

Community as a Source for Democratic Politics

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There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of... personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community.... But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium.

--John Dewey (1927 219)

Without some sort of local community where citizens can act together, there can be no democracy. Without a space where people have common interests and goals, it is difficult to imagine the process of citizens linking their needs to mechanisms for political participation and reform. As such, democracy renewal must be considered within a broader framework of community development and organizing. Only when citizens are organized and mobilized can communities create the kind of pressure needed to buttress reform initiatives; only when citizens are organized can we consider ourselves living democratically.

A century ago, Tocqueville postulated that American democracy thrives because it

balance of the three sectors of national life: the government, the market, and civil society. If any one of these three sectors overwhelmed the other, Tocqueville suggested, democracy is imperiled. Ideally, each sector performs a separate function: The government creates laws and manages problems, the market provides jobs and choice, while civil society provides space where people come together to build community. Civil society can be understood as the mechanism that creates links between neighbors and their route between public policy and private enterprise. The local institutions of civil society -- community organizations like union halls, parks, and churches -- serve as the places where citizens learn civic skills crucial to democracy. As John Dewey explained, in his classic work *The Public and its Problems*, "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (Dewey 1927 213).

As most of us know, civil society is suffering within contemporary America. Powerful economic forces increasingly dominate government processes and threaten civic spaces. Affordable housing is cut back, community gardens are bulldozed, and community centers are sold off (see Shepard, 2001). Driving these phenomena is the powerful collusion between global capital, big real estate, and unrepresentative governments. Against these relationships, grass-roots civic groups fight an uphill battle. This is why the reconstitution of communities through a variety of different civic institutions is so important today. Without attempts at community building, democracy will continue to be under threat (Shepard and Hayduk, 2001).

for kids, and educational classes for the settlement houses of workers fought for an immediate homogeneous neighborhoods based on closed-minded traditions. If that sort of community ever existed, it is certainly gone now. Nonetheless, some sort of elemental community life must be in place for democracy to operate well. As someone who has been involved in numerous community struggles over the year, I have personally witnessed how the building of community can bring together diverse actors in meaningful ways. I have seen how "innocent" community work -- the building of a public park or a community garden, for instance -- can often take a distinct political turn and come to serve an educational function about the way power works. In this essay, I will show how this has historically been the case and why it is still so today. The examples I draw upon in this essay are admittedly limited; nonetheless, I believe they teach us important lessons about how citizens have reconnected to politics via local communities. Democracy reformers have a great deal to learn from such experiments.

The Origins of Community in the Settlement House Movement

Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House (see the Mattson essay in this volume), described her goal as interpreting "democracy in social terms." Addams was one of the first to see how building community could lead citizens to realize a wider public and civic life where they could become citizens. The first and most basic step in the process Addams tried to nourish at Hull House was to alleviate the harshness of her residents' lives. To this end, Hull House organized activities and services including a day nursery, kindergarten, clubs

for kids and the hundred classes. These began the Settlement House's work of planning needs -- nursing the sick, washing newborn babies, providing meals and shelter -- before asking anything else of residents. Political involvement would have to wait until basic needs were addressed. Once met, Hull House residents were expected to organize, "to develop whatever of social life its neighborhood may afford, to focus and give form to that life," (WHAT'S BEING QUOTED HERE? 86). From meeting basic needs, the next step was improving civic and cultural life. Thus, Addams set up a museum where local neighbors could display their own work (i.e., clothes and other crafts made by new immigrants); she held lecture series on the humanities where professors from local universities participated in rigorous discussions. These activities would ensure that the neighborhood nurtured a civic life beyond meeting basic material needs.

Addams also taught her residents to see the needs of the neighborhood as a whole, to produce data for legislation, and use citizen influence to achieve it (p.87 SAME?). Beginning by exposing widespread sweatshop conditions on Halsted Street in Chicago, where Hull House was located, Addams and her residents successfully lobbied for fair labor legislation in Illinois and helped President Theodore Roosevelt to pass Child Care Legislation. By creating spaces where people could know each other and build neighborhood ties, the Settlement House cultivated communities where "democracy [could] endure" (Sidel, 1998,xxiii). Hull House also helped to create spaces where citizens could learn together and become actively engaged in politics.

