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The Story of Social Change

Lessons from a lifetime of organizing.

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Why do we experience such difficulty even imagining a different sort of society? Why is it beyond us to conceive a different set of arrangements to our common advantage?...Our disability is discursive: we simply do not know how to talk about these things any more. -Tony Judt, Ill Fares The Land (2010)

After forty-three years of organizing, I stepped down as co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) six months ago.

When I started in 1976, I had two big questions about organizing. The first was whether one could have a normal family life while organizing professionally. The second was whether organizing could really work. Could it have impact that lasted and that reached significant scale? Thankfully, over the course of my career I found the answers were yes to both: I was able to have a full family life, and our organizations figured out how to create real change that could be sustained over decades and across regions.

I saw firsthand the extraordinary courage of African American civil rights leaders in Chicago, but I also saw the power of the Cook County Democratic machine.

But I didn't anticipate a development that troubles me as I shift gears: that the large-scale and long-lasting impact of our organizations would not be recognized by the mainstream media or by the vast majority of academics and analysts who study and document these trends. Howard Zinn once lamented, "The obliteration of people's movements from history is one of the fine arts of American culture." Apparently, longer-lasting people's organizations are overlooked as well.

Today you could drive all around New York, or San Antonio, or Washington, D.C., and a dozen other places and not realize that the streets and sewers beneath you, the thousands of homes along the

avenues, the new schools rising in formerly forlorn neighborhoods, the park along the East River, the person on the bus or subway sitting beside you going to work from his or her affordable home or apartment—all that and more were imagined, designed, fought for, delivered, and maintained over decades by a form of organization that receives little or no recognition.

That neglect is due, I think, to the approach to organizing that we took—rooted in local institutions, focused on real leaders instead of media darlings, proudly pragmatic and non-ideological, focused on a few major issues not a long litmus test of policy positions. Observers of social movement are more typically captured by the polarizations that they often decry, but nonetheless amplify and accelerate: free market libertarianism versus socialism or progressivism, conservative Republicans versus liberal Democrats, Trump versus Pelosi.

So, as I transition into my new role as senior advisor, still doing on-the-ground organizing, I want to tell the real story of social change: how it happens, who creates and implements it, and what foundational work allows, for example, a job training strategy to succeed, a local library to innovate and flourish, a series of neighborhoods to be rebuilt by and for the people who already live in and near them. The appetite for change, the hunger for improvement, is still strong, but the clarity about how to organize effectively is not.

When I started at the IAF my worries about impact were justified. The IAF was a small and struggling experiment in organizing, building fragile toeholds in Texas, Chicago, New York, and Baltimore. In the 1970s we had a handful of young organizers—most of us flying by the seats of our pants. Today the IAF has strong and muscular organizations in twenty-three states and the District of Columbia. It also has a range of working relationships with organizing efforts in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. And we have about 250 well-trained professional staff of all ages and levels of experience and literally tens of thousands of sharp and savvy volunteer leaders engaged in our efforts.

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It is measured in relationships and meaningful reactions over time.***

In 1976 we were what would now be called a “start-up.” We weren’t trying to create another organization. We were experimenting and testing the feasibility of a new *kind* of organization at a time when two other organizational types—local civic groups and broader national issue-based movements—were dominant. I started organizing as a student who first observed and then participated in some of the actions of the civil rights movement in Chicago. I saw firsthand the extraordinary faith and courage of African American deacons and deaconesses, of young black clergy, and of Roman Catholic priests and nuns, who walked a gauntlet of white-hot hate in housing marches on the southwest side. Those leaders remain heroes and heroines to me to this day. But I also saw the power of the Cook County Democratic machine and its paid clergy apologists—power that blunted the impact of civil-rights activists and sent them out of the city bruised and partially defeated. I also worked in two local civic efforts in Chicago—the Contract Buyers League in an African American community known as Lawndale, the other a small neighborhood association in a white ethnic community a few miles away. Each had some impact.

