Community Organizing as Tocquevillean Politics: The Art, Practices, and Ethos of Association

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THNTRO PARA:

Recent political theory often cites Tocqueville on associations, but disagrees on why we should value associations or what normative lessons flow from Tocqueville. A different approach starts by asking what kinds of political action Tocqueville's analysis calls for. One answer is political organizing, which is praiseworthy to the extent that it combats social isolation, checks majority tyranny, and fosters civic capacities. The theory of organizing outlined by Robert Moses and fleshed out by Saul Alinsky puts forth three practices that characterize (normatively) good organizing. As analysis suggests and three case studies confirm, these practices involve types of action and qualities of self-restraint that are hard to sustain in practice. This difficulty is in some ways a virtue rather than a flaw. Because it is rare, true organizing can serve to correct the excessively universalist, statist, and top-down politics to which Tocqueville feared mass democracy would tend, while skirting the ethical criticisms that organizing might face were it practiced more universally.

Recent political theory has seen an explosion of works on association and civil society (Bellah et al. 1985; Berger and Neuhaus 1996; Cohen and Arato 1992; Cohen and Rogers 1995; Isaac 1998; Mitchell 1995; Rosenblum 1998). The works share certain themes: the need to look beyond formal political structures to the social conditions for good citizenship; a suspicion of excessive legalism in theory and practice; and support of decentralization as opposed to "bigness" in politics and government alike. Beyond this, however, there is little agreement: the civil society argument tends to replicate the usual ideological divisions seen in both theory and practical politics. Association and civil society have been invoked in the service of programs that are radical, liberal, or conservative; devoted to strengthening trust in central government or weakening it; progrowth or anti-growth; utopian or pessimistic; devoted to futuristic transformation or to the return of traditional social structures. This normative diversity blunts the force of the civil society argument by making it seem indeterminate or dangerous. If we do not have even a working consensus on why civil society is to be valued or what is supposed to happen if we set it free, it is hard to conclude that doing so would lead to a clear improvement on more traditional forms of politics and governance—or even to discern what "improvement" would entail or what the existing problem is.

As Galston (1995, 531) has noted, this literature has diverse roots in Catholic social thought, reflections on the revolutions in Eastern Europe, and contemporary debates about hyperindividualism and public life, but the "indigenous American discussion" goes back to Tocqueville. Many sides of the debate indeed invoke broadly Tocquevillean arguments regarding civil society, but to very different ends; other writers, including political scientists of an empirical bent (Putnam 1993), cite Tocqueville in broad terms

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Organizing Practices

Former SNCC organizer Robert Moses (Moses et al. 1989, 424) has distinguished between two "traditions" of civil rights organizing: the "community mobilization tradition" of rallies and rhetoric, epitomized by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the "community organizing tradition, which was "older, yet less well known," than King-style mobilization, and which focused on careful work among ordinary people. This was "the tradition in the Civil Rights Movement of quiet places and the organizers who liked to work them" (Moses et al. 1989, 424).

Moses et al. (1989) describe the organizing tradition as based on three main principles: "the centrality of *families* to the work of organizing; the *empowerment of grassroots people* and their recruitment for leadership; and the principle of 'casting down your bucket where you are,' or *organizing in the context* in which one lives and works, and working the issues found in that context" (425). As I shall discuss below, these principles are not always ones that SNCC had tried to follow or succeeded in following, nor were they consistent parts of Moses' own practice. They are the products of theoretical generalization rather than narrow experience, and they crop up repeatedly in both the theory of organizing and empirical accounts of what organizers do (e.g., Alinsky 1971, [1946] 1989; Payne 1995; Russell 1990; Skerry 1993, 131–215). They therefore provide a good starting point for considering why those who practice organizing strive to act in a certain way and what the theoretical significance of organizing might be.

Family: Trust and Action in Face-to-Face Societies

The "family" Moses and his colleagues discuss in the context of the civil rights movement is not a literal family united by kinship and marriage: a "family" relationship is a relationship among people who are personally acquainted and who trust one another on a personal level that does not require shared convictions or ends. By a process Moses et al. (1989) calls "informal absorption," SNCC organizers were taken in by local families, becoming honorary children of the community and thus negating the label of "outside agitator" (425). In turn, the organizers "empowered their adoptive families by reinforcing and enlarging the connections between them and the larger Movement family, with its extensive networks across the land" (1989, 425).

