Mobilizing People in Low-Income Neighbourhoods

The Virtues and Ambiguities of Community Organizing
Julien TALPIN

Much confusion has arisen in recent urban policy discussions in France about the importance of "empowerment". To reduce this confusion, and to see more clearly the relevance of American experience to France, Julien Talpin points out the basic difference between community development and community organizing, and explores the latter in a field study in Los Angeles. The difference between the two can be subtle, but familiarity with it is nevertheless indispensable for designing and putting into place participation by neighbourhood residents.

For some years now, among those who take an interest in low-income neighbourhoods, there has been something of a craze for community organizing in France. There have been conferences on this topic,[1] reports devoted to it[2], and growing interest in it among people looking for new approaches in the worlds of social work and urban policy.[3] However, studies of it in French are few and far between,[4] except for various references to Saul Alinsky – the founder of this movement – who has been the subject of several recent books.[5] This French craze followed the movement's return to favour in the United States after the election of Barack Obama in 2008 had buffed up its attractiveness and made it more visible and less prone to being treated as outdated.[6] As a candidate, Obama had made much of his experience as a community organizer as part of his personal history, and that experience also had some impact on his election techniques.

Today all French experts in urban policy emphasize the need to strengthen capacities for action in low-income districts. "Empowerment", "the power to act", and "getting people moving" are the new watchwords, in the face of disillusionment with participative democracy and more established ways of acting together. Everyone looks to North America for

---

1 "Le community organizing: Développer le pouvoir des citoyens?", ENTPE, Vaulx-en-Velin , 14-16 March 2012; "Community Organizing: The Theory & The Practice", Université Grenoble 3, 12-13 April 2013.

2 J. Donzelot, Y. Djaziri, and A. Wyvekens, "Banlieues et quartiers populaires. Remettre les gens en mouvement", Terra Nova, no. 27, 2012; L. Arsan and R. Didi (eds.), *Organisez-vous ! Construire la participation politique dans les quartiers populaires*, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2013.

3 M.-H. Bacqué and M. Mechmache, "Pour une réforme radicale de la politique de la ville. Ca ne se fera pas sans nous. Citoyenneté et pouvoir d'agir dans les quartiers populaires", Rapport au ministre délégué chargé de la ville, Juillet 2013.

4 However, see H. Balazard, *Quand la société civile s'organise: l'expérience démocratique de London Citizens*, Thèse pour le doctorat de science politique, ENTPE, 2012.

5 T. Quinqueton, *Que ferait Saul Alinsky?,* Paris, Desclée de Bouwer, 2011; S. Guth (ed.), *Saul Alinsky. Conflit et démocratie locale*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2013. See also the new translation of one of his works: S. Alinsky, *Etre radical: Manuel pragmatique pour radicaux réalistes,* Brussels, Aden, 2011.

6 For example, see "Community Organizing Never Looked so Good", *The New York Times*, 12 April 2009.

solutions,[7] but imprecision reigns, both in the definitions of the terms and on the practices to be implemented. While the idea of "empowerment" is the subject of a useful book in French that emphasizes the ambiguity and the multiplicity of meanings of that term[8], there is less precision in France about the idea of "community organizing", which is a term that is also increasingly cropping up there. Although there is much writing in French on the work of Saul Alinsky, studies of the "nebulous community" [9] of contemporary America have changed since his death in 1972, both for and against him, and cannot be reduced to the work of its founder. Without presenting a comprehensive survey of the literature, it does seem clear that the phenomenon of "community organizing" can be better understood by considering parts of the literature dealing with what it is and what it is not. Our glance at the nebulous American community will be assisted by a field study done in Los Angeles in 2012-2013. After distinguishing between community organizing (CO) and community development (with which it is sometimes confused) by highlighting the different ideas of power and social change in these two ideas, it will be argued that CO is primarily a set of specific activist practices – a repertoire of actions and an organizational style – which make it particularly effective for mobilizing residents in impoverished neighbourhoods.[10] Observing the routines of several organizations shows that the bulk of their daily work is recruiting and mobilizing residents. While the difficulty of this task spurs professionalism, which leads to issues of internal democracy and questions about the capacity of CO to strengthen the autonomy of the most disadvantaged, CO's specific qualities and strength reside in its unique ability to mobilize.[11]

Community Organizing versus Community Development: Conflictual Relations with Institutions