The Contract Buyers League successfully exposed the habits and abuses of the predatory lenders of that era—securing an average \$14,000 payment for each homeowner who had been exploited. The Northeast Austin Organization spearheaded, with other groups, the attempt to end the practice of redlining by local banks and savings and loans—the first step in the effort that led to the creation of the Community Reinvestment Act. In spite of those successes, the impact was limited; both the African American neighborhoods affected by contract selling and the adjacent white ethnic neighborhoods crippled by redlining continued to decline; and the overall arrangements of power and

exploitation remained largely unfazed. A new book by Princeton professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit*, does an extraordinary job of documenting the structural racial bias baked into the nation's real estate practices. She details the damage done by those practices on generations of working-class African Americans seeking to live a better life in safer neighborhoods. She honors the attempts of some communities to counter these trends, but concludes that they were no match for the power of the real estate industry and the political machines that supported it and benefited it.

Chastened by what we believed to be the limits of these two options, senior IAF organizers at the time developed a training session that compared civics, movements, and this new experiment that we gave a clunky name: "institutionally-based power organization." When we did that session, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, all hell would break loose. Those devoted to local civic efforts would accuse us of ignoring the wishes and priorities of block clubs, homeowners associations, and the like. Those committed to the anti-war and other movements would say that we had sold out—giving up on their strategy of sweeping (often national or even international) change for our vague process of power building that required years of painstaking ground work before the first public action even took place. Those were exciting, heated, raucous sessions. (The only thing that would get people more worked up was when we banned smoking from our meetings!)

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Four decades later, I am certain that the IAF made a good bet. Because we built deep and powerful bases in cities and counties; because we sought out and engaged the institutions that still made sense to people in those places—churches, synagogues, mosques, schools, libraries, other not-for-profits, labor locals, and more; and because we created a culture of high-powered leadership training and development for our small but growing professional staff and large and expanding teams of local leaders, we were eventually able to target and tackle a series of issues that everyone thought were intractable. And they *were* intractable if your starting point was a small community of a few hundred homes or apartments—which was the reality for most civic efforts. And they *were* intractable if your movement insisted on the non-negotiable demand of immediate and total change—a demand that often failed to untie each knotty issue and wore out and confounded activists.

In 1983, for example, we decided to try to rebuild the abandoned, burnt-out, and most desperate sections of East Brooklyn. We had a very powerful local organization in place by then called East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC). Its leaders believed that they could do something unprecedented—rebuild a community by and for the people who already lived there. They understood that neither the market, nor the state would ever make things fair for black homeowners. So they created the kind of third sector power organization that would—and did.

Just two weeks ago I was working with a talented young organizer; we met in a home that EBC built in 1986, in Brownsville, with a woman who was the original buyer. It's a modest brick townhouse that has stood the test of time. But, more importantly, its owner, retired comfortably, was sitting in a home that she and her late husband had paid off in full, enjoying a retirement that included travel and miniature golf. She is one of almost 5,000 such homeowners (and another several thousand renters) in east Brooklyn. The average **increase** in equity for each buyer has been more than \$200,000. That translates into nearly \$1 billion of equity in the wallets and savings accounts of new African American and Hispanic homeowners, and many more billions in increased equity for the local owners of homes and apartment buildings in their surrounding area. If someone had told me in the 1980s that it would take thirty-five years, I am not sure I ever would have started. But having been part of the effort, I can say with confidence that I would start tomorrow with another city that is open to this, even if it takes thirty-five more years. I wish Taylor had included more consideration in her book of the efforts of

East Brooklyn Congregations and others that created conditions on the ground for black homeowners to thrive.

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Another success: in the late 1990s, our Illinois affiliates led by United Power for Action and Justice focused on access to health care, becoming the nation's first state to require all insurance companies doing business in the state to keep young adults on their parent's insurance policies until they had their own or turned twenty-seven or thirty years old. The effort expanded health coverage to more than 900,000 Illinois residents through an effort called Kids Care and eventually, Family Care. The organizer who helped craft that effort, Cheri Andes, moved to Boston, where our affiliate, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization worked with Republican Governor Mitt Romney and a Democratic legislature to pass the country's first statewide health coverage plan in 2006—parts of which informed the Affordable Care Act several years later. Just last week, more than 800 leaders in Boston met to push for controls on the high cost of pharmaceuticals there.