This use of surrogate "family" for the purpose of building trust and enabling power may be further developed by considering Laslett's (1956) concept of a "face to face society." For a family or other such society, writes Laslett, "[a]ll of its activities either are, or can be, carried on by means of conversation, conversation between members of the family." The Greek *polis* and the British House of Commons, claims Laslett, are face-to-face in this way. Such societies are characterized by their members' "knowing" each other and by a kind of supra-rational decision-making. "Knowing" means that the members are "never called upon to cooperate in any other way than by being present at what is going on"; when they are present and cooperating they "respond with their whole personality, conscious and unconscious" and know that the other members are doing the same (Laslett 1956, 157–158). When such societies get together to decide things, the "meeting and talking" by which they decide includes rational discussion but is not limited to it: exclamations, laughs, silences, and other nonpropositional expressions are part of the decision-making process as they are part of normal conversation. The process involves "intuitive psychology" and "total intercourse between personalities." (This is in contrast to intercourse among people who do not know each other, which is a "matter of record" and involves ratiocination almost exclusively [Laslett 1956, 157–160].) Laslett regards the trust and allegiance that builds up within such a society as natural—in contrast to the allegiance of people to distant government officials or the state, which is hard to explain and seems to him quasi-religious. This seems to correspond to both Tocqueville's theory and common sense: a family or a long-running group of intimate associates feels itself to be united by mutual understanding in a way that a mass political movement or party does not and cannot.

The purpose of a face-to-face society that interests us here is not trust for any purpose, but trust with a view to action. Laslett states that "any given sample of individuals capable of acting collectively" must discover within itself—or itself constitute—a "group of a critical size" that can act in this face-to-face way (Laslett 1956, 160). This is an insight shared by political science, which assumes that only very small bodies can easily make and act on decisions. This does not mean that only small bodies can wield political power, but does imply that an increase in size involves a loss in decisiveness, and must be justified by gains in other areas, such as fairness, policy, efficiency, power, or democratic inclusiveness (Dahl and Tufte 1973, 71; Buchanan and Tullock 1962, 97–116; Moe 1980).

Community organizations are, or aspire to be, face-to-face societies. This is partly because they aspire to supple action and easy decision making, but more crucially because it makes possible *nonrational* assessments of organizers' characters. Those trying to organize people who lack formal education, political skills, and experi-

ence with abstract argument must earn local people's trust by demonstrating good character, rather than by proving intellectual propositions. Beyond this, political inexperience creates a recurrent problem rooted in the tension between the authority organizers need and the outsider status they necessarily embody. A group of people accustomed to passivity may need organizers from outside to prod them into action and teach them political skills. But as Moses (as well as Alinsky) stressed, such outsiders can find it hard to win the trust of local citizens, who cannot be sure that these "outside agitators" understand local circumstances, are truly committed to the welfare of those they are organizing, and are likely to stay around if organizing becomes dangerous. This is not to discount political theory arguments for universalism and against a relativism that claims that local cultures are always right. The point is not that any local group is always right but that organizers must earn the right to tell them when they are wrong.

Ideally, organizers solve this problem by making sure that locals invite them. Such invitations provide "credentials" (a word used by Moses et al. 1989, 425 and Alinsky 1971, 101; see similarly Delgado 1986, 66, 106). But as Payne has noted, rural blacks in the South often relied on their own intuitive face-to-face judgments, independent of such invitations. One organizer for the Congress on Racial Equality said that rural people

> deal more with the character of an individual rather than what he's saying . . . . When you met him, whatever way he was when you met, when you saw him ten years later . . . he would still be the same way, ten years down the road . . . . They knew who was strong and who was for real and who wasn't . . . . We would get caught up in words and logic. That didn't mean nothing to them. They were dealing with motives and intent. Skip all the words and everything else. They brushed that aside and got right to what the individual was about.

Thus organizers began their political relationships with local citizens only after "they were judged to be worthwhile people" (organizer Matt Suarez, cited in Payne 1995, 238–239).

This implies a requirement for the kind of self-control that we might compare to that of prospective family-members (during courtship or an initial meeting with in-laws). Organizers, in Payne's account, "self-consciously strove to be on their best behavior around local people, best behavior as defined by local people." They tried to appear as "God-fearing, as respectful of women and the elderly, as men and women of their word, as principled"

(1995, 243). In general, "informal absorption"—the process of creating surrogate political "families"—calls on skills related to those of matchmakers, as veteran civil rights organizer Ella Baker initially "set up" Robert Moses with Mississippi local leader Amzie Moore and other contacts.

Moreover, sustaining associative "families" often resembles something like counseling a married couple when that "family," like a marriage, is in danger of separating. In face-to-face groups, as in families, intimacy and a mutual ethic of commitment and care do not rule out tension or even enmity. Family counseling, or even just daily living within a family, requires patience, tact, and the capacity for intelligent self-delusion. It is fatal to hope for a pure and perfect "love" that is beyond the reality of real families, let alone artificial ones. What one can hope for instead is the enlargement of sympathies and growing awareness of common interests that Tocqueville hoped for in associations.

