Episode 4: The Ability to Act: Power Over and Power With

Luke Bretherton (LB) [00:00:05] Hi. My name is Luke Bretherton, and this is the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, which focuses on the history and contemporary practice of organizing in democratic politics. In each episode, I talk to those who live and breathe community organizing and other related forms of relationally driven politics that put people before program. This podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation—or IAF—Duke Divinity School, and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. This is the fourth episode in the series and represents the turn from the section on listening, which was the last two episodes, to the section on organizing. In this episode, I examine the nature and meaning of power. Now, for many, the term power conjures up mostly negative associations and bad experiences. But as Martin Luther King, Jr. puts it so eloquently in his book, Where Do We Go from Here?, power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It's the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes. In this sense, power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice. One of the greatest problems of history is that the concept of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with the denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. There is nothing wrong with power. The problem is that in America it is unequally distributed. To build on what King says here—and central to democracy—is the commitment that power should be distributed as widely as possible. That commitment is written into the fabric of the word, which in Greek combines "demos"—people—with "cratos"—power. As the political philosopher Melissa Lane points out about ancient Greek democracy, the novelty of it was not that common people had some role in government, but that, as Lane puts it, ordinary people, including the poorest of the citizens, came to control—and not merely be consulted by—the powers of government. Echoing King, in organizing, power is defined neutrally as simply the ability to act. And in the spirit of democracy, organizing seeks to help ordinary people realize their power in order that they can have some control over their living and working conditions. To discuss the relationship between power and democratic politics and a range of other questions, such as: Who has power? How should we analyze it? How can those who don't have much get more? And how does power operate, for better or worse in democratic politics? And what are the different kinds of power organizing uses to effect change? To think about these questions, I talk to Robert Hoo and Ben Gordon. Robert is the lead organizer and executive director of One L.A.-IAF. He has 15 years of organizing experience with the Industrial Areas Foundation in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Sacramento. And before that, he served as an AmeriCorps member in Connecticut. Ben is senior organizer with Metro IAF, which he joined in 2016. He currently works with the IAF organizations in Boston, Connecticut, and Milwaukee, as well as several labor union partners. Prior to joining Metro IAF, he was director of organizing for the Civil Service Employees Association, a 200,000 member affiliate of the Public Employees Union. He began his professional organizing career in 1987 with the southern region of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union organizing clothing factory workers in the Southeast. So, join me now on this, the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast to discuss power.

LB [00:04:51] Ben and Robert, it's great to have you with us on the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. Thanks so much for being here and for doing this. So, one thing I like to begin with is—tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you came to be involved in community organizing. Robert, if we start with you.

Robert Hoo (RH) [00:05:10] Sure. I grew up in Connecticut. My parents were both originally born and raised in mainland China. And they and their families left China around the time of the communist revolution. So one strand of how I got involved in community organizing is that from a very early age, I was conscious of the impact of politics. Politics literally overturned the life of my parents, my grandparents. And, despite that, my father had a love for politics. He didn't react to that by saying politics is a terrible thing. He really imbued me and my sister with the sense that politics was important and that it was vital to try to make the world a better place. And I think that is an influence. My sister became a journalist. I wanted eventually to organizing. So you can say he had an impact on both of us. So that is at least one strand of how I came to community organizing.

LB [00:06:05] And what was the journey specifically into organizing per se, after you left the university and stuff? It's a strange vocation to find yourself in. But what were the immediate steps that led you into organizing?

RH [00:06:17] It is a strange vocation to find yourself in. And I didn't know what it was. So when I left college, I worked for the AmeriCorps program doing direct service work with kids who were growing up in federal housing projects. And it was—I love that work, tutoring, mentorship, spending a lot of time in communities. But I heard about organizing. I had developed this interest in politics. I was an activist in college, like a lot of people were, and I said, "Oh, I want to go check that out." And so I got an organizing job in New York City that I did for a year and then eventually found my way to the Industrial Areas Foundation.

LB [00:06:51] So, Ben, what's something of your story, of your upbringing and how that leads you into this work?

Ben Gordon (BG) [00:06:58] I'm originally from Chicago—came from a union family. My maternal grandfather was in the Teamsters Union on the south side of Chicago, Local 753. One of my most prized possessions is his union card and dues deduction booklet from 1909. My paternal grandfather up on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota was in the Barbers and Beauticians Union. My father was part of the group that struck for recognition and formed Local 1600 of the American Federation of Teachers in the City Colleges of Chicago. And the union was always an important institution in my life, growing up: for protection, for voice, for power, standards, solidarity.

LB [00:07:47] Now in this episode, we're going to discuss power. So, Robert, let me ask you the most basic question: How do you define power?

RH [00:07:58] I think in Industrial Areas Foundation, we teach that power is the ability to act—the capacity to act and to compel a reaction from other people.

LB [00:08:10] And so, the sense, then, of the ability to act in the world as you discover it and to have agency around you. Ben, can I just turn to you, then? In organizing terms, there's this—that's a very neutral definition—the ability to act—there's also this further development of talk about "power over"—sometimes referred to as unilateral power or command and control forms of power—and that's contrasted with "power with"—sometimes referred to as relational power. Can you explain this distinction and give some examples where we see these different kinds of power in operation?