Also in the 1990s, our Texas IAF organizing team, led by Sr. Pearl Cesar, invented a job training approach called Project Quest, enabling thousands of individuals to learn the skills in health care and other fields that qualifies them for work that pays a livable family wage. A recent **study** performed by the Economic Mobility Corp, a nonprofit group dedicated to researching questions of economic mobility, found that Project Quest is the most effective job training program of its kind in the nation.

This list goes on and on.

All of these breakthroughs required the presence and persistence of the institutionally based power organizations that we started and then maintained for decades.

The theory behind that approach was straightforward: the notion that communities no longer have institutions, or have only crippled institutions, is false at best, racist at worst; effective organizing must be hooked onto existing local institutions that are durable and valued by the local citizens. IAF organizing relies not on isolated individuals but on institutions that people own and control, a citizens' organizations capable of transporting people into and through the tough and sometimes treacherous terrain of the power arena.

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Real change depends on finding a large group of local leaders—people, as the late great Peter Drucker wrote, with actual followers—not a single charismatic person with a gift for media attention, not a spellbinding speaker, not a celebrity spokesperson. The calculus of power isn't defined by hits or clicks or tweets. It is measured in relationships and meaningful reactions over time. Even the whole notion of confrontation—which the uses in organizing—is defined relationally. The purpose of a confrontation—from the Latin *con* and *frons*, which means “face-to-face” or even “in your face”—is simply to demand recognition. Recognition is the first step toward a working, albeit often testy, relationship with other people and institutions with power. That relationship is the basis of all reciprocity, negotiation, and compromise. In movements, then and today, confrontation is often conducted for its own sake.

Real change also depends on a commitment to nonpartisanship. Unlike many other organizing groups, ours are not fronts for the Democratic or Republican Party. We believe that there are three

important sectors in society—the state, the market, and the voluntary sector—not just two. We plant our flag, first and foremost, in the third sector and position ourselves to work with or against anyone in the other two sectors, depending on how they react to us.

About six weeks ago, the *New York Times* ran a very long, positive account of Project Quest that covered the Economic Mobility Corp Study. Mark Elliott, president of the Corp described the results as "stunning" and noted that Project Quest has the "largest sustained earnings impact" he had "ever seen" among work-force development programs. Deep in the story, the writer devotes two sentences to its history: "Project Quest was born 27 years ago in a Hispanic neighborhood in San Antonio. . . . Community groups created Project Quest as a way of preparing workers for better-paying, more highly skilled jobs that were less vulnerable but still in demand."

The two groups the *Times* refers to anonymously have names: Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance. The primary midwife of Project Quest also has a name, Sr. Pearl Cesar. She worked closely with IAF senior organizers in Texas—Ernesto Cortes, Jr., Arnie Graf, and the late Sr. Christine Stephens. And they uncovered remarkable community leaders like the late Andy Sarabia and the late Fr. Albert Benavides. I list these their names not only because they earned recognition many times over, but also because there is no way to understand *why* Project Quest succeeded if you don't appreciate the deep and longterm relational work, the leadership development, and the evolving power analysis that build the foundation for Project Quest's success. The *Times* story makes no mention of these efforts. Nor does it mention that almost every cent raised for Project Quest was, and continues to be, a product of the power and leverage and non-partisan, political savvy of COPS and IAF.

Around the same time that the Project Quest story came out, I read a fine book, *Palaces for the People* (2018), by the NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg. It's a paean to libraries—praise that local libraries richly deserve. And its first chapter opens in the New Lots Library in East Brooklyn. It rightly records the vitality of the neighborhood residents who use that library these days. But it makes no mention of a fairly important fact: the New Lots Library sits squarely in the thriving neighborhood that East Brooklyn Congregations rebuilt.

