

Obama and the Organizing Tradition

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Barack Obama will be our first president to have been a community organizer. Constructing associations is not easy, and organizers have a long tradition of debate about how best to do so.¹ Obama contributes something to this organizing tradition, and he has suggested that if he becomes president his use of executive power will be shaped by what he has learned from it.

That an elected official might model his or her role on the organizer's is not a new idea for Obama. In an interview with the *Chicago Reader* during his first campaign for the Illinois Senate thirteen years ago, Obama mused:

People are hungry for community; they miss it. They are hungry for change.

What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer... as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them? As an elected public official, for instance, I could bring church and community leaders together easier than I could as a community organizer or lawyer.

A common understanding within the organizing tradition is that the term "community organizing" refers to organizing efforts within existing communities defined by geography or, perhaps, affinity (rather than, say, within workplaces). Obama seems to see community organizing as a process of *creating* communities. Where many participants in the organizing tradition have held that the role of the organizer is different from that of the leader—and, especially, from that of the political office holder—Obama wants to merge these roles. These are innovative and troubling ideas.

Obama was schooled in the organizing method of Saul Alinsky. In the late 1930s, Alinsky began to apply the techniques of industrial union organizers to the problems of poor urban neighborhoods. He developed an approach to community organizing that is frank about power and self-interest, in which neighborhood groups based in churches or other stable institutions seek power for those Alinsky liked to call the "have-nots". Alinsky-style community organizations typically use creative and disruptive demonstrations to challenge unresponsive landlords, business owners, and government officials. Alinsky's approach depends on the skills of trained organizers who recruit members, convene coalitions, and

help organizations develop strategies. Alinsky's organizer is a "realistic radical," a social critic at least as concerned with power as with persuasion, a savvy troublemaker who might sometimes make reasoned arguments but who is more likely to cajole, to goad, to teach by thrusting community members into new situations, or to reflect back to community members thoughts and experiences they might not otherwise have examined. What the organizer must not do, Alinsky insisted, is lead. Leadership is the prerogative of community members—or, one might better say, of citizens. The organizer's role, in contrast, is to remain in the background, expressing neither self-interest nor will, fostering the leadership and power of others by bringing them out of their customary isolation into organization. Only with organizers nudging them toward collective action, Alinsky proposed, can the have-nots gain political power.

During Obama's presidential campaign, journalists have generally used the candidate's Alinsky-school background to paint him as a streetwise political realist. He may be this, but he has taken other lessons from his organizing experience as well, lessons quite different from those Alinsky and many others have drawn from the organizing tradition. Obama's ideas about the process of organizing and the role of the organizer open up certain political possibilities and close down others, and it is worth our while to notice both sets of consequences.

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From 1985 to 1988, Obama was an organizer for the Developing Communities Project (DCP), a church-based community organization on the South Side of Chicago. Obama tells the story of his experiences there in the middle third of his memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995, 2004), making his Chicago years a bridge between his childhood and his later trip to Kenya in search of his father's family. As Obama tells the story, his apprenticeship in community organizing carried him from innocence to worldliness, from the immediacy of a child's notions of family to the complex uncertainties of an adult's overlapping community memberships. Obama chose as the epigraph for this book the first half of I Chronicles 29:15, which in the King James Version reads: "For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers." Obama's book (in both its editions²) contains what appears to be a typographical error—*them* instead of *thee*—which significantly, if unintentionally, changes the verse from an expression of human lowliness and transience in the face of the divine to a complaint about social isolation or exclusion, shared by one outsider with another. For Obama, the lessons to be learned from community organizing concern the problems that arise in the absence of community. Obama seems to see the status of stranger as an inheritance passed to each of us in the contemporary United States. The role of the organizer, then, is to unestrangle us—that is, to teach us how to unestrangle ourselves.

Early in his memoir, Obama recalls what it was like to play basketball as a youth. Players wanted to play well and to win, he writes, but that was not all.

And something else, too, something nobody talked about: a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that's how you sustained the trance.