Arising in Chicago in the 1930s at the initiative of Saul Alinsky, community organizing has greatly evolved in the last thirty years. Beyond the Obama image, its history is connected with the dismantling of governmental social services. Starting in the 1980s, many social services are now provided directly by "civil society", and there has been an influx of funding – from federal and state government and from private foundations – to finance community organizations.[12] So in the United States, community organizing now appears as one way of resorting to civil society – a minority, politicized and critical way. It embodies the radical edge of "empowerment", even though that term, widely taken up by institutions, is rarely used by these associations. It is one of the forms taken by "community-based organizations" (CBOs), which constitute a significant part of American civil society, though "community" – a mystical word that is constantly being glamourized[13] – can actually refer to

---

7 For explicit and implicit references to the United States in the recent report on urban policy, cf. T. Kirszbaum, "Un empowerment à la française? A propos du rapport Bacqué/Mechmache", *La vie des idées*, 12 November 2013: http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Vers-un-empowerment-a-la-francaise.html

8 M.-H. Bacqué and C. Biewener, *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

9 Borrowing M.-H. Bacqué's term, "Associations 'communautaires' et gestion de la pauvreté. Les Community Development Corporations à Boston", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 5 (160), 2005, pp. 46-65.

10 It goes without saying that we are not equating French low-income districts with American slums, given the very different social and racial structures. Nevertheless, as Loic Wacquant emphasizes, "Even though they are at opposite poles in the urban space, the low income suburbs in France are clearly the structural equivalent of the inner city in the United States": *Parias urbains. Ghetto, banlieues, État*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008, p. 207 (quotation translated from French). This structural equivalence makes it possible (with due caution) to examine together the mobilization of the marginalized populations in the two cases.

11 What are referred to in this article as "organizations" or "community organizations" are also known as "non-profits", reflecting their tax exemption status.

12 N. Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare's End*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.

13 Cf. N. Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998. http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Est-il-devenu-indecent-de-parler.html

many different practices.[14] The three ideal types of CBOs are service associations, community development, and community organizing[15], all of them aimed at finding remedies for poverty and social marginalization in large American cities.

The majority of CBOs are social service providers: e.g., access to housing, assistance with job seeking or administrative procedures, provision of meals, and help with homework. These organizations can be more or less politicized. They are supposed to provide services mainly by involving unpaid volunteers, a form of participation that is seen as a source of empowerment for individuals.[16] While these CO associations do sometimes provide services – e.g. tutoring students, and reintegrating ex-convicts – those are secondary (in terms of time spent, staff assigned, and resources devoted) in the activity of these organizations, which focus especially on working to mobilize the residents of poor neighbourhoods into "campaigns" with the goal of "social justice". Here we find various federations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)[17] started by Alinsky, People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO)[18], Gamaliel[19], DART, and the late ACORN[20] (arising from the civil rights movement), as well as several local organizations, all with community organization credentials. Our research is based especially on studying the Los Angeles branch of PICO (LA Voice) and two unfederated organizations, Community Coalition and the Bus Riders Union – some of the most powerful local CBOs. In spite of their differences, these organizations share the definition of CO as the process allowing "people to mobilize by themselves to gain concrete improvements benefiting the most disadvantaged communities."[21]

French references to community organizing, which always mention Alinsky, sometimes seem quite remote from what CO means in practice in the United States today, and in recent work on CO it is actually community development that is being discussed. We think maintaining this distinction is necessary, because the two phenomena have different political logics. The tendency to elide the two is very clear in a recent report coordinated by Jacques Donzelot: "this method (CO) had its full impact only in the late 1970s, when it was included as a part of community development. …The community development organization is no longer just some kind of union for residents' struggles."[22] Indeed in the 1960s we saw in the wake of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty many examples of local participation coming from the creation of *Community Development Corporations* (CDCs), which received federal money for economic development and housing renovation in damaged urban

---

14 Cf. N. Marwell, "Privatizing the Welfare State: Non-Profit Community-Based Organizations as Political Actors", *American Sociological Review*, 69, 2004, pp. 265-291.

15 Cf. P. Dreier, "Community Empowerment Strategies: The Limits and Potential of Community Organizing in Urban Neighborhoods", *Cityscape*, 2(2), 1996, pp. 121-159.

16 Here it could be argued that in the United States there is a participative compulsion or imperative that comes from below. Unlike in France, the supply of participation comes mainly not from any level of government, but from civil society.

17 Cf. M. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. On the English version of the IAF, cf. H. Balazard, *Quand la société civile s'organise, op. cit.*

18 Cf. R. Wood, *Faith in Action: Race, Religion and Democratic Organizing in America*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2002.

