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Community Organizing – how does it differ from other forms of Activism?

I'm researching the field of Community Organizing (CO) for a new lecture in our LSE activism course this autumn, and really enjoying it. But I'm hitting a couple of conceptual roadblocks, so thought I would consult the activist hivemind.

From my reading, what is distinct about CO compared to advocacy or campaigning includes

1. Its focus on the social institutions that structure community life, especially religious congregations, which bring together values of social justice and community care, providing a strong foundation.
2. It's often, but not always place-based, eg rooted in poor neighbourhoods and their institutions
3. The idea that the purpose of activism is not primarily to win this or that given 'ask' but to build power – reflected in the relationships, resilience and self confidence of communities. It reverses the means and ends between organization and wins.
4. A stress on the role of 'organizers', often from outside the communities. Marshall Ganz, one of CO's main gurus, quotes an old Yiddish riddle, 'which asks, "Who discovered water?" The answer is, "I don't know, but it wasn't a fish." We are all fish in the water of our own stories, so we need a coach or an interlocutor to ask us the probing questions.' I find the reliance on external organizers a bit iffy – on the one hand, I get that simply reifying 'communities' is often a cop-out, but the centring of the organizers in so much of the literature is pretty striking.

The literature is almost entirely dominated by the US experience, where CO has generated its own institutions, training colleges and 'craft'. There is almost no reference to anything going on in Europe, let alone the Global South – a common failing of the American Left, in my experience.

So how do I fill the gap? The challenge is to identify what is different from CO compared to other forms of grassroots organizing (e.g. social movements, protest movements).

The obvious equivalent in the Global South would be base Christian Communities in the 70s and 80s, which I spent a lot of time working on in Latin America (esp Central America and Brazil).

Feminism, trade unionism and civil rights movements also seem to be close neighbours, but the first two tend not to be linked to community institutions (or in the case of Latin American feminism, sometimes spin off from them, eg mothers’ groups leaving the Catholic Church; radical left groups founded by former catechists/lay preachers).

Here’s what ChatGPT threw up in terms of different organizing traditions:

Summary of Traditions

Tradition	Focus	Notable Legacy
Labor Organizing	Worker power	Collective bargaining, unions
Settlement House	Social services	Community-based reform
Civil Rights	Racial justice	Nonviolent mass action
Alinsky-Style	Power-building	Relational tactics, issue campaigns
Ethnic Movements	Cultural & racial autonomy	Land, labor, education rights
Feminist Organizing	Gender justice	Intersectionality, consciousness-raising
LGBTQ+ Organizing	Identity, equality	Direct action, pride, rights
Environmental Justice	Health, climate	Cross-movement alliances
Digital Organizing	Speed, reach	Decentralized mass mobilization

Elsewhere I see communities and faith groups being instrumentalized by those in power (eg BJP in India). That’s not building power.

Here are my draft slides for the lecture, but my reading thus far leaves me with so many questions:

Community Organizing slides v2 (1)

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- Where else in the world should I be looking, either for straightforward examples of CO or close relatives? Tom Kirk suggested the Sudanese Resistance Committees (see slides 21 and 22), which are fascinating. Most of the literature just portrays them as emerging as an organic response to crisis, but one paper pointed to the behind-the-scenes work of the Salmiya Group in training thousands of grassroots leaders – a very CO approach.
- What’s the current best online equivalent of CO, which avoids the lure of quick fix clicktivism and genuinely builds the power of an online community and its leaders?

- Does the quasi-religious nature of sport fandom (or maybe other fields, like fans of particular music genres or bands) generate something akin to CO, or just traditional activism to do things like get rid of blood-sucking soccer club owners?
- What else have I missed?

All suggestions welcome!

About the author



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