The basketball courts, he writes, provided “a community of sorts, with an inner life all its own.” But this community soon passed. The young Obama wanted a sustainable answer to the question, “Where did I belong?” More importantly, he began to think that others felt and had felt the same need. No surprise, then, that when Obama went to work for the DCP, he saw “becoming an organizer [as] a part of that larger narrative,” part of a generations-long search for belonging. His organizing seems not to have recreated the self-erasing trance of the basketball courts, but in Obama's writings the word *community* always suggests a relationship that absorbs the individual with an intensity that we might call spiritual. At the same time, Obama indicates that in choosing to organize, he rejected the playacting of college student protests in favor of the worldly principles of hard work and realism. (This mixture of utopian aspirations and a self-conscious commitment to tough-minded practicality seems characteristically American, in its incoherence as much as in its earnestness.) For Obama, the pursuit of political change through collective action at least intimates a kind of unity that stands beyond politics. Organizing, he writes, holds out “a promise of redemption.”

Obama describes the instructions he received from Marty, the seasoned organizer who trained him:

The day after the rally, Marty decided it was time for me to do some real work, and he handed me a long list of people to interview. Find out their self-interest, he said. That's why people become involved in organizing—because they think they'll get something out of it. Once I found an issue enough people cared about, I could take them into action. With enough actions, I could start to build power.

The distinction between showy rallies and “real work,” the reliance on one-on-one conversations, and the attention to self-interest and power-building are essential features of Alinsky's organizing method. As well as anyone who has written about it, Obama describes the slow and frustrating work of building an Alinsky-style organization: bringing in new members, sparking members' awareness of their own potential power, blundering toward

strategies through which that small share of power can be leveraged to win substantial changes. Obama begins his organizing career trained in Alinsky's method, but—seeker after community that he is—he becomes discontent.

Relating the story of his first days in Chicago, Obama describes a visit to a neighborhood barber shop. “Had to be here to understand,” the barber says of the black community's enthusiastic response to the election of Mayor Harold Washington. Obama reflects:

He'd meant here in Chicago, but he could also have meant here in my shoes, an older black man who still burns from a lifetime of insults, of foiled ambitions, of ambitions abandoned before they'd been tried. I asked myself if I could truly understand that.

Obama is worried that he cannot understand (or be understood by) a generation whose experiences he hasn't shared, but this anecdote implies a question of greater political importance: Can the outsider be an effective community organizer? Or, rather: Can the effective organizer remain outside the community?

Alinsky would answer that the organizer *must* be an outsider with no roots or particular allegiances within the communities where he organizes—a permanent sojourner, as it were.³ At the heart of Alinsky's method is the idea that the organizer plays a role different from that of the organization member, who belongs to a specific community and has loyalties of religion, race or ethnicity, neighborhood, friendship, and family. Alinsky writes in *Reveille for Radicals* (1946), his first book on organizing, that the maxim of the organizer is “*In order to be part of all, you must be part of none.*” Like Machiavelli's Prince, who would rather be feared than loved if he cannot be both, Alinsky's organizer “cannot enjoy the confidence—even to a limited degree—of all other groups as long as he is personally identified with one or two of the community agencies,” since “it is impossible to secure the trust of all groups and...the next best position to be achieved is that of being suspected by all.”

If the organizer's aim were to persuade community members to adopt his own ideology or goals, he might need their trust. But his purpose is to agitate community members to articulate their own grievances, to allow the program of the organization to emerge from members' own interactions, and so the organizer refrains from advancing an agenda of his own. If the organizer needed the trust of community members, perhaps he would need to share their histories, their experiences, or their identities. But he doesn't; he simply needs them not to believe that he is opposed to their interests or group loyalties. To play his role well, then, the organizer must also refrain from the relationships that define the lives of community members.

Obama's devotion to an ideal of community, however, leads him away from Alinsky's method and from the self-limiting role Alinsky prescribed for the organizer. At a crucial moment later in his story, as he describes a period of malaise in the DCP, Obama recounts a conversation with a member named Mary, as she helps him set up for a meeting:

"Do you mind if I ask you something, Barack?"