19 H. Swarts, *Organizing Urban America. Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

20 Cf. R. Fischer (ed.), *The People Shall Rule: ACORN, Community Organizing, and the Struggle for Economic Justice,* New York, Vanderbilt University Press, 2011.

21 This definition was given during a course on community organizing taken by the employees of the group Community Coalition.

22 J. Donzelot, Y. Djaziri, and A. Wyvekens, "Banlieue et quartiers populaires", *op. cit.*, p. 41.

neighbourhoods. Although this was aimed at improving the lives of residents in marginalized areas, this policy cannot be equated to community organizing, which is concerned with maintaining autonomous action. CO autonomy with respect to government bodies is particularly important in its methods of financing, largely based on foundations and membership dues. So it is misleading to say that "the idea of community organizing is putting everyone around a table to talk".[23] In the process of community organizing – especially in the first movements, founded by Alinsky – community organizations did aim to assemble all the stakeholders in a geographical area (churches, schools, unions), but autonomously from public authorities. The relationship with government is therefore very different: the organization no longer just transmits and receives information, it becomes a critical stakeholder. The model championed by Jacques Donzelot and his colleagues for the past ten years[24] is therefore not a model of community organizing, but of community development.[25] The bulk of the work of CDCs consists of renovating and then managing affordable housing in low-income districts, and of encouraging the creation of local SMEs or even of "black-economy capitalism". Their activity often extends to managing crèches, schools and training services, in order to make residents more employable. Because of the professionalism required for this model to work, the local residents' participation is often reduced to a bare minimum.[26] While the CDCs are often very effective in improving residents' housing conditions, the much sought after "empowerment" seems to be marginal. Also, community development is part of the privatization of the state by having recourse to civil society: CDCs operate in "empowerment zones", where taxes are lowered in order to foster economic development, and where community organizations are subsidized in order to provide basic services to residents. So CDCs have gradually been institutionalized, with their tasks assumed to be more the provision of expertise than the construction of an opposing force.[27] In the United States, community organizations now often criticize community development as an embodiment of the neo-liberal aspect of empowerment.[28]

Thus, even while French urban policy's institutionalization of participation is being deplored, there are calls for this policy to follow the lead of American forms of participation that have somewhat misguidedly co-opted associations, and to create spaces for partnership in dealing with social and economic precariousness. The same discordance can be seen in a recent book in which Michel Kokoreff and Didier Lapeyronnie persuasively argue in favour

---

23 As asserted by Y. Djaziri in *Le Monde*, "Terra Nova propose d'importer le 'community organizing' à l'américaine dans les banlieues françaises", 12 April 2012 (quotation translated from French).

24 See especially J. Donzelot, C. Mével, and A. Wyvekens, *Faire société. La politique de la ville aux États-Unis et en France,* Paris, Seuil, 2003.

25 Note that Alinsky had publicly rejected the model of community development as established by the War on Poverty, calling it "political pornography". Cf. S. Alinsky, "The War on Poverty – Political Pornography", *Journal of Social Issues*, 41(1), 1965, pp. 41-47.

26 Cf. J. DeFilippis, "Community Control and Development: The Long View" in J. DeFilippis and S. Saegert (eds.), *The Community Development Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2008; and R.M. Silverman, "Caught in the Middle: CDCs and the Conflict between Grassroots and Instrumental forms of Citizen Participation", *Community Development*, 36 (2), 2005, pp. 35-51. The American "community development" movement was criticized especially for its focus on housing and economic development – a "hard", "bricks and mortar" approach – neglecting "softer" approaches focused on social life and civic connection (similar to criticism directed today at ANRU [the National Agency for Urban Renewal] in France). In the 1990's there was some limited success in attempts to promote the "soft" "community building" approach.

27 On the comparable dynamics of the gradual professionalization and depoliticization of associations aiming at the empowerment of the black community in the United Kingdom, cf. V. Sala Pala, *Discriminations ethniques: Les politiques du logement social en France et au Royaume-Uni*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012.

28 Cf. R. Stocker, "The CDC model of Urban Redevelopment: A Critique and an Alternative", *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 19 (1), 1997, pp. 1-22; and M.-H. Bacqué, "Associations 'communautaires' et gestion de la pauvreté", *op. cit.*

of repoliticizing low-income neighbourhoods: "To remake cities, in a double and admirable sense of the word, is to intervene politically in problem neighbourhoods and to build on the efforts of people who are trying to make heard the voices of those without a say".[29] Community organizing? No, CDC! Although they denounce "consensus building and the like" and turn towards "the formation of groups established as indispensable and informed interlocutors",[30] they favour a model – community development – that in the United States is a model for depoliticization.

