that public institutions can become partners and play a positive role in the advancement of organising initiatives and actions (Interviewee #11), rather than simply interlocutors or even opponents, for their organising efforts. This point puts one of the IAF main tenets into question. This situation is made even more complicated by a public culture focused on the idea of state intervention rather than citizens' spontaneous activation (Interviewee #8), coupled with negative ideas of power and conflict (Interviewee #6), which at times can make the process of organising itself and the possibility to carry out effective contentious actions targeted on the public authorities more difficult.

6. Can We Talk about Soft Power in Community Organising?

In order to understand the conceptualisation of power implied in CO and its evolution from Alinsky's to Chambers' IAF, it is useful to start from the classical 20th century typologies.

To begin, in reference to Max Weber's (Weber 1947, 2004) theorisations, power in CO is related to the concept of Macht (de facto power) rather than Herrschaft (legitimate power). This is particularly clear considering the wall of separation created by the IAF organisers between the civil society grassroots organisations and the political authorities, which can sometimes be seen as targets for the campaigns and some others as positive interlocutors, but never as associates or funders for the community organisation (see, for example, Gecan 2004). However, once the latter is created, a new legal-rational legitimisation seems to be

born, although based on the support of informal civil society networks rather than elected political institutions. In relation to legitimisation, we must also add that Alinsky's role in the CO movement could probably be defined in charismatic terms; however, after the IAF development and especially after Alinsky's death, this factor has weakened, with the insistence on the organiser as an activator and coordinator of energies rather than a central figure in the long term. Although subsequent charismatic representatives of the movement, such as Cesar Chavez or Marshall Ganz, have emerged (Schutz and Miller 2015), the insistence has been mostly on collective empowerment and "co-action", rather than charismatic leadership.

Broadly speaking, Alinsky's idea of power is based on the idea of a sharp division of society in two categories, the "Haves" and the "Have-Nots" (Alinsky 1971), which is not surprising considering Alinsky's positive relations with major figures of the US "power debate" of the 1950s, such as C. Wright Mills (2000), who thought that America's power relations were based on the predominance of an elite. Indeed, all of Alinsky's public activity seems to be oriented towards the rejection and the subversion of this predominance, by organising and empowering the Have-Nots to counterbalance the Haves' power. This is clearly, therefore, a theory of power from below in opposition to unilateral, top-down power of formal and informal, political and economic authorities. Although a broader definition of Alinsky's attitude towards democracy goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is probably worth noting that, while in Reveille for Radicals (Alinsky 1946), this idea might have some socialistic flavour; in Rules for Radicals (Alinsky 1971, p. 59) he seems to be more oriented towards framing this idea in terms of a commitment to a "free and open society".

Alinsky's recipe to change the elitist structure of society, or at least balance it in favour of the Have-Nots, takes place through organisation and the adoption of the right tactics of pressure (Alinsky 1971). Here we have a major difference between Alinsky's point of view and the strategy adopted by the IAF after his death, particularly under the leadership of Edward T. Chambers. In Alinsky's idea of organising, the creation of power coalitions to give power to the Have-Nots was mainly based on self-interest and often clearly tactical and temporary in scope, with a focus on short- or medium-term campaigns. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the post-Alinsky IAF, understanding the need to create durable social coalitions and community organisations in order not to waste the organising effort in the long term, started to insist on the relational side of organising. The main tool created to operate this change was the above-mentioned "relational meeting" or "one to one", aiming at sharing stories and creating durable relationships among the local leaders to cement a stable and powerful grassroots community organisation. This is very evident also in the definition of power itself adopted by Chambers, as "the ability to act": a phenomenon that "takes place in relationships". As mentioned above, Chambers and the IAF organisers prefer to talk of "relational power", as:

> infinite and unifying, not limited and divisive. As you become more powerful, so do those in relationship with you. As they become more powerful, so do you. This is power understood as relational, as power *with*, not *over*.
>
> (Chambers 2018, p. 17; italics in the text)

The concern about creating a strong local base of power based on relations before engaging in action is so deep in IAF-affiliate organisers that they can even choose not to engage with national CO networks until they regard their local organisations strong enough (Interviewee #1).

This, however, does not mean that the understanding and the use of power made by the IAF and its affiliates can be understood as soft power. Indeed, when the confrontation with public authorities and other "strong powers", rather than the coalition building, is concerned, they seem very keen on using a "smart" mix of the three traditional powers (see Weber 2004; Nye 2008): political (based on authority and the use of force), economic (based on incentives), and ideological or soft (based on moral suasion). Particularly, Alinsky

seemed very competent in using the first one, also as a consequence of his experience in trade union organising and his positive relations with the CIO leader John L. Lewis (Horwitt 1992); moreover, he often used economic means of pressure, such as boycott campaigns and the ownership of companies' shares but he also was aware of the role of ideological or soft power. This is where the religious factor also comes to the fore. Although, as mentioned above, Alinsky is very clear in his idea that religious actors, not unlike other types of actors, are essentially driven by self-interest rather than moral considerations, he is also aware of the ideological power and authority embedded in religious institutions. Thus, during his early struggles in Chicago, he clearly exploits the authority of the members of the Catholic hierarchy, such as Archbishop Sheil and, later, Cardinal Stritch, to give legitimacy to his role as an organiser and an interlocutor of public authorities. This factor is also evident in several other campaigns, such as the one against Kodak's racial segregation work policies, where the invitation received from a circle of local congregations played a major factor in Alinsky's legitimisation as a power broker (Horwitt 1992). Although both the US and the European society have changed in the meantime, the moral authority of religious leaders still seems to play a role well-exploited by the organisers, as shown, for example, by Michael Gecan's (2004) recollections of the struggles in 1990s and 2000s New York, and as recognised by Interviewee #3, a religious minister active as an organiser in the US and Germany, who acknowledges the respect often given to him as the representative of a religious institution.