It's not that the *Times* reporter and Klinenberg were negative or dismissive. On the contrary, both authors were positive and respectful of the topics that they chose. But they missed a big part of each story: the kind of activism that made success possible.

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The problem is that, forty-five years after civics and movements were the dominant, default options for public engagement in our country, bureaucratic programs and a new generation of movements have emerged to take their place. This bureaucratic approach uses a service model favored by foundations and academics and many journalists. The bureaucratic culture of service programs partly reflects and resonates with the bureaucratic culture of a university or research group. It has metrics—which are often important and necessary. But the demand for metrics has become a kind of cult. And the narrow preoccupation with metrics today blocks the peripheral vision needed to see other dynamics. It blinds analysts and observers to the broader kinds of relational work—the scores thousands of individual meetings done by organizers in San Antonio or East Brooklyn, year after year, now for forty or more years, the hundreds of training sessions for many thousands of volunteer leaders done there, the painstaking identification of power and leverage points that underlies every action and long-term strategy. We believe, teach, and practice accountability.

We say that the word inside "accountability" is "count." But you have to count the right things and not miss a complex public reality. For instance, it may satisfy many funders to count the number of email

blasts sent, or the number of fliers placed on porches, but these practices, as Gerber and Green have documented, are the least effective and most costly way of actually engaging occasional voters. The most effective way is to have a series of short, three-minute, face-to-face exchanges with potential voters. But those encounters are time-consuming. And the numbers of encounters will seem small, compared to circulating, let's say 300,000 circulars that no one will ever read.

The newer movements, like the pro-rent regulation movement in New York City, often pattern themselves on the best of the civil rights and anti-war movements of half a century ago. Many of them re-enact the songs and tactics and slogans of those early movements—songs and tactics and slogans that emerged out of the felt experience of people in the past, but that now are predictable and even stale. Recent movements have modernized by incorporating social media, but the opponents of those movements have quickly countered those moves. And while social media can be a useful tool in organizing, it is not a strategy: it cannot take the place of understanding and building of complex, mature, public relationships, which, in our world, are the sinews of long term and productive power organizing.

After a lifetime in organizing, I am more convinced than when I began that almost every major issue that we now face can be addressed if there is a commitment to finding leaders, listening to them, engaging them, and then working patiently but relentless with and through them to address the challenges they face. About a month ago, I was sitting in a library in Gallipolis Ohio, on the Ohio River, with about forty librarians, school superintendents, bank and hospital executives, and local clergy at a meeting with one of the five commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission. In my semi-retirement phase, I've been meeting leaders in rural southern Ohio, testing this question: can the universals of effective organizing work in a rural and more conservative region?

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In the course of my travels, I have met remarkable leaders running innovative libraries that have become the vital social and learning centers in their communities. On their own, librarians like Debbie Saunders in Gallipolis have been figuring out ways to provide internet access to local students, job seekers, and families. When I suggested a session with FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks, they quickly brought together leaders from seven counties and had a constructive and informative exchange with him. As I sat there, I could see how they could and would connect the isolated and often marginalized individuals and institutions in their region with the rest of the connected world. That's the kind of effort that continues to inspire me.

Here's the way the late Elinor Ostrom, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, put it: "Extensive empirical research leads me to argue that . . . a core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans. . . . we also have to be willing to deal with complexity instead of rejecting it." And by rejecting it, she meant not resorting to the default responses of both major parties—simplistic and sweeping market solutions or simplistic and sweeping governmental solutions.

Meaningful social change is not some pie-in-the-sky goal. It's achievable. In fact, we and others have achieved it. And my colleagues—local leaders and organizers in the IAF—are generating more social change even as I write.

But the challenge now is to make sure that that possibility, that opportunity, is seen as an option by those who are trapped in the established tropes of limited bureaucratic programs or frustrating and fleeting movements. Journalists and academics, already in danger of being marginalized, need to rise to this challenge. It just might be a way to revive two partially paralyzed professions. And it would certainly contribute enormously to our struggling society.