In spite of their very detailed knowledge of the sociology of low income city neighbourhoods in France, these authors look to forms of participation that are rather distant from their aspirations to "get people moving". To repeat: community development – in shorthand, the CDC model – is not community organizing.[31] It may be that the two are compatible,[32] but at least analytically it is helpful to distinguish between them. In Los Angeles, they coexist, though in a rather parallel fashion since their interactions remain limited.[33] Getting beyond the terms, the fact is that the way that they think about social change is very different.[34] One of the key differences is in their concepts of political action: cooperation versus power struggle. In one camp it really is to do with putting everyone around the table to improve the management of a neighbourhood, with an economic development frame of reference.[35] This is the logic of the market, in which associations, government bodies and businesses work hand in hand. In the other camp it is to do with collective and autonomous self-organization of low income neighbourhoods, designed to create a power struggle with institutions, and not to sit at a negotiating table until after claims have been made and heard through collective action (demonstrations, petitions, media appearances, etc.). A phrase that is constantly repeated in the organizations that we studied is "they have the money, but we have the numbers", which explains the importance of mass mobilization (which we look at below). Thus in the United States, though community organizing comes in different shapes and sizes, it always has a conflictual relationship with institutions and elected politicians. This does not mean that these organizations cannot occasionally have more cooperative relationships with institutions and politicians. In this flexibility, community

---

29 M. Kokoreff and D. Lapeyronnie, *Refaire la cité*, Paris, Seuil, 2013, p. 105 (quotation translated from French).

30 *Ibid*. (quotation translated from the French). See pp. 95-96 for the explicit reference to CDCs.

31 The same shift can be seen in the United Kingdom, where the Cameron government is trying to retrieve the popularity of community organizing, which is how they have described their initiative for community development, leading Citizen UK (the local branch of the IAF) to reassert that the two programs have very different characteristics. Cf. H. Balazard, *Quand la société civile s'organise, op. cit.*

32 Several CDCs have emerged from the gradual institutionalization of community organizations. Recently, Community Benefits Agreements have been a model of collaboration between community organizing and community development. These Agreements create spaces for temporary participation and negotiation, in which all of the stakeholders – public, private and associational – come together to negotiate major development projects, the results of which are carved in stone by the signature of a contract. One of the first examples occurred in Los Angeles, for the construction of halls for sport and spectacles as part of the revitalization of the city centre. Fearful that the neighbourhood would be gentrified, community organizations obtained (by negotiation but also by pressure) the construction of social housing, crèches, and schools for the residents, as well as residents' priority in the hiring on the building sites. Cf. L. Saito, "Low Income Residents Can Benefit from Urban Development: The LA Live Community Benefits Agreement", *City & Community*, 1(2), 2012, pp. 129-150.

33 This is tied in with the history of community organisations in Los Angeles. Many of them appeared following the riots of 1992, distinguishing themselves from the community development initiative Rebuild LA, which aimed at encouraging private investment in the areas damaged in the riots. In spite of the millions of dollars invested, the initiative failed, and that persuaded community organizations of the need for a more independent approach.

34 Cf. R. Stoecker, "Community Organizing and Community Development in Cedar-Riverside and East Toledo: A Comparative Study", *Journal of Community Practice*, 2 (3), 1996, pp. 1-23.

35 The phrase "consensual organizing" is also used, in order to reject the "them and us" aspect of community organizing.

organizations seek to distinguish themselves from social movements,[36] which they reproach for their lack of "pragmatism" and, in particular, their lack of concrete and winnable demands.[37] However, in alternating between conflict and cooperation, community organizations reason that institutionalization can only work against them, preventing them from relying on the power of the numbers that they mobilize.[38] Therefore, any participation or negotiation always has to be temporary.