Empowerment and Grassroots Leadership

Organizing has many related purposes: fighting majority tyranny, teaching people the actual exercise of their formal rights, giving people courage to form individual judgments, and enabling social action between individuals and across social boundaries. None of these things can happen if the organizer acts as a top-down "leader," telling the troops what to do while only he exercises independent judgment and initiative. Tocqueville noted that American organizations tend to have a "civil government." But this is not a natural or inevitable state for organizations, especially new ones. An educated, politically sophisticated organizer facing a group of uneducated political neophytes will face every temptation simply to take over, to make decisions in the name of those organized. For Ella Baker and others, the ability to resist this temptation was the hallmark of good organizers, "interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people" (Baker 1970, 351; see also Russell 1990, 123, who portrays an unwillingness to dominate group members as a "professional ethos" of organizers)—as opposed to "leaders," who happily buy organizational control and the joys of personal power at the cost of members' passivity.

This does not mean that organizers should do nothing, or that democratic organizations are only authentic if all opinions are spontaneous and no one influences anyone else. Baker's and other radical democrats' talk of developing local *leadership* necessarily implies that some people will lead more than others will. But between the organizer's leading the organization herself and her

developing local leaders there are three crucial differences, each of which implies rare dispositions or habits that the organizer must possess.

The first difference involves social open-mindedness: a willingness to entertain as leaders people of modest (or lower) social standing, as long as they command respect or have useful friends. In its early days SNCC worked through bootleggers and recruited a former prostitute to run citizenship classes (Payne 1995, 143, 166); Ella Baker claimed that a true organizer must fight for the rights of social outcasts like alcoholics (Cantarow and O'Malley 1980, 70); Alinsky sang the organizational praises of petty racketeers (Alinsky 1989, 111), and on at least one occasion used prostitutes as fundraisers (Horwitt 1992, 402).

Second, an organizer must have realistic expectations regarding political participation: a cynical and manipulative "leader" is often someone who starts with utopian expectations of civic virtue and is disappointed. Baker's distinction between local leaders and everyone else reflects the fact that people vary in their love of politics and the time they have to pursue it. In a democracy, the political class consists of everyone—including many people who cannot spare time and attention from their mundane nonpolitical tasks, as well as many who are seriously and legitimately devoted to nonpolitical projects. Some must normally act for others: universal participation in a political action is very rare. Alinsky, who has the status of an authority among organizers, wrote that in his most successful organizations only 5 to 7 percent of the population were active participants. This was not grounds for discouragement: as this participation rate far exceeded that of any union or political party, an organization that reached it commanded great power (Alinsky 1989, 181 and following). Even more strikingly, while one book on the low- and moderate-income organizing group Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) stresses with great enthusiasm the group's success at cultivating local leadership, its account of actual canvassing activities makes clear that canvassers had to contact about a thousand people in a given area if they wanted to find "between ten and fifteen" with "leadership potential and/or legitimacy" among the organized group (Delgado 1986, 67).

Dahl (1961, 225) has distinguished between *homo politicus*, a character type who likes being involved in politics, and *homo civicus*, the average citizen who feels he or she cannot spare the time. "*Homo civicus*," he reminds us, "is not, by nature, a political animal." The demand that everyone be a political animal interferes with the goal of finding *potential* political animals and making them into actual local leaders. An effective organizer will rarely upbraid members who "only" vote and contribute

money. They realize that all organizations need money and ordinary voting members and are happy to find what local leaders there are among a group of people used to exercising no power at all. Complaints about apathy are characteristic of students or full-time activists who lack ordinary responsibilities. Organizers, again, let people define for themselves where their interests lie.

Finally, an organizer must cultivate the link between action and education. Against "good government" educators who treat citizenship as a group of platitudes to be learned from a book, organizers know that people learn when they have an incentive to learn. As Tocqueville (1969, I.2.6, 238) put it, "the American man of the people has conceived a high idea of political rights because he has some." Therefore, an ideal competence must sometimes wait on action.[4] On the other hand, against overoptimistic advocates of participatory democracy, organizers know that decentralizing power and multiplying opportunities for participation does not automatically create civic skills. Democratic institutions, including social movements and community organizations themselves, may simply act badly, irresponsibly, or stupidly if the people in them are not prodded to develop the capacities to run them well.

Organizing in a Context

Organizing "in the context in which one lives and works, and working the issues found in that context," means that one adapts oneself to the context in which one chooses to organize, and to the issues found there. Adjusting to context has a general and a special sense, both requiring a democratic attitude toward human imperfection and a tenacious suppression of the organizer's own moralistic and ideological wishes.