"No, go ahead."

"Why are you here? Doing this work, I mean?"

"For the glamour."

"No, I'm serious. You said yourself you don't need this job. And you're not very religious, are you?"

"Well..."

"So why do you do it? That's why Will and I do this, you know. Because it's part of our faith. But with you, I don't—"

The conversation is interrupted, and Obama never answers Mary's question. In the meeting that follows, several members share stories of why they became involved in the DCP. Mary comments to Obama afterwards, "We noticed that you didn't share anything with the group." Obama, still trying to be a good Alinsky-style organizer, replies: "The organizer's supposed to keep a low profile." Mary counters: "Who says?"

This is the turning point in Obama's organizing narrative. The DCP soon pulls itself together and starts an energetic new campaign for an employment and training center in the neighborhood, and Obama himself starts, as he says, to "[dissolve] the lines between organizer and leader." Forming friendships with the people he is trying to organize, Obama tries to move toward the "center of people's lives." Friendships are the first stage of this move; the second stage begins when one of the local pastors Obama tries to organize begins to organize Obama. The pastor asks:

"By the way, what church do you belong to?"

[Obama replies,] "I...I attend different services."

"But you're not a member anywhere?"

"Still searching, I guess."

"Well, I can understand that. It might help your mission if you had a church home, though. It doesn't matter where, really. What you're asking from our pastors requires us to set aside some of our more priestly concerns in favor of prophecy. That requires a good deal of faith on our part. It makes us want to know just where you're getting yours from. Faith, that is."

At this point in his story, Obama has begun to doubt Alinsky's precept that self-interest is the most reliable—or even a sufficient—basis for organizing. To stop “searching” and join a church is to proclaim religious faith, certainly. But Obama's conversation with this pastor also plants the suggestion that the organizer might, after all, need to earn the trust of community members—their faith, in a second sense of the word—by becoming one of them. To become a member of a church is, in part, to claim a place as a member of a community in a very concrete sense, with one's name on a roster, one's money in a collection plate, and one's body in a pew. Without this membership the organizer will not necessarily fail (“It *might help* your mission,” the pastor says, although he probably means this as an understatement), but cannot be fully trusted by those he or she tries to organize.

Trust does not matter to Alinsky because his organizer does not need to be trusted to build a power-seeking organization oriented by the self-interest of its members. Obama, however, has by now decided that what matters most is not power but a “cultural community” that can be a “sustaining” force in the lives of its members. Isolation, not powerlessness or injustice, is the evil that Obama now aims to confront.

If the organizer's role is to foster community, Obama decides, then Alinsky's strict separation between the roles of organizer and community member must have been a mistake. Realizing that Chicago's South Side has become his home (“Place kinda grows on you, don't it?” a DCP member asks him), Obama makes his first Sunday-morning visit to Trinity United Church of Christ. He describes the sermon preached that day by the now-famous Reverend Jeremiah Wright—the title of which, “The Audacity of Hope,” became the title of Obama's presidential campaign manifesto—in which Wright links the travails of Biblical characters to the struggles of his church members:

These stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world.

Obama seems to have found—not organized—the community he has been looking for. It is a community not of overlapping self-interest but of shared emotional experience, shared values, and shared faith—religious faith, but also faith (or trust, as Alinsky would have said) among the community's members. Obama describes tears running down his face during the alter call. This is, like the basketball courts of his youth, a “community...with an inner life all its own,” and membership in this community, as in that earlier one, can lift its members to an ecstatic state. The rootless organizer is no longer a stranger or a sojourner.

Obama sets community rather than power as the aim of organizing in part because he senses that the communities currently available to us are fragile. Contemporary Americans as Obama sees us hunger for community, and our hunger cannot be satisfied unless communities are “created, fought for, tended like gardens.” Where organizers of Alinsky’s generation could assume the vitality of local communities with dense religious and cultural networks and coherent identities, Obama believes he cannot take these things for granted. His decision to join a church, as he presents it, is an act of community-creation—or at least community-tending, which is not quite the same thing. There can be no community organizing without at least the seeds of a community, he suggests, no community without community-creating institutions such as churches, no churches without church members. To refrain from membership in the fundamental institutions of a community, then, is to neglect the foundation of political organizations.