Over the hundred years since the original CAP, the Settlement House framing work of placing people in housing, providing services, and getting them involved in neighborhood activities has become a standard model for housing providers and community organizers around the country (see Cyler, 2001). For instance, New York's Housing Works, an organization that locates affordable housing, regularly organizes busloads of their residents for trips up to Albany to lobby for issues ranging from housing to reform of the Rockefeller Drug Laws in New York, but only after these citizens have been housed and primary needs addressed. The wisdom of the Settlement Housing Movement is that it understood this. And Housing Works is but one example of the still thriving housing and tenant organizing movement building on their roots in the Settlement House Movement.

Beyond Settlements: The Chicago Area Project and Debates about Community

In fact, the tradition begun by Hull House passed itself down to other organizers within Chicago. In 1932, Clifford Shaw founded the Chicago Area Project (CAP) to help neighborhood members organize against crime and delinquency through the creation of webs of interaction among neighborhood residents. The goal was to encourage both neighborhood delinquents and leaders to participate within community life (Shaw, 1939, Schlossman et al, 1984). Like Addams before him, Shaw's model of democracy renewal began with community organizing. His approach was to incorporate delinquents into the core of existing communities rather than marginalize them. They were reformed by being organized into the community.

Shaw, a grandfather of the original CAP staffers who worked in the Chicago local remain. These CAP staffers witnessed the full utility of neighborhood organizing during a period in our history when the question of democracy in America was truly in peril. Shaw effectively mobilized the human resources of neighborhoods. His view was that delinquency was an "area problem" associated with industrialization and things like crime, poverty, disease, suicide, and family instability (Short (1972: xxvii). While other strategies failed, the CAP answer then was to enlist the participation of, "local people, ordinary people." Shaw reasoned that if delinquency was a problem of specific areas, the solution lay in "community organization" by neighborhood residents in such areas (xxvi). "That's when the area project sprung to life from Shaw's brain," Ray Raymond, an 85 year old CAP veteran, recalled in a personal interview.

The Chicago Area Project grew out of a response to the social ills plaguing Chicago's waves of Irish, German, Italian, Polish, and African American Immigrants. Shaw believed that neighborhoods needed to form community committees. The idea was to make the neighborhood, "conscious of the problem of delinquency, collectively interested in the welfare of its children, and active in promotion programs for such improvements of the community environment." CAP emphasized four components: 1) neighborhood autonomy, 2) utilization of those with established positions of local leadership, 3) maximum involvement of existing neighborhood institutions, and 4) participation of those living in the community (Schlossman et al, 1984,1).

of values and interests which needed to be defended through mobilization and conflict. Shaw put great effort into aligning his organizers with existing South Chicago local institutions. The aim for CAP was to gain entry into community social life and thereby contact with neighborhood juveniles and their gangs. He gained the sponsorship of St. Michael's, a South Side church, by subsidizing a youth program the church could not afford on its own. St. Michael's Club for Boys spurred the creation of the Russell Square Community Committee, the first of Shaw's initial three pilot projects (Schlossman et al, 1984,6-7,10-11). In doing this community organizing, Area Project staffers concentrated on building ties among neighborhood members, emphasizing the cohesive nature of personal connections among residents. Neighborhood was the center of all CAP organizing efforts. Henry McKay, Shaw's assistant, described neighborhoods as, "areas of participation" (Bennett, 1981:171). And through participation in neighborhood affairs citizens gained a sense of ownership, which in turn lead to political participation and calls for reform.

An early staffer for the Area Project was a University of Chicago trained sociologist named Saul Alinsky. He began his career as a community organizer in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhoods in the 1930's (Bennett, 1981:215). The association was short lived. While Shaw maintained a very low key disposition, Alinsky often put himself at the center of his campaigns (Bennett,1981:216). Alinsky left (or was fired as the story goes) in 1940. Conceptions of community and politics lay at the core of the split. Both Alinsky and Shaw believed that the cornerstone of good organizing involved understanding and respect for "community traditions" (Alinsky,1969:76). Where they differed was in strategy. While CAP functioned around the concept of "primary community" or neighborhood personal relationships, Alinsky viewed community as place

of values and interests which needed to be defended through mobilization and conflict (Herbert, 2001). The new "assets-based" approach to community development offered tactics -- two principles which lie at the center of politics (p.132). Alinsky organized around, "secondary community, many different areas." Shaw, a much less political man, advocated the virtues of interconnectedness among neighborhood members to combat social problems. Shaw did not talk about achieving power (Bennett,1981:216).