In a general sense, the context in which one organizes is the context of human nature. An organizer has a knack for discerning human motivations like shame, anger, and competitiveness, and the willingness to play on such motivations despite personal discomfort at the fact

[4] Stokely Carmichael, in organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, encouraged barely competent people to run for offices like sheriff and tax assessor. Those people *then* acquired an interest in learning what those offices did and developing a platform (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 111 and following). Similarly, members of an Alinsky organization learned about the role of the federal government after they felt they had some power and might be able to pressure the government for grants if they found out what programs existed (Alinsky 1989, 165–169, 173). This latter case is instructive as to means as well: Alinsky knew all about the government programs, but pretended to be less well informed than he was so that local leaders would learn how to seek out and use government information on their own.

that people are not nobler. Alinsky recruited an important labor leader by inviting him to a baseball game but spending the whole game whispering with other people about the community organization. The labor leader's envy and pride soon made him want to be a prominent person in the new organization, as he was in his union. The racketeer mentioned above wanted above all to be respectable. Alinsky got him more and more involved in an organization (and with this, more willing to heed community pleas to keep minors out of his gambling dens) by letting him pose for pictures with important political and social leaders (Alinsky 1989, 109–112). Most instructively, in dealing with two business leaders who had joined a community organization merely as good advertising, Alinsky put them on the children's committee, where they saw poverty first-hand. Having joined out of self-interest, they were quickly introduced to wider social interests and became dedicated to organizing around them (Alinsky 1989, 112).

More particularly, organizing in a context means a willingness to find out and organize around the issues that the people *being organized* care about, rather than the issues that one cares most about oneself. This requires a great deal of self-denial. When Ella Baker was director of branches for the NAACP, she first found out what issues local people cared about—things as prosaic as street lights—and *then* explained how the political position the NAACP represented was related to these concerns (Baker 1970, 347; see also Russell 1990, 32; Delgado 1986, 47; Alinsky 1971, 122). The assumption is that grievances that people actually have are, if not fully informed or enlightened, at least a respectable starting point. As Moses put it in an interview, "The whole point...is to teach the lowest sharecropper that he knows better than the biggest leader what is required to make a decent life for himself" (cited in Burner 1994, 198).

The assumption that people are good judges of their own interest (eventually, and when well informed) is common to both populist forms of democratic theory (Bentham 1962) and Tocqueville's observations of American democratic convictions (1969, I.1.5, 66, 95). Putting this assumption into practice, however, demands ideological flexibility and discipline at the same time. It demands flexibility in that an organizer—generally an opinionated type—generally has preconceived plans or programs that she must keep silent about or ignore altogether if locals do not like them. (Later, after the organizer has gained trust and allies, she can suggest her own opinion from the position of one friend among equals, not from that of an arrogant outsider with contempt for local mores.) It demands discipline with respect to local opinions and outlooks, to which an organizer must be con-

stantly attentive. Moreover, organizers must follow this mean between flexibility and discipline, not only with respect to ideas, but also with respect to people. As Payne has noted, early SNCC volunteers were willing to deal with socially "conservative" locals, and often found them invaluable in organizing communities around far-reaching and courageous goals. Later black radicals often came in condemning certain attitudes and social sectors as "reactionary," thus thoroughly dooming their chances to influence anyone (Payne 1995, 199–200; see similarly Alinsky 1971, 184–196). Respect for people's opinions as they currently exist is particularly important if one takes seriously a central normative lesson that a "Tocquevillean" analysis of organizing implies: fighting social and class isolation requires not only organizing the poor but also convincing the comfortable that their interest lies in common action. Radicals hoping to persuade the upper classes to rejoin democratic life should sometimes start by warning them, but never by insulting them. There is a great difference between a tough appeal to interest and an offensive charge of immorality. The former embodies democratic respect; the latter flouts it.

It should be stressed again that Tocquevillean goals go beyond mere "success" or the achievement of social reform ends. Organizing properly understood is worthwhile because it breaks down the natural barriers between social groups and fights creeping democratic despotism—regardless of whether it succeeds in changing government or corporate policy. Whereas the standard measure of a social movement's "success" is the extent to which it achieves a predetermined set of demands or policy goals, the measure of an organizing movement's success will be the extent to which it engages people to pursue their own goals, or others they discover. That citizen activity or "empowerment" is a goal in itself is a commonly voiced platitude (e.g., Russell 1990, 118–122), but it is not easy to take it seriously in practice. In order to do so, organizers must prefer local citizens who vigorously pursue the "wrong" agenda to a manipulative politics that ensures the right agenda while mocking citizens' capacity for self-government.