Obama is concerned not only with community membership in a broad sense but with church membership in particular. He writes in a 1990 essay on his DCP experiences that the most important contributions the black church can make to community organizing are its “values and biblical traditions that call for empowerment and liberation,” and in a 2006 speech at a conference of Call to Renewal, a leading group within the small “social justice” wing of evangelical Christianity, Obama proposes that Americans yearn not only to “relieve a chronic loneliness” but also to find “a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives...an assurance...that they are not just destined to travel down that long highway toward nothingness.” For Alinsky, churches had an instrumental value in community organizing, as relatively stable membership institutions containing a wealth of relationships into which an organizer could tap. For Obama, the content of religious teachings matters too. If the organizer’s work is to yield bonds that are more than instrumental, if organizing is to create associations that can, like Obama’s basketball courts, sweep us up in a trance in which individual wins and losses cease to interest us, then this “sense of purpose, [of] a narrative arc” is necessary. A community organization that simply seeks power for its members cannot provide this.

When Obama insists on the church’s intrinsic value, he reflects a broader tendency among certain schools of post-Alinsky community organizers, especially those associated with groups such as the Gamaliel Foundation and Alinsky’s own Industrial Areas Foundation. Obama, however, is concerned not just with the place of the church in the process of organizing but also with the place of the organizer in the church—and thus in the community. This is the move within Obama’s political thought that is, perhaps, most consequential.

If the organizer is a member of the community, Alinsky's requirement that he limit himself to a "low profile" becomes obsolete: the organizer can become a leader, and need no longer limit himself to raising questions behind the scenes of political affairs. If the organizer is simply a community member with an unusual devotion to public life, then, as Obama suggested in his *Chicago Reader* interview, the best organizer might indeed be an elected official who works to "bring church and community leaders together." For that matter, an executive might be better at this project than a legislator could be. The executive "energy" and "unity" lauded by Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist 70* might even make the president the American citizen best suited to the task of organizing the public, of constituting the public as a community.

This sort of organizer would face another kind of limit, though. If Obama's organizer is a community member, linked to other community members by personal loyalties and shared faith, he or she will find it difficult to trouble those bonds. Obama's notion of the organizer as community member means, in the end, that he expects the organizer to be bound by the existing sensibilities and beliefs of the community. Where Alinsky's organizer takes these as starting-points for a process of radicalization, Obama's organizer can only try to bring into the open a consensus that is latent in them. The kind of organizer for which Obama calls might well make a viable candidate for elected office. But Obama leaves room only for political changes easily harmonized with the search for forms of community that can "relieve [the] chronic loneliness" in American life. Something of value in the organizing tradition is lost here.

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Along with a blacklisted playwright friend, Alinsky once wrote a play based on his friendship with John L. Lewis in which the title character, a union organizer, bore the telling name Socrates McGuinness. In *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (1971), Alinsky writes:

Socrates was an organizer. The function of an organizer is to raise questions that agitate, that break through the accepted pattern. Socrates, with his goal of "know thyself," was raising the internal questions within the individual that are so essential for the revolution which is external to the individual.

Asking questions gives Alinsky's organizer an alternative to leadership. "Much of the time," Alinsky writes,

the organizer will have a pretty good idea of what the community should be doing, and he will want to suggest, maneuver, and persuade the community toward that

action. He will not ever seem to tell the community what to do; instead he will use loaded questions.