Ways of Mobilizing and Symbolically Representing Marginalized Neighbourhoods

This might suggest that community organizing embraces all kinds of collective protest in low-income districts. But a more exact understanding of CO is more explanatory. As a kind of collective protest, CO relies on a specific set of tools. The golden rule of CO is "not to do for people what they can do by themselves". Therefore its activity differs from "advocacy" – which means speaking in the name of someone else – and it focuses instead on letting the inhabitants of poor districts speak for themselves. Nevertheless, community organizations are aware that the voice of low-income districts does not arise naturally or spontaneously, and that therefore it must be made to emerge. It follows that one of the characteristics of CO, in comparison to other forms of collective action, consists of the substantial political task of recruiting and training the district's residents. Community organizations spend a lot of energy in door-to-door canvassing, house meetings, Tupperware parties, telephone calls, and one-on-ones[39], with the objective of creating relationships with the residents and thereby mobilizing them lastingly.

This mobilization work takes two main forms. First, there is the traditional Alinski approach (seen particularly in the IAF but also in the PICO federation), which seeks to assemble the existing bodies (churches, schools, unions, associations, etc.) to carry out specific campaigns (in housing, health, education, transport, etc.). This approach is usually referred to as "broad-based", "institutional", or "faith-based" organizing. It relies especially on progressive congregations, religious institutions being perceived as powerful reservoirs for politicization. The mobilization work is facilitated by churches' internal organization. The presence of the imam, rabbi, priest or preacher supports the mobilization, which penetrates into all of the usual spaces of religious participation (Bible or Koran reading groups, choirs, social actions, schools, etc.). The role of organizers[40] is to build relationships with the leaders of existing organizations. The second approach, which could be called post-Alinskian[41], aims to mobilize the non-organized.[42] Focusing on the residents who at the outset are participating in nothing – no association, no church – and who are generally the most disadvantaged, this approach requires a larger amount of organization work than is the case with faith-based organizing. We have studied an example of this kind of approach – the Community Coalition

---

[36] Cf. S. Chauvin, "Le worker center et ses spectres: les conditions d'une mobilisation des travailleurs précaires à Chicago", *Sociologies pratiques*, 15 (2), 2007, pp. 41-54.

37 Some also distinguish between "organizing" and "mobilizing", the former considered as permanent and the latter as temporary. However, we have not adopted this distinction in the title of this article (which was written in French, in which "organiser" does not carry the same connotations as the English word "organize").

38 There is an obvious parallel in the history of the trade union movement.

39 These are face-to-face sessions between an organizer and a potential leader, to identify the sources of indignation and the interests of future members, and the association's objectives. Above all, these one-on-ones create relationships between organizers and leaders.

40 Organizers are employees of organizations; their work consists of recruiting and mobilizing residents, and getting actions underway.

[41] Some organizations even reject the Alinsky tradition as being too hostile to social movements and to the ideological approaches of the 1960s. They also criticize its absence of political initiative, with its movements often occurring as reactions.

42 This tradition was represented especially by ACORN, which disappeared in 2010 as a result of a scandal.

in Los Angeles – and we are struck by the impressive amount of mobilization accomplished by this body's organizers. While in the first approach the work is already affected by the internal organization of churches, schools and unions, in the second approach everything needs to be done from scratch. Thus there are more organizers, each linked with a particular neighbourhood, in which he or she has to conduct a "power analysis" in order to identify the people who matter in a given location, and then has to work on the ground, meeting the people and identifying the salient problems of the residents, with a view to mobilizing them.

In terms of mobilization, the work pays off in both approaches. The organizations manage to produce participation by low-income residents, most of whom are members of minority groups who lack social and educational resources, even though they are in general the best integrated parts of impoverished districts.[43] The numbers are not massive – some hundreds or occasionally a few thousands of people per organization – but that is enough to obtain significant political victories at the local and sometimes at the state level.[44] We need to study in detail the sociological bases of this unlikely commitment, and to analyse what kinds of rewards[45] explain the favourable response by hundreds of residents to these repeated requests. One important issue concerns the relationship between community organizations and the most socio-economically vulnerable people in the inner cities. The poor neighbourhoods in American cities are increasingly polarized between the most marginalized inhabitants – a very socially isolated "underclass" – and those who even though close to the poverty level do have jobs (sometimes several) and are socially relatively integrated.[46] It is mainly the latter who are to be found in community organizations. While these "working poor" are sometimes trying to set themselves apart from drug dealers, gangs, the homeless, and more generally from those who are unemployed and the most socially marginalized, the organizations we studied look not down but up, and they see the enemies not within the community but alongside government authorities: large businesses and property developers. The fact that many organizers are ex-convicts or former gang members shows that the border between groups is porous. Although it is difficult to secure participation by the poorest people, the structural interpretations of the cause of urban marginalization that are prevalent in these organizations (emphasizing especially the roles of "the transformations of capitalism" and "institutional racism") encourage them not to stigmatize people that they want to get to