Departures: Ideology, "Success," and Citizen Judgment

Tocqueville's theory, I have claimed, gives us normative standards that transcend mere "success": citizen empowerment, enabling passive citizens to defend their own interests and exercise their own judgment, is an end in itself. The following examples will briefly illustrate these

normative implications by looking at three cases: the low- and moderate-income group known as ACORN, the COPS organization in San Antonio, which concentrates on a specific constituency of Mexican-American Catholics, and SNCC in Mississippi after 1964, which did not in fact follow the ideal organizing path described by Moses. The first two groups are "successes" in terms of the numbers organized and the (limited but significant) benefits won for members; the last was a well-known failure. *All three* organizations, however, could be criticized on Tocquevillean grounds for abandoning in clear ways the goals of citizen independence and social mixing.

ACORN: Ideological Coherence versus "Majoritarian" Development

The network of locally based groups known as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) has been very successful in numerical terms: in its first fifteen years of operation it grew from nothing to form groups active in twenty-seven states (Delgado 1986). From its inception, however, its mission has embodied clear tensions. It has roots both in the Alinsky organizing tradition—from which it has taken an aversion to ideology, a mistrust of established elites and institutions, and a majoritarian desire to organize as many "low- and moderate-income" citizens as possible around their self-defined interests—and in the National Welfare Rights Organization, a self-defined poor people's movement with a predictably narrow constituency. ACORN can in fact be seen as an attempt to combine the mission of a poor people's group with a majoritarian organizational style and the chance for wide popularity that goes with it.

The grafting of majoritarian strategies onto an anti-poverty agenda has led to both political success and recurrent accusations of a hidden agenda. Some of those who participated in and/or commented on ACORN took more or less at face value its stated aim of helping "all the people in this country who are shut out of...power" (Wade Rathke quoted in Delgado 1986, 47), and its claim that empowering such people to achieve their own ends is a sufficient end in itself (Russell 1990, 122). Others, including one founding member and long-time organizer, have explicitly assumed that ACORN was basically "Left" and aimed to raise members' consciousness until they realized that their desires could not be achieved under capitalism (Delgado 1986, 89, 102, 145–146, 198, 209–213).

During the late 1970s, tensions came to a head: ACORN founder Wade Rathke, weary of the scattered nature of the movement he had spawned, forced a shift in emphasis from decentralized local action to national politics, with a particular focus on trying to affect the 1980 party conventions. In the process of forming a unified platform, ideological disagreements among the dispersed local groups became clear: there were disagreements not only over whether income supports should be linked to work—a important point for a group with roots in welfare-rights work—but over more serious cultural and partisan divides. Many ACORN groups self-identified as Republican; many were culturally conservative; one local group, asked to suggest agenda items, suggested sterilizing welfare recipients and protecting "our interests in the Panama Canal" (Delgado 1986, 139).

Top ACORN organizers could have dealt with these disagreements in various ways. They could have given up the idea of national political influence, for the sake of preserving local diversity. They could have founded a third political party or ideological membership organization, thus achieving greater influence while serving notice that they no longer were organizers who claimed to take direction from their members. Or they could have examined their own ideology and modified it to take into account members' concerns; some have claimed that decentralized economic radicalism combined with a certain quirky cultural conservatism is in fact the natural ideology of ACORN's core membership group, the American urban working class (Lasch 1991).

Instead, ACORN's founders chose a path of manipulation, using various tactics to make the more conservative local chapters feel unwelcome (Delgado 1986, 137 and following). The result was a more ideological harmonious organization: ACORN worked for Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential candidacy without great dissent, and its local chapters later came to work closely with the social-democratic New Party, which for a time achieved significant local victories. The strategy has probably "worked" in terms of success—ACORN retains a great many active members and exercises a certain influence on local policies—but it has failed in Tocquevillean terms. Would-be participants now know, or should know, that dissenting opinions are not welcome; that the lead organizers squandered the chance to examine their own world views; and that the leadership has made it clear that political influence takes precedence over the development of independent viewpoints. ACORN has come to resemble the noncivic political organization hostile to dissent that Tocqueville feared. Its decisions no longer challenged by recalcitrant members, it teaches people to oppose local power structures while remaining subservient to ACORN itself.

COPS: Religious Community versus Democratic Development

Alinsky advocated, and himself tried to form, organizations of organizations, which sought to join together local church, union, and voluntary groups rather than supplanting them. There are strategic arguments for and against this approach (Lancourt 1979). Less often noted, however, is the normative argument: Alinsky's strategy helped diversify citizens' contacts and teach them how to influence the larger world but avoided passing judgment on their existing "primary" associations, which remained unmolested as long as they answered felt needs. No primary association, in turn, stood or fell on the larger group's decisions or reputation; as only one actor among many, each could dissociate itself from any actions that offended its constituents.

