



Duncan Green

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Review: People, Power and Change, by Marshall Ganz

Duncan Green reviews a new book by a community organising legend and explores the differences between that school of activism and more policy-focussed advocacy

Marshall Ganz is a central figure in a school of activism known as community organising. His thinking and scholarship are rooted in deep, on-the-frontline experience, including 16 years working with **Cesar Chavez** and **Fred Ross** at the **United Farm Workers** in California and most recently, devising the grassroots organising model for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

After decades of activism, he returned to finish his education at Harvard, where he had dropped out in the 60s to join the civil rights movement. Harvard has now become the base for a lot of his training and reflection. I really hope Harvard wins its **current showdown** with the Trump administration so that this kind of work can continue.

People, Power and Change feels like a legacy book (he is 82, but still going strong), with everything he wants to pass on to future generations of organisers. It combines deep thoughts on strategy with practical advice (e.g. how to get people to show up to your house meetings as you try and build your network) and anecdotes from his own and other organising. The text is dotted with great zingers ('Charity asks, 'What's wrong? Let me help!' Justice asks 'Why is it happening? Let me change it!') and memorable quotes (Eisenhower: "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.") It should become an instant classic.



Marshall Ganz on the frontline

Community organising v advocacy

So what is community organising and how does it differ from the kinds of advocacy and campaigns practiced by NGOs or activist groups like Just Stop Oil?

According to Ganz: “the process does not start with identifying an issue” or analysis (“understanding flows from action, rather than preceding it”). Instead, the first question is ‘who are my people’ – they must be the source of the change and the resources for achieving it. The impact of a community organising campaign can then be evaluated by asking three further questions:

- Did we accomplish the goal?
- Did we grow stronger as a constituency?
- Did we recruit, train and develop the leadership to take our work forward?

In my experience, standard advocacy and campaigns often stop at question one. They start with what they want to achieve – a change in the law, or policy, then try and assemble the coalition to achieve it. For community organising, building the power of the people comes first.

Ganz is also concerned that modern campaigns’ reliance on external funding is corrupting this model: “Constituency-based power has been replaced by donor-based patronage”.

The importance of emotions also seems stronger in community organising: ‘Mass meetings during the civil rights movement were not only shows of strength or reports on progress but also celebrations of community, solidarity, and love. Singing was an embodiment of that love. Group activities like singing help individuals experience the values shared by the community’. I did draw

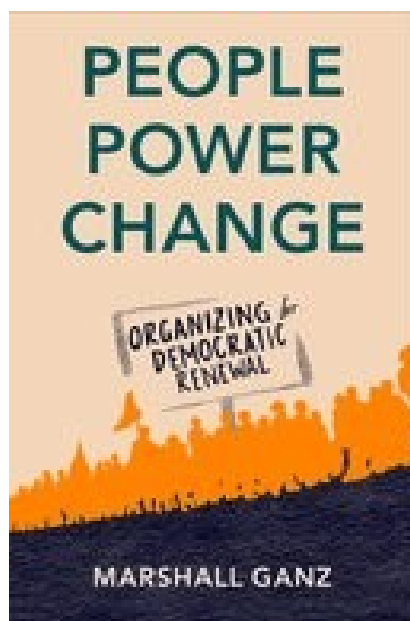
the line at the idea of introducing 'team chants' though. Not every idea should be crossing the Atlantic....

Ganz identifies five 'key practices of organising':

1. **Building relationships:** lots of 121s – 'the most widely practiced skill associated with community organising. An organiser who can elicit another person's story of self shows real interest, attention, and engagement that few of us experience in our daily interactions.'
2. **Telling stories:** 'how we can communicate why I care, why we care, and why we must choose to act now: a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now'.
3. **Strategizing:** 'how we turn what we have (resources) into what we need (power) to get what we want (change).'
4. **Acting,** where he cautions on over-reliance on online organising
5. **Structuring:** 'Campaigns embody time as an arrow: episodic, focused, and intense. Organisations embody time as a cycle: steady, deliberative, and substantial. Organising involves both.'

Each gets a chapter, and they are all brilliant. I found the strategy chapter particularly relevant to my work at LSE and will blog separately about that.

Ganz calls organising a 'craft' and this book suggests that craft is far more deeply rooted and conceptualised in the US than in the UK. He quotes de Tocqueville's comparison: "Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association."



That may seem outdated in the current era, as Trump and his brologarchs tear the US fabric apart, but Ganz remains upbeat:

We are again in a movement moment. People of all ages—and especially young people—are calling for societal responses to the climate crisis, racism, xenophobia, socioeconomic inequality, the housing crisis, transphobia, gun violence, and more. Our challenge is linking social movement energy with organisational capacity to transform it into political, economic, and cultural power. This in turn depends on our capacity for leadership, organising, and action.

I'd be interested in people's views, and how other countries' organising traditions compare. He's visiting the UK to launch the book in May, so I may well be reporting back.

About the author

Duncan Green

Duncan Green is a Co-Director (with Tom Kirk) of the LSE's Activism, Change and Influence programme and website. He is a Professor in Practice in the LSE's International Development department. He can be reached at d.j.green@lse.ac.uk, or on [@duncangreenlse.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@duncangreenlse.bsky.social). He doesn't look at twitter any more.

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