---

43 The very limited statistics on the social composition of community organizations are essentially for organizations that fit into the Alinsky tradition of broad-based organizing, and cover only their governing boards. In 2011, 23% of the members of COs had no college diploma and had annual incomes lower that $25,000, and 35% had incomes between $25,000 and $50,000. 32% were African-Americans, and 14% were Hispanics. Cf. R. Wood, *Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Organizing*, Jerico, Interfaith Funders, 2011. Our investigation suggests that the ordinary members of these organizations are from lower income segments. In any event, they are clearly socially more ordinary that the publics in French participatory schemes. Cf. M. Carrel, *Faire participer les habitants? Citoyenneté et pouvoir d'agir dans les quartiers populaires*, Lyon, ENS Editions, 2013.

44 One of the political campaigns that we observed in the autumn of 2012, on Proposition 30, concerned the financing of public education in California through raising the state income taxes of high-income taxpayers. A state-wide coalition of community organizations and unions was actively involved, carrying out a large door-to-door operation. Although all the credit for the 55.4% "Yes" vote cannot be given to this mobilization of voters on its own, the coalition nevertheless did think of the result as a victory; in their eyes, the hundreds of thousands of voters that they had mobilized were enough to tip the scales in the right direction. The victory meant that there will be $6 billion more primarily for public schools in poor neighbourhoods. The part played by such coalitions or federations is crucial, because it gets organizations beyond merely local struggles for survival in those neighbourhoods. However, their effectiveness is highly variable.

45 The Alinsky model emphasizes the necessity of starting from the "self-interest" of the lower classes.

46 Cf. especially the classic work by William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987 (second edition 2012).

participate. The following scene, observed in a public Community Coalition meeting about security in South Central Los Angeles, demonstrates this organizational style. The residents are first invited to talk about the problems that they encounter in their daily lives: more and more prostitution, young people hanging around in the streets and taking drugs in plain sight, filth, roads in disrepair, etc. Confronted by this avalanche of problems that tend to line up some resdients against others, the Coalition Director, Alberto Retana, speaks in a way that reveals the organization's discursive norms: "When I look at prostitution, when I look at loitering, at drug trafficking – all those activities are problems, but all those are symptoms. We could deal with that all day, we could incarcerate someone selling her body, we could incarcerate someone loitering, we could do all that, but it's not going to solve the problem. So what CoCo [Community Coalition] tries to do is get at the root of problem. The unemployment, the broken foster care system, broken schools – if our schools were functioning correctly our kids wouldn't be there in the streets. But most of the time, we like to blame the person, when we can count up our good people and our bad people, while at CoCo what we are trying to do is to look at the structure of the system. …The root is how the city prioritizes one part of the city over another." [47]

This way of talking, the reaction to which would repay analysis, is itself indicative of the fact that the community organizations we studied try to do two things at once: to construct symbolically the unity of marginalized districts by transcending the cleavages of class and race that run through them, and to promote their interests by defending local claims that will benefit everyone. Thus, the first major campaign led by the Community Coalition shortly after the 1992 riots was concerned with liquor stores, which are overrepresented in low-income areas and are places with a high concentration of criminality. Rather than targeting the drug dealers around grocery stores, pimps and alcoholics, the Coalition went to the city government to get it to adopt a regulation to prevent the reconstruction of the liquor stores destroyed in the riots, and to compel the others to strengthen their security arrangements. More recently the Coalition led a campaign to transform some of the grocery stores into supermarkets selling fresh produce, to make available high-quality food in these neighbourhoods that are often referred to as "food deserts". Community organizations seek to change the conditions that produce urban marginalization, by adopting a structural perspective; for example, easy access to alcohol, and the difficulty of shopping for fresh fruits and vegetables, produce certain kinds of behaviour: alcoholism, obesity and health problems in the poorest people. This approach also helps attenuate the racial cleavages that run through the organizations, by prioritizing territorial ("spatial") or class claims. This is not always easy – for example, when the issue is the regularization of (mainly Latino) illegal immigrants, or mobilization following the controversial 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man accused of murdering Trayvon Martin (a young African-American). The possibility of having several ongoing campaigns brings with it the possibility of a racial division of labour, with some groups putting more into some issues than into others, even though the organizers pay a lot of attention to building interracial coalitions that seem strategically stronger.[48] In fact, although community organizations do not set the poor against one another[49], they do