Where organizational life is less dense, or has atrophied over time, this strategy becomes more difficult, as Skerry (1993, 131–215) makes clear. In the Mexican-American neighborhoods of San Antonio, Alinsky organizers, in particular Ernesto Cortes, came to rely almost exclusively on the Roman Catholic Church. Organizers typically had Catholic backgrounds, the basic unit of organization (and the unit assessed for financial support) was the parish, local activist priests almost always played prominent roles, and COPS strategy sessions typically included discussions of Catholic social thought (Skerry 1993, 164–165).

This parish-based, Catholic-centered focus had clear advantages. It built on secure and trusted allegiances; it provided a ready source of cash, with large amounts generally donated directly from parish funds; it enabled COPS to build on a robust tradition of Catholic thought that fit well with local opinion in combining a desire for social justice with family-oriented mores. Nor can COPS be accused of replicating stereotyped "Catholic" hierarchies and exclusions. Organizers did not dominate local leaders, as proved by the frequency of fights between the two (Skerry 1993, 150). In particular, contrary to the male hierarchy of the Church, local leaders tended to be women, for full-time homemakers were the ones with free time and few prospects for lucrative paid work (Skerry 1993, 149). Like ACORN, though on a more local scale, COPS has a record of significant policy victories, and Skerry is probably right to credit it with giving its members greater political efficacy and social connectedness.

Still, COPS' sectarian strategy can be faulted on Tocquevillean grounds. First, the associative skills it fostered were apparently too narrow even in strategic terms: accustomed to being able to assume a basically Catholic

orientation and a parish-based lifestyle, COPS organizers found themselves ill prepared to organize the more diverse and mobile Latino population of Los Angeles (Skerry 1993, chapter 6). Beyond this, the parish-based approach did not actively foster a broadening of sympathies outside the sectarian group. It is not clear whether either the organizers or the organized learned to associate readily with those who were not traditional-family-oriented and Catholic like themselves. Finally, the close links between COPS and parish priests caused the Church itself to become vulnerable. While Tocqueville thought that church-state separation guaranteed that churches could outlive political controversy (1969, I.2.9, 294–301), parishioners who dissented from COPS' political activities often accused the group of hijacking their local religious life. (Skerry [1993, 165] mentions one case in which an organizer told a priest, "Father, you'll have to choose between your parish and COPS.") Skerry finds elective affinities between Alinsky-style organizing and Catholic moral habits, and this may be right. Alinsky himself, however, typically balanced the strong Church presence in his organizations with union or other groups (Skerry 1993, 145; Lancourt 1979; Horwitt 1992), thus ensuring that the group would retain ideological choice and social diversity. While COPS was less manipulative than ACORN, there are signs that it became ideologically dogmatic, dismissing (for example) secularized Chicano activists as somehow unreal in their concerns (Skerry 1993, 156), and making little effort to promote union activities among an overwhelmingly working-class population.

Skerry, a sociologist with communitarian leanings, actually congratulates COPS for building on the "shared cultural heritage" of its members, for instance by starting actions with a prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe (1993, 156). Cortes frankly described this Catholic-centered strategy as "go deep" rather than "go wide." To outsiders, however, such "deep" and literally parochial organization might seem exclusive and unwelcoming; the Tocquevillean goal of civic mixing implies normative limits to how far organizers should go in reinforcing the cultural slant of the organized. A Tocquevillean might even accuse such a strategy of promoting the family-based "individualism," the withdrawal from larger social currents, to which democracy is subject. One could apply Tocqueville's own label (1983: 96) for the sectarian divisions between and among classes in pre-Revolution France: "group individualism." Again, a Tocquevillean perspective can induce us to look at concerns that transcend mere short-term effectiveness. A "deep" and narrow strategy may increase a cultural group's sense of efficacy. But the organizer who pursues it may undermine

efficacy in a wider and longer-term sense (by failing to develop the interethnic communication skills needed to build broad alliances), may have to disrespect the opinions of cultural dissenters among the local population, and may undermine the independence of the local organizations on which later organizing efforts will depend.

SNCC: Brothers' Quarrels and Neglected Citizens

SNCC itself did not consistently abide by the organizing principles that Robert Moses later set forth. After the Freedom Summer of 1964 and the rejection of the SNCC-backed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at that summer's Democratic convention, SNCC rapidly declined and took on few new organizing projects; a group once so close that James Forman (1972, 419) called it a "band of brothers, a circle of trust" dissolved among factional fights and mutual charges of betrayal.