As primary communities have shifted, so have notions of community organizing. Today, the flexible CAP umbrella model containing autonomous project groups remains a popular, effective organizational structure for grassroots groups. But so too does Alinsky's argument that local community organizing must eventually confront existing political institutions and challenge the power structure. If anything, community organizers have recognized the need to press citizens to become more connected to political change as they become members of a local community.

From Delinquency to Gardens: Connecting the Local Community to Politics

Over the next thirty years, the Shaw and Alinsky organizing models continued to form the basis of community organizing and renewal projects from coast to coast. The neighborhood organizing approach became increasingly necessary as the federal role in urban areas receded during the Reagan/ Bush years. Due to devolution (transfer of power from federal to state authority), a new generation of organizers began to take stock of what existed within their neighborhoods. Instead of focusing on what was missing, they took inventory of neighborhood resources: from a bank to a vacant lot to public transportation, to cultural, institutional, and even intellectual assets such as universities and hospitals

~~(NWBCCC, 2001) This new base case is a practical, but also a very development of the~~
countless possibilities.

At its best, this tradition of community organizing has even interacted with national public policy. Take the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). While the CRA, which forces banks to end discrimination in lending and to create loans in low-income areas, had been in place for years, it was rarely implemented. During the 1980s and 1990s, local community organizers worked within existing civic institutions in order to highlight the problem of redlining and local neglect of the CRA. Community groups such as the Chicago Woodstock Institute and The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), one of the community organizations that had fought for passage of the CRA in 1977, created pressure which forced the law to be fully implemented.

The NWBCCC provides a good case in how such groups have used innovative tactics and local civic institutions to achieve this goal. In 1995, the House Banking Committee passed a bill that exempted 88 percent of banks and lender from the CRA's provisions. The NWBCCC moved to counter this development and threat to their constituency. Their phone calls to try to meet with their senator and the House Banking Committee Chair, Al D'Amato, were not returned. So, Coalition members took another tact: they rented a bus full of neighborhood members and armed banners and fliers explaining their mission and headed up to a swanky Park Avenue building where Senator D'Amato's girlfriend lived. The very next day, D'Amato made a return the call to the

~~SPACCC people in the introduction, Coalition's tactics problems solving and discussion of~~

That fall, CRA was preserved, with support from D'Amato (See Groarke and Moss, 2001).

Without redlining, an economic pulse returned to many low income neighborhoods from South Central Los Angeles to the Bronx. The result was an incredible economic resurgence in cities across the country (Herbert, 2001). The democratic reforms intended by the CRA, could only thrive once community organizers got involved to force the issue. The result of this organizing is a model of bottom up community redevelopment that helps enhance the practices of the national government that pertain to social justice.

Another recent movement that has connected local community activities to politics has been the community gardens movement. To a large extent the garden movement builds on generations of community organizing. Garden activists organize neighborhood artists and residents, who learn to work with each other through tilling the earth and community in much the same fashion that CAP organized neighborhood area project groups. While Clifford Shaw helped reform delinquents by working to incorporate them back into communities, garden activists teach local kids to plant seeds and learn about the urban environment, within community. Just as Jane Addams encouraged Hull House residents to get involved in creative arts, the garden movement uses garden as spaces for theatre. Community gardens often become places for neighborhood members to meet, to share a space, work on a common project, and to plant the seeds of community together. These are

spaces for people to be introduced into the neighborhood to proliferate party identities. Resists of mutual interest. Yet, like many public spaces in the era of globalization, they are under attack.