---

[47] Observation notes, Community Coalition, 27 March 2013.
[48] On the racial divides in community organizations, cf. S. Chauvin, "Sur la route de Washington. Le déchirement d'un pèlerinage politique de travailleurs journaliers", in M. Berger, D. Céfaï, and C. Gayet-Viaud (eds.), *Du civil au politique: Ethnographies du vivre ensemble*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 503-543.
[49] Loïc Wacquant rightly emphasizes the intra-community tensions in the "hyperghetto" – which we refer to above, in the words of residents participating in a public meeting – but in the battlefield that he describes he forgets the politicized community organizations, which attempt by themselves to accomplish this "immense really symbolic work of aggregation and representation", in order "to get this conglomerate into existence and thus into collective action".

nevertheless involve some people speaking up, who thereby speak in the name of others, and in particular in the name of the most socio-economically vulnerable people.

Working at Self-Organization: Tensions at the Core of Community Organizing

Because of the effort that is required, community organizations – especially the second model – demand a lot of human resources. While in the Alinski model two or three organizers can be enough, in the second model, in the case of the Community Coalition, there are no fewer than fifteen organizers, working on a smaller territory, South Central.[50] The difficulty of mobilization thus implies greater professionalism, which involves raising more money and can strengthen the organizations' bureaucratization. Robert Michel's' "iron law of oligarchy" is never very far away.[51] That is why the education of the participants – through both popular educational sessions and actions – appears so essential; organizations try to increase the leadership capacity of their members, especially their ability to speak in public on behalf of the group and to become familiar with technical and political techniques.[52] So there is some risk that leaders increase their capacity for action in a way that detaches them from the base. In addition to these issues of internal democracy (which are important), the relationship between organizers and residents is central.

Because the goal of community organizing is to enable people to mobilize and to speak for themselves, domination by organizers must constantly be opposed. One solution to this problem, which Alinski established very early on, is to rotate the organizers: every five or six years organizers have to leave the city where they are working, in order to avoid accumulating too much power. It is sometimes difficult to apply this rule because of practical constraints: as they become older, organizers do not necessarily want to go on remaking their lives, because they have families on whom they cannot inflict permanent geographical mobility. And the rotation rule does not cover all of the dimensions in the relationship between organizers and residents. One question that is frequently raised in informal discussions – but not in theories – is whether good organizers should be "in the image" of the people they are trying to organize. So the issue of representation appears at the heart of community organizing. This issue was never really raised by Alinsky, a white Jewish man from a modest background, who managed to organize all kinds of communities. Today it is dealt with more directly in organizations. An essential part of the sociology of poor neighbourhoods in Los Angeles is their multiracial quality, with a numerical domination by Latinos (mainly with Mexican or Central American origins) and a historically significant but now declining African-American population.[53] The Director of LA Voice is a white man with a Harvard theology degree, but two of his organizers are Hispanics, and a third, a Protestant

L. Wacquant, *Parias urbains, op. cit.*, p. 255 (quotation translated from French). On the role of the organizational and institutional environment, sometimes mitigating the structural forces that destabilize poor neighbourhoods, see R. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2012.

[50] Symbolically strongly stigmatized as a place for outcasts, South Central is the poorest district in the city, almost exclusively made up of ethnic minorities, where the riots of 1992 started.

51 Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (translated by Eden and Cedar Paul from the Italian translation of the German original [1911]), London, Jarrold & Sons, 1915. On the internal democracy of community organizations, cf. H. Balazard, "Mobiliser et mettre en scène les leaders: Les coulisses des campagnes démocratiques de London Citizens", *Participations*, 2 (4), 2012, pp. 129-153.

52 Many studies show that repeated participation has long-term effects on the politicization of those most closely involved. Cf. V. Terriquez and H. Kwon, "The Political Socialization of Youth from Immigrant Families and the Role of Community-Based Organizations", paper presented at the American Sociology Association Annual Meeting, Denver, 17-20 August, 2012.

53 Cf. C. Ghorra-Gobin, *Los Angeles: le mythe américain inachevé*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2002.

African-American, has recently been hired to strengthen the presence of black churches in the organization. In order to increase participation by the young, the Director is also wondering about the advisability of hiring a younger organizer (the existing ones are all over 40), implicitly accepting the assumption that the organizers' capacity to mobilize depends on the extent to which the residents can identify with them. At LA Voice the organizers come from the middle classes and do not live in the neighbourhoods that they organize. Although that reduces their capacity to mobilize, having the opportunity to get support from church leaders – including the clergy – facilitates their task.