The facts of the breakup have been often told: in simplified form, a "floater" " or "freedom" faction identified with Moses and determined to avoid organizational restraints on both organizers and local people clashed with a "hard-line" faction led by Forman that stressed the need for ideological coherence and discipline. Eventually, SNCC splintered and its leaders ended up abroad, burned out, or in other organizations; some turned to governmental service or elective politics, while others joined openly communist, black nationalist, or Maoist groups (Burner 1994; Carson 1981; Dittmer 1994; Forman 1972).

A Tocquevillean perspective prompts new questions about these well-known facts. First, it causes one to question the perspective of participants who regret the close brotherhood lost with SNCC's breakup. Whether a group of organizers feels like a band of brothers is, from the perspective of citizen engagement, an irrelevant and self-indulgent question: true organizers would care more about their relationship with ordinary citizens than about their relationship to one another. Moreover, SNCC's use of retreats to reassess its future direction could be criticized regardless of the results of those retreats: an organizing group seeking direction should actually seek out more contact with citizens outside the group rather than less and should seek to minimize rather than maximize ideological orthodoxy.

This is not to say that the "floaters" had the better Tocquevillean case. In fact, neither Forman nor Moses can be praised on Tocquevillean grounds. Forman's turn to orthodox communism, his talk of making SNCC a "strong, centralized organization" with organizers as the "cadre" (1972, 424–425) clearly showed little tendency to respect the views of ordinary African-Americans, whose

views were becoming increasingly militant but whose spontaneous interest in communist centralism was, to say the least, limited. But Moses' existentialist humanism, though it enhanced his reputation for moral purity among SNCC organizers and outside sympathizers impressed with his intellect, can also be criticized as of questionable relevance to ordinary Mississipians. Moses agonized about Camus' question of how former victims can avoid becoming executioners (Warren 1965). This question was of great importance to Camus' audience—French intellectuals thinking of breaking with Soviet communism—but it seems unlikely that powerless sharecroppers wondering how to get, and use, the vote were able to benefit from Camus' eloquent plea that one not become a commissar.

The Black nationalism of Stokely Carmichael, perhaps the most famous ideology identified with late SNCC years, fares no better on Tocquevillean grounds. Ladner (1967), a student of the Black Power movement in Mississippi, distinguished between what Black Power meant to "cosmopolitans" like Carmichael—largely intellectuals—and what it meant to "locals" of a more grassroots origin. The cosmopolitans saw African-Americans as colonized and venerated Frantz Fanon. The locals were more focused on immediate social and economic problems and had a much more practical outlook. Ladner noted the demographic differences between the two groups (but did not interpret them): compared to the cosmopolitans, the locals were more likely to have been involved in electoral politics with the Freedom Democratic Party; were older; had more local organizing experience; and finally, were simply more numerous—two-thirds of her sample. Put more simply, pragmatic concerns were much more *popular* than anticolonialist ideology, even though the supporters of the latter were free to come in unlimited numbers from outside the state, and the more democratic organizing experience people had, the less attractive anticolonialism seemed. From a Tocquevillean perspective, Carmichael's attempt to dominate others through charismatic oratory is suspect to begin with; in any case, once his views failed to move a large number of active citizens in a given area they lost whatever claim to legitimacy they may have had.

All this should not be held to deny SNCC's accomplishment: as a group of powerless students who managed to challenge openly the massed power of a racial hierarchy, its accomplishments can hardly be overstated. They testify, however, not to some miraculous quality whereby "committed" activists can overcome political problems that affect everyone else, but to the extraordinary robustness of the organizing model itself, which is able to leverage the desires and aspirations of people

from whom all previous experience would predict endless subservience. SNCC's achievements came not from the organizers but from those they organized. In forgetting this, SNCC became what its enemies had always accused it of being: a group of impractical intellectuals and outside agitators with little support among local people.

Conclusion: Localist Democracy and Universal Morality

Organizing is not universally admired. The traditional objections are, broadly speaking, statist and universalist: while the state can hope to be a guardian of everyone's interests, an organizing struggle tends to favor the claims of some people or groups at the cost of the economic, social, or political claims of others. The state listens impartially and protects all; the organizer makes uncompromising demands and favors a constituency. Again, I would respond to this objection by changing its terms from political theory to political ethics, from the question of what our political society should be to the question of what kind of politics we should favor.

In these terms, the ethos of organizing action could be described as local, practical, and directed towards action. This ethos might seem not ethical at all in the sense the term is used by much moral theory, which aspires to be universal and abstract, and which disdains the "is" in favor of the "ought." There are legitimate concerns here that need not be merely academic: organizers should have to justify their actions in terms that transcend the groups they are organizing, simply because they aim at giving people power, and power can be dangerous. Developing civic capacities is not an abstract goal but one that culminates in actions that have consequences. Organizers think that some people's interests are consonant and that everyone's interests can be balanced through bargaining. But bargaining, though distinct from violence, is also distinct from brotherly love. If people protect their interests by voting, they will appropriate resources that might have gone to someone else. Other political methods associated with organizing—strikes, boycotts, and the like—are just as frankly coercive as voting is (though not violent), with the potential to harm some people's interests as they benefit others'.