How Community Gardens Became Politics in New York City

In January 2000, members of the More Gardens Coalition welcomed guests for a teach-in in a community garden on East 7th street. The subject at hand was resisting the destruction of La Esperanza, a community garden in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Over the previous weeks, the 22-year old garden, named for hope, had come to symbolize the tensions between privatization at the center of globalization and the civic need for public spaces open to all. Despite its history as a community center for picnics, refuge for children, and parties, Mayor Giuliani's office sold La Esperanza to developer Donald Capoccia back in August 1999 -- a man who had just happened to donate some \$50,000 to the mayor's electoral campaigns and acquired the garden site from the city without any fair bidding process. Giuliani claimed that Capoccia planned to construct "low-income housing" on the site, and that garden supporters were "not living in the real world" (SOURCE???). In reality, the 79 apartments Capoccia slated to build are "80/20 housing" -- 80% market-rate, luxury apartments, with a token 20% set aside for low-income tenants.

To place the struggle for La Esperanza in context, we have to go back to May of 1999. "Nueva York Necesita Jardines Comunitarios" (New York needs Community Gardens) stickers could be found through out the Lower East Side; an international public

space that they took over, the activists in the neighborhood sold for a profit, tangled with the Streets and Build a Garden;” and some 50 garden activists were arrested for committing civil disobedience to prevent the planned auction of some 125-community gardens. In the end, local pop culture celebrity Bette Midler helped to purchase and preserve the gardens. The garden movement had become a force to be reckoned with -- already reconnecting local citizens to political protest.

In response, Mayor Giuliani changed tactics. In a new strategy, the city began selling off individual gardens, perhaps one or a small group at a time, but not enough to draw city-wide attention along the lines of the May auction. All the while, the general public believed all the city gardens had been saved. Yet, the city continued to put more lower east side community gardens up for auction. Then in December 2000, developers ripped the wall off the back of the Esperanza garden, preparing to bulldoze. The scene was a vivid reminder of the way Capoccia had bulldozed the Chico Menendez Garden two days after Christmas back in 1997. Activists, community members, and friends of Esperanza were determined to prevent the same thing from happening again. Neighborhood members started organizing.

Garden advocates sought an injunction to save Esperanza after its sale. Little came of it. By mid November, Alicia, the original gardener who had planted the seeds of Esperanza back in 1977, received a letter from Capoccia, stating construction would start on the land behind the garden within the week. Having traversed every legal and policy

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bulldozers. In Puerto Rican folklore, the Coqui, a species of frog, has long been known to successfully vanquish larger adversaries. Esperanza could use the same sort of patron and mythology. Garden activists built a giant steel and canvas version of the Coqui for the garden. The ten foot tall frog faced the street, drawing crowds of sympathizers to the cause of the garden (and serving as an exemplar of public and community art). Activists could spend the night inside the structure, equipped with telephone lines, a heater, and materials to lock themselves down to the Coqui if bulldozers were to roll in early in the morning.

To add a sense of urgency, state Attorney General Elliot Spitzer was filing papers calling for an injunction barring the destruction of all gardens that morning. No injunction could go into effect until 2 PM that afternoon at the earliest, but if activists could stall the police and bulldozers all morning, there was a chance the garden could be saved. Some activists locked themselves to the surrounding fence with bicycle locks around their necks, another group locked themselves to a 45-foot high steel tower of a sunflower and tripods. Five activists locked themselves inside the Coqui.

Police swarmed the front of the garden, while a bulldozer loomed in the distance to the back of the garden. The activists were locked inside. The police moved in, tearing down the fence in front of the garden, sawing off the chain of an activist who had locked herself to it. While protestors were being arrested, Giuliani played to the usual debate that the city has to decide between housing or gardens. Garden activist spokespeople retorted

with the city (Sue of Nelson lots and Giuliani's buildings to be bulldozed in five months), there is room for both gardens and housing. A Giuliani spokesman would claim that Capoccia's contributions had nothing to do with him winning city development contracts for the Esperanza site. But it was clear from all of this that community activists could no longer simply protest and use a variety of cultural means to do so; instead, they needed to engage in politics. The More Gardens Coalition, which organized the Esperanza resistance campaign, successfully constructed a multicultural coalition, mobilizing activists from all over the city. Yet, this was not enough to match the deep pockets of New York's real estate industry and their influence on New York's political culture.