In contrast, the Community Coalition has made the choice of hiring organizers mainly from South Central, and from ethnic minorities. The idea is that organizers reflect the neighbourhoods that they organize: to get the residents to back them up, these residents must somehow identify with them, which is easier if the organizers show that they have first-hand knowledge of life in the neighbourhood. Local knowledge, plus geographical, social and racial identity, facilitate the merger of the organization with the neighbourhood. The organizers are models as well as mirrors: priority in recruiting goes to young university graduates, who are rare in South Central. The organizers thus appear as the vanguard, the most politicized and educated part of the neighbourhood that they want to mobilize. If that sometimes raises questions about the real autonomy of the participants in the organization – after all, the organizers call the shots – it is also in this way that the principle that we shouldn't do things for people that they can do by themselves is established and implemented.

A model exportable to France?
Although the image can be scary – community organizing will open the door to "communitarianism"![54] – careful study of what has happened in the United States shows that, in general, community is relied on only in order to get beyond it. Interfaith organizations combine several religious communities not to advance particular agendas, but to conduct social or territorial campaigns. Likewise, the organizations that target the unorganized seek to create relationships and to get ethnic minorities to act together in struggles for territorial demands – for example, demands for channelling more resources to South Central.[55]

These American experiences may seem far removed from events in France, but comparable tensions can be seen in forms of participation in France since the 1970s. Although American community development has gone farther in devolving autonomy to local organizations, it does embody an institutionalized form of participation that is reminiscent of the first stages of French urban policy and some contemporary participatory mechanisms. And "community organizing" is not unlike the urban battles of the 1970s, in which conflictual relationships with government bodies and the active mobilization of residents were central.[56] There is another comparable ingredient in the fact that these battles started out being financially and politically autonomous, and were annihilated by their gradual co-optation.[57]

In fact, in recent years there have been many initiatives in France explicitly claiming to be examples of community organizing. However, in our view French enthusiasm for

---

54 Cf. *Le Monde*, *op. cit.*, 12 April 2012.
55 Cf. E.W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, covering in particular community organizations in Los Angeles.
56 Cf. P. Cossart and J. Talpin, *Participation piège à cons? Quand l'Alma-Gare prouve le contraire*, forthcoming 2014.
57 On this subject, see the recommendations of the Bacqué/Mechmache report on the reform of financing associations in France.

community organizing and empowerment has covered over certain ambiguities and brought together under a single banner actors with quite different aims and methods. Some groups and local initiatives have been inspired directly by the community organizing model, adopting in particular its concept of power, and taking an approach that is conflictual and independent from government bodies.[58] Others, making efforts to renew urban policy, defend a concept closer to community development. A third trend is a classically liberal approach, with an emphasis on local entrepreneurial leadership. While it is too early to say which direction these various different initiatives will take, we think that their alliance behind a common language is unstable both conceptually and politically. The American experience suggests at least two possible voices, which are difficult to reconcile. Nevertheless, apart from the fascination with all things American, the community organizing trail does offer many lessons. French city suburbs are not policy deserts, but some tested practices could well help bring about the empowerment that is sought after to combat fragmentation and the difficulties of collective action that exist there. However, it is difficult to imagine such a step being impelled from above, by elected officials with little to gain.[59] Such initiatives exist locally, but often seem impotent, struggling to mobilize sufficient numbers for power plays. That is why we have emphasized the effectiveness of the tactics of community organizing in this respect: it looks for people where they are found, and doesn't wait for spontaneous popular participation to occur. To do that, it has to start with problems that are raised by residents, such as housing, employment, and discrimination (which is certainly a feature of the "moral economy of French suburbs" [60] but is seldom tackled collectively). Allying and politicizing existing common spaces in working-class neighbourhoods (community centres, places of worship, sports clubs, associations, etc.) independently from government bodies could help put a stop to a hopeless spiral of marginalization.

Books&Ideas.net, 19 January 2015.

---

58 Cf. http://www.alliancecitoyenne-ag.org/; http://www.stoplecontroleaufacies.fr/

59 See the reflections of Thomas Kirszbaum, *op. cit.,* who points out that it is oxymoronic for a department of a city government to be promoting empowerment.

[60] Adopting the phrase from M. Kokoreff and D. Lapeyronnie, in *Refaire la cité, op. cit.*