Of course the Socratic role, if played poorly, can be a mere pose. As any reader of Plato's Socratic dialogs knows, Socrates always had more ideas than he admitted to when he began to ask questions at the beginning of a conversation. Alinsky sometimes (he is inconsistent on this point) insists too much on the organizer's lack of ideology or values. He begs several difficult questions when he writes that the organizer "does not have a fixed truth" but believes simply that "if people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions." Still, Alinsky derives from the figure of Socrates a model of questioning that allows the organizer to provoke community members into reflecting on their need for power and to agitate them until they begin to seek power—and to do all this without insisting on his own agenda and without needing anyone's trust (or, as Machiavelli would say, love).

Alinsky presents a stylized conversation in *Rules for Radicals* that he describes as an example of "the Socratic method." It is worth reading carefully.

ORGANIZER: Do you live over in that slummy building?

ANSWER: Yeah. What about it?

ORGANIZER: What the hell do you live there for?

ANSWER: What do you mean, what do I live there for? Where else am I going to live? I'm on welfare.

ORGANIZER: Oh, you mean you pay rent in that place?

ANSWER: Come on, is this a put-on? Very funny! You know where you can live for free?

ORGANIZER: Hmm. That place looks like it's crawling with rats and bugs.

ANSWER: It sure is.

ORGANIZER: Did you ever try to get that landlord to do anything about it?

ANSWER: Try to get him to do anything about anything! If you don't like it, get out. That's all he has to say. There are plenty more waiting.

ORGANIZER: What if you didn't pay the rent?

ANSWER: They'd throw us out in ten minutes.

ORGANIZER: Hmm. What if nobody in that building paid their rent?

ANSWER: Well, they'd start to throw...Hey, you know, they'd have trouble throwing everybody out, wouldn't they?

ORGANIZER: Yeah, I guess they would.

ANSWER: Hey, you know, maybe you got something—say, I'd like you to meet some of my friends. How about a drink?

Here, Alinsky shows the organizer willing, even eager, to be the first target of the community member's anger—just so long as the anger arises. The organizer moves the community member from a general discontent about “rats and bugs” to an awareness that the building tenants might be able to confront their landlord about any number of problems if they act together, and his questions transfer the community member's anger from himself to the landlord. The organizer does this without making an argument, without appealing to values or faith, without doing anything that resembles a conventional leadership role or that requires trust from the community member. Thus it is possible for the pivotal moment in the dialog (“Hey, you know...”) to come as a new realization on the part of the community member himself.

Alinsky's organizer is Socratic because he limits himself to asking questions and because he is not concerned with whether he has the community's trust or love, and thus is not bound by the community's habits of mind. His capacity to organize is constrained by what the community leaders want and know: he can only move them to adopt an agenda that arises from their existing grievances and he can only prompt them to make strategic choices that resonate with their experiences. But a Socratic questioner who stands apart from the community's customary social inertia and who does not mind that the pursuit of power is a discomforting experience can push community members toward strategic collective action in a way no indigenous leader can. The Socratic organizer pulls community members together so they can win power and pursue their own interests, maintaining control of their own organizations—but still acting, in a sense, despite themselves, since without the organizer they would most likely have remained powerless. Alinsky's organizer, by being Socratic, is able to build an organization that exercises power.

This interest in power is what Obama sacrifices when he asks the organizer to be (or to become) a community member, a seeker after trust and consensus, rather than a Socratic agitator. Obama's organizer knows what it is like to be a stranger and sojourner and wants to avoid—and to organize others so they can avoid—those fates, but Alinsky's organizer remains a sojourner and retains a Socratic estrangement from common sensibilities and beliefs. Without such organizers, Alinsky argues, power rests with the haves.

Obama poses an important question for the organizing tradition when he asks whether community organizing is possible in the absence of communities—that is, in the absence of strong bonds of trust and shared fundamental commitments. The answer is not obvious, and Obama should not have the last word here. It is possible, after all, that Alinsky-style efforts to build power for the have-nots are of most value precisely when communal

notions of identity and meaning are threatened (thus Alinsky's claim that he became an organizer in order to be a "professional anti-fascist"). Certainly the bonds that link *citizens* to each other are never—more importantly, ought never be—as vital as those that define any grouping Obama would recognize as a community. Still, if we are going to take seriously Alinsky's appeal to the model of Socrates, we might recall that Socrates almost always spoke before a group—interacting with one person at a time, perhaps, but with an audience of potential conversation-partners who shared commitments or assumptions that might provide substance for agitation. We might want to ask what sorts of commonalities (or perhaps solidarities) are necessary for Socratic organizing, and then ask whether and how organizers should foster them.