Two responses to this concern follow implicitly from the above discussion. First, I have suggested that the organizer's activity is largely self-limiting in one sense: antidemocratic aspirations will not be supported by large numbers, and the organizer seeking the power of numbers will have to abide by democratic rules. Second, a good organizer is democratic in broad orientation, and

hopes eventually to prod local groups towards more inclusiveness and democratic respect for others. There is no guarantee that this will work, and organizers must frequently make momentary—or more than momentary—concessions to local prejudice. But this is a general problem of all politics, not unique to organizing. Long-running prejudices are always hard to fight; on an issue such as race relations we cannot say that even the combined effects of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the civil rights movement over many decades have changed attitudes completely. This does not mean organizers should not try to change people's minds—as they do. But it does mean that organizers should not be condemned for making concessions to local prejudice: this is a general condition of democratic politics.

Two further replies are also possible. The first would stress that organizers can choose whom to organize. The account above claims that organizing requires extraordinary discipline and an exceptional sense of political limits; this implies that organizing in the true sense is rare. This might seem pessimistic, but it entails at least one good thing: organizers, being scarce, are constantly in demand and can choose their fights. They therefore can, and should, require that local groups seeking their help prove that they deserve help. This will mean that local groups must defend their particular aims in more universal terms—whether or not they in fact accept the legitimacy of those terms (compare Elster's [1998, 12] theory of the "civilizing force of hypocrisy").

Finally, I would appeal to the idea of a division of ethical labor.[5] The United States is founded on high ideals and has embodied its idealism in several powerful institutions and practices. Our Supreme Court, uniquely powerful among democratic nations, is allowed to strike down laws if they are "unreasonable" or violate an array of citizens' rights defined at a very abstract level. Where other countries take for granted that the chief of state is a partisan figure who appeals only to a governing majority and has contempt for his or her opponents, Americans expect the President to articulate the good of the entire nation, to avoid excessive appeals to resentment or party feeling, and to appeal to "the better angels of our nature." The structure of our bipartisan legislature, and in particular the anti-majoritarianism of the Senate, puts a premium on compromise, on offending no one's values too deeply, and on seeking "win-win" outcomes that can appeal to much more than a narrow majority (Buchanan and Tullock 1962). Finally, we have a particular devotion to the

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[5] The term "moral division of labor" appears in Nagel (1991, chapter 6), but my usage does not resemble his.

"jeremiad" style in politics, to self-proclaimed prophets who see themselves (rightly or wrongly) as moral truth-tellers and try to change out behavior by appealing to deep and universal principles: democracy, equality, liberty, patriotism, or on occasion less appealing aspects of Americanism (Berkovitch 1978).

In this context, there is ample room for *one* kind of politician whose role is to challenge claims to universal morality in favor of the particular, the neglected, the common. Tocqueville claimed that democrats were uniquely, and excessively, devoted to abstract ideas. Too lazy to do exhaustive research, and too self-reliant to rely on old, complex truths, we democratic citizens are quick to draw general conclusions from our own motives, beliefs, and practices (1969, II.1.3, 437–441). The exception was political ideas: in politics, Tocqueville says, Americans had direct practical experience, and so were slow to accept new and sweeping generalizations that neglected experience (1969, II.1.4, 441–442). The organizer brings us back to practical political experience, and chastens our love of generalizations. Where mass democracy stresses the large, the universal, the national, and the common, organizing is based on a stubborn and salutary attachment to the particular: it aims to further the demands of a set of local people, and to foster their ability to govern themselves, challenge authority, and develop their civic capacities. It is one embodiment—perhaps the most deliberate, willful embodiment—of the political activity Walzer has called "insurgency," which "calls into question the omnicompetency of the state" through "modest but urgent demands" for a bit of self-government in a particular time and place (1980, 48–52).

The United States will never lack for politicians and political institutions that articulate the glories of equal protection, the claims of absolute liberty, the imperative of looking for the common good. Organizers force us to see another side of things. They stress that achieving equitable policy outcomes requires addressing inequalities in social power. They point out, and work towards, the social preconditions of liberty. They tell us when an allegedly "common" good has left out those who lack power and do not understand the political system. American politics tends to define democracy in terms that slight the socially marginal, the local and particular, and the philosophically inarticulate. But this does not make organizing undemocratic. It means that it is vital to democracy and forces us to rethink the kinds of politics that democracy can and should include.

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