Indeed, this role of religious congregations became even more prominent in the post-Alinsky IAF, especially under the leadership of Chambers. The latter, as a former seminary student, was much more used to religious circles and language than the secular-minded Alinsky. Religious congregations and the smart use of their religious authority or soft power thus became a major plank of the IAF organising strategies. This was particularly true in contexts marked by widespread strong religious beliefs, such as the Latinx Hispanic communities organised by the Southwest IAF. As explained above, the use of religious languages, imaginaries, and values to frame the organisers' activity, and the involvement of the laity made by organisers such as Cesar Chavez, was a major innovation in comparison to the self-interest-based idea leading Alinsky's involvement of religious leaders. In the work of the IAF-related organisers, especially in the US, Biblical language and references are often very open and clear. For example, the programs aiming at the creation of affordable housing, throughout the IAF-related organisations, are named after the Biblical prophet Nehemiah, who had promoted the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

This does not mean that the IAF network has converted to a primary use of soft power. Indeed, its organisers, even the religious leaders and organisers that we interviewed for our research, are always very careful in framing their understanding of power relations in society in a very realistic way, with a clear consideration of the role of pressure tactics and economic influence. Evidently, self-interest and power analysis are still a primary focus when they build a social coalition and they craft a campaign. It is true, however, that the religious soft power legitimacy lent by the massive involvement of religious leaders and local congregations in the organising efforts today plays a major role both in building the broad-based coalitions the IAF relies on, and in adding more legitimacy to the community organisations' demands to the authorities.

7. Conclusions

In this article, the authors analysed the network of organisations promoted and coordinated by the IAF, in the US and abroad, to try to understand the role played by religion in their methodology and activities, its evolution from Alinsky to the present day, and its role in determining the conception of power implied in CO initiatives. Unlike many existing works on CO, the focus was not primarily on the US, but also on the growing European CO movement, also to understand how the passage from North America to the Old Continent has influenced how CO is conceived and practised.

A first remarkable conclusion is that, unlike many other contemporary civil society movements and initiatives (especially in Europe), CO is deeply imbued with a religious imaginary, and deeply marked by the role of religious congregations as essential planks of local community organisations. However, this role has changed from the self-interest-based involvement of religious groups carried out by Alinsky and his collaborators to a more careful consideration of the role played by religious values and imaginaries in the construction of the community. Quite strikingly, this role of religion has remained a significant part of CO activities even with the passage from the US to the more secularised Western Europe. However, in this context, the stakes in managing the involvement of religious communities together with that of an often vibrant (and, in some cases, wary of religion) secular civil society were higher, while more challenges were posed by a peculiar type of religious pluralism, which is frequently marked by the presence of immigrant faiths whose successful involvement in CO initiatives is often very problematic to carry out.

Finally, the article focused on the idea of power in CO, and its evolution from the Alinskyan perception of power, essentially in terms of self-interest and the creation of ad hoc social coalitions able to pressure power, to the "relational" idea of power proposed by today's IAF and its affiliates, relying on a long-term work of community construction carried out through the creation of deep bonds within a local area. Although this concept might suggest the presence of a "soft" conception of power, this article shows that this idea is rejected by the IAF organisers, who still retain a very Alinskyan conception of power, where the construction of a strong and cohesive local community aims at balancing the overwhelming influence of political and economic "strong powers". This happens through a "smart" mix of different types of influence, ranging from bottom-up campaigns and political pressures to the use of economic boycotts and incentives to more "soft" forms of influence and moral suasion. This is, particularly, where the role of religion comes to the fore, by lending to the organisers both a powerful tool for the construction of the local community, and a moral authority in facing the powers that be.

However, what is still unclear is whether this logic can also work effectively outside of the US context, and particularly in the more secular European continent. As shown above, religious congregations and leaders play a significant role in several European CO initiatives. Given the still relatively short history of these experiments, however, the broader efficacy of the IAF model of organising in Europe is still to be fully tested and proved, and surely this issue needs further research in the future.

Appendix A. Interviewees List

1. Man, religious minister, former organiser, UK
2. Man, organiser, Berlin, Germany
3. Man, religious minister and organiser, Berlin, Germany
4. Man, organiser, Amsterdam, Netherlands
5. Man, religious minister and organiser, Rome, Italy
6. Man, policy consultant and organiser, Berlin, Germany

7.   Man, organiser, France
8.   Man, researcher and organiser, Durham, Germany
9.   Woman, organiser, Duisburg, Germany
10. Man, religious minister and organiser, UK
11. Woman, researcher and organiser, Catania, Italy
12. Woman, religious leader and organiser, London

Notes

[1]   The authors would like to point out that the concept of soft power is used in this paper only in scientific terms and with analytical purposes: indeed, it is not only never used by the practitioners of community organising met during the research—who usually prefer the concept of "relational power"—but is even explicitly rejected by some of them (Interviewee #8) as a "statist" concept, related to a top-down and "unilateral" idea of power.

[2]   Organising in Deutschland, https://www.communityorganizing.de/handlungsansatz-co/community-organizing-in-deutschland/ (accessed on 21 March 2022).

[3]   De Noords As, https://www.denoordas.nl/ (accessed on 21 March 2022).

[4]   *Rerum novarum*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Capital and Labor, http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html (accessed on 21 March 2022).

[5]   Gamaliel, https://gamaliel.org/ (accessed on 10 November 2021).

[6]   Faith in Action, https://www.faithinaction.org/ (accessed on 10 November 2021).

[7]   Theology Center, http://www.theology-centre.org.uk/about-us/ (accessed on 10 November 2021).

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