That said, the problem remains. The consequence of Obama's decision to prize community over power is that the organizer, as Obama envisions that figure, need not be limited to a question-posing Socratic role and thus can become a leader, even a president. The consequence of relaxing the distinction between organizer and leader is that Obama's organizer-leader can lead only within the bounds of what community members already feel and believe. This constraint is likely to be most severe if the organizer-leader is accountable to a vast public—if, for instance, the organizer becomes a nation's Organizer in Chief. This might be part of the significance of Obama's decision earlier this year to resign his membership in Trinity UCC: the statement of faith that bound him to his South Side Chicago community had come to trouble his attempt to bind himself to a broader and different community. Organizers who become community members may find that instead of provoking new aspirations among their fellows, they constrain their own hopes.

5

Much has been made of the Obama campaign's superb field operation, which used some of the techniques of community organizing to recruit and train thousands of volunteers. Democrats are learning how to run better election campaigns, and the organizers who helped to shape Obama's—most prominently, SNCC and UFW veteran Marshall Ganz—deserve a share of the credit. Obama has chosen for his White House political director one of the rising stars of the labor movement, Patrick Gaspard of SEIU, suggesting that once in office he will continue to take seriously the work of mobilizing citizens for political participation.

For the organizing tradition, however, these developments are likely to be of incidental interest. To mobilize is not yet to organize. It is possible to understand organizing not as a mere *technique*, a means applicable to any number of ends, but as something like what Socrates would have called a *techné*, a practice that carries within itself one particular end. If we understand organizing in that way, then the important question is what that end might be.

Obama proposes that the end of organizing is the creation and tending of communities that can redeem us from our mutual estrangement. The organizing tradition contains an alternative idea both more modest and more unsettling: that the end of organizing is the exercise of power by the have-nots. Power is an end that remains within the bounds of the political. When groups of citizens come to exercise power, they are apt to find not only that they have caused trouble for the previous holders of power but also that they have had to displace their own yearnings for that redemptive community that Obama sees as the fruit of organizing. For this reason, if we are to achieve a more democratic constitution of power our organizers will need to remain strangers and sojourners before us.

Obama will be our next president in part because the lessons he derived from the organizing tradition resonated with an American electorate he has rightly described as “hungry for community.” Obama has called for “fundamental change,” but if the period of his presidency is to bring changes that measurably improve the lives of the have-nots, some among us will need to take other lessons from the organizing tradition.

¹ Scholarly discourses address some of the same questions the organizing tradition does, but the twain (or the several) never seem to meet. Sometime, someone ought to address the junctures and disjunctures between the organizing tradition and the academic literatures on civil society, social movements, and the tension between democracy and philosophy. I will not do so here. (I will also not address here the related question of whether or to what extent the *American* organizing tradition stands on its own.) For initial, if insufficient, discussions of these questions, see Mark E. Warren’s *Democracy and Association* (2000) and the chapter on the organizer in Andrew Sabl’s *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (2002). Michael Walzer’s deceptively modest *Political Action: A Practical Guide to Movement Politics* (1971) is a subtle introduction to the issues at stake in any such endeavor.

² My thanks to Michael Perry of the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for helping to confirm this.

³ The masculine pronoun here is a deliberate choice. Alinsky’s conception of the organizer is not reducible to machismo, but it is nevertheless full of it. Obama’s conception of the organizer is less gender-bound, so I will use inclusive pronouns when referring to Obama’s organizer but not when referring to Alinsky’s. Much could be said about this difference. For now, I will only propose that a Socratic organizer without Alinsky’s machismo might need to admit, and thus perhaps move beyond, the romanticism hidden behind Alinsky’s exaggerated aversion to ethical questions.