As long as the Attorney General's Temporary Restraining Order prevented further bulldozing, many took a breather from the garden fight. But no real policy solution was emerging. Meetings were held in a nearby community center that had ironically been sold to another developer that could be taken over at any time. Calls to representatives had gone unreturned. The City Council refused to even put pending garden legislation to a vote. Therefore, community organizers decided to create a ballot referendum to save the gardens. Language in Municipal Home Rule Law, section 38 of the City Charter, offered a route to curtail the power of elected officials by amending the City Charter. This would take collecting 60,000 signatures within the next two months, which amounted to 10% of the votes cast for the governor in the last election, getting them certified, but since usually half of the signatures get thrown out, activists strove to collect another 60,000 and file them

with the 60,000 signatures and Wicgert will be in this volume for more on this process.)

The challenges to such a strategy were inordinate. In the first place, community organizers needed to create a public language that had teeth and was agreeable to those whose emotions were running high. While garden activists had always just agreed that they wanted to keep the gardens as they were, there was little consensus about what a permanent administrative solution would look like. Forsaking idealism for winnable solutions required a great deal of this group of community organizers. While many had hoped for more community control of the parks, case law suggested the best route for success was to draft language which would call for the gardens to be moved under the control of the New York City Parks Department. After much haggling, the group agreed to this strategy. The referendum language called for the following amendments to the city charter: “Notwithstanding the provisions of this charter, no community garden space may be sold, leased, exchanged or otherwise disposed of except with the approval of the Department of Parks and Recreation.”

The next step was to collect signatures with apartment numbers on them and countless other bits of electoral minutia. As this essay is being written, countless activists are outside at the Puerto Rican day parade collecting signatures for the referendum. Community activists are also using other institutions of civil society to find signatures, such as local community based housing groups, labor unions, civil liberties organizations and numerous activist organizations. As of today, we have some 26 days to collect the first

around \$60,000 signatures, push for a referendum in order to challenge local

“From the very beginning we’ve known that getting it on the ballot is a dream, and that’s what we’re trying to do,” explained organizer Mark Read in a personal interview.

Short of that, probably the most important part of the campaign is to create a dialogue about the role of gardens and public space in urban centers. Activists recognize that the city needs both affordable housing and green space. The New York Attorney General’s office has brokered deals that satisfy the needs of both developers so housing can be built and gardens preserved. Yet, Mayor Giuliani’s has refused to sign the agreements (Lobbia, 2001). The Mayor has refused any dialogue with organizers; in his refusal there is a deep betrayal of democracy. In the efforts of community organizers, we see a hope that local efforts and community initiatives can actually have an impact on political institutions. The conflict between these two visions will prove crucial to the future of democratic reform in America.

Conclusion

The previous three cases outline methods for organizing communities to participate in democracy renewal. In the case of the Settlement House Movement, immigrants needed a home and sense of community before they could contribute to reform efforts. Jane Addams understood this. In the case of the Chicago Area Project, Clifford Shaw was able to keep delinquents out of jails by incorporating them into the life of the neighborhood,

Bennett, James. 1987. *Oral History and Delinquency: The Rhetoric of Delinquency*.
while Saul Alinsky tried to push this effort in a political direction in order to challenge local power structures. The efforts of CAP helped organize a model that would become a cornerstone of programs of LBJ's War on Poverty. In the third case, we witnessed the challenges of community building. Not only do citizens have the difficult challenge of maintaining public space (in this case community gardens) in the face of privatization, they must also challenge the way political power works. In the process, they learn the important lessons of democracy -- that the health of local communities relies upon the political initiative of its members.

Communities need to create civil society organizations in order to facilitate communication and democratic activity. This is the hard but necessary work of democracy. Most importantly, when citizens organize locally, they can create connections to the wider political world -- even if that connection might very well be antagonistic (something Alinsky understood so well). In the context of this book, it is crucial to understand that only when politics "touches home" will most people enter into the political realm. We must understand this and create more places where this can actually happen. Without this sort of initiative, the promise of democracy remains simply that -- a vague promise.

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