BG [00:08:50] Well, "power over"—or dominant power—is what most people think of when they think of power. Employers wielding power over employees, elected officials with a positional power passing laws or allocating millions of tax dollars, well-funded corporate interests who can make political campaign donations and open or close production facilities. "Power over" is generally one directional. Those with it use it. On those without it, to get what they want, it's thought of as zero sum—when I have more, you have less. Relational power or "power with" is thought to be more mutual—two-way: I don't necessarily have power at your expense. Organizing a labor union, building a tenants association would be kinds of shared power. When we get together as individuals or institutions, we can build something stronger, more powerful.

LB [00:09:47] So there's a sense there that our ability to act together—the more there are of us, and this is over and against the kind of zero-sum idea of power—the more there are of us, the more power we have because of the quality character of the relationships between us. And therefore we can draw more people out to actions. We can claim greater significance to what we're doing in terms of representation. We represent this many more people and there's a sense in which we can then act together at a much bigger scale through more people being in relationship with each other. And so, that sense of the relationship is expansive in the scope of power and agency or the ability to act that enables, rather than focusing down, as in unilateral power, on the one person being able to act over and against others. Is that a fair representation?

BG [00:10:47] I think it's a very good representation. Things that are bigger that we couldn't do individually—can't do alone—that when we understand each other's interests and we start to relate to each other, we can build the power to take on those kinds of challenges.

LB [00:11:04] And it strikes me that one of the things in that is that in relational power, questions of trust, questions around can I keep faith with this person, questions of cooperation—all of these, you might even use a theological word, love—actually, that's what's in play in relational power, the sense in which the kind of quality and character and who am I in relation to this person, these other people, that's what's at stake. Whereas unilateral power—I don't really have to pay attention to the quality and character of the relationship between us, because I can kind of make you do what I want through command and control means of doing that. That's very, very interesting. So, Robert, can you give me an example from from your context or work or experience where we see these two different kinds of power in operation?

RH [00:11:51] Well, I think it's Ben said, people's experience of power in the world is often power over—that their employer, government, their landlord will power over them. They're on the receiving end of power. And what we do in our broad-based organizations is we build power with; we build relational power. People from various backgrounds, churches, synagogues, nonprofits, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, coming together to be co-creators and building an organization and building power together. Just yesterday in Los Angeles, One L.A., the broad-based IAF organization in Los Angeles, did a press conference to call on L.A. County to focus the distribution of the vaccine in the hardest hit neighborhoods, which are which are minority neighborhoods filled with essential workers. That was an example of all of those different institutions, communities that are part of One L.A. exercising power together—that they've created together—to try to get the county to change their policy.

LB [00:12:52] So that's a great example of this sense in which organizing uses relational power to hold accountable either state officials, in the case you've just given, or corporations, like the managers or people who run large scale supermarkets or whatever it is—i.e. the holders of

unilateral power—what are some of the—how would you define the differences, then? How is relational power operating and how do you build it? And how does that contrast with how unilateral power tends to operate?

RH [00:13:30] Well, do you mind if I give some scriptural examples?

LB [00:13:33] Yeah, sure. Great.

RH [00:13:33] So I think that you can say that in Exodus, the power of Pharaoh is "power over"—its unilateral power. It's the power that the Hebrews experienced. But then the formation of the people—a mixed multitude—the moment at Sinai—those could be examples of creating relational power, or "power with." Another example would be from the gospels: the feeding of the five thousand. This sense of with five fish and two loaves of bread you can feed five thousand people—is contrasting an experience of scarcity, as Ben said, zero-sum: We are isolated. We are fearful. We are anxious. There is not enough resources to go around—contrasting that with creating a community, a body of people who together have a spirit of abundance. There is more than enough to feed everybody. There's more than enough to go around. And then when our broad-based organizations are in action, it is around those deep principles. Is there enough wealth in Los Angeles for everybody to have a home? Is there enough resources in Las Vegas for everybody to have a good job? Absolutely there are—but only if we have that attitude towards power.

LB [00:14:51] So expand for me a little bit, then, the talk—we can breakdown relational power and how it operates—in organizing, we talk about organized money, organized people. How are those manifestations of relational power in action? And how they used to hold unilateral power accountable? Ben, if I turn to you.

BG [00:15:16] So, using Robert's earlier definition of power as the ability to act, to take action, to get things done, we think of organized people as voters or people who attend or turn out to a rally or an event, people who sign petitions, attendance at a planned action or a city council meeting. In my earlier example, that would take the form of hundreds of people attending meetings with their elected state representatives to push for real police reform. We think of organized money—using money consistently and persistently with a focus to achieve a particular goal. We tend to think first of wealthy people and institutions or corporate interests who have money using that money to get what they want. That could be campaign contributions through political action committees, trade associations, hiring lobbyists or making investment decisions. But it can also apply to those without significant money. This power of organized money. It can mean crowd-funding a project or a campaign or union members paying dues so they can have an organization to bargain for better wages or a say on the job. Or, churches, mosques, synagogues, faith institutions—or other non-profits in IAF organizations—paying dues and using that money to hire organizing staff and run campaigns, hold events, train leaders. Other examples of organized money might be boycotts or campaigns to pressure banks or stop redlining neighborhoods or hundreds of people in institutions threatening to withdraw money, or collectively engage their money to attract a bank or a grocery store to a neighborhood by promising to direct deposits or purchases at that bank or that store.

LB [00:17:04] That's very helpful. So, Robert, break down for me—we've done previous episodes on this podcast on the one to one and house meetings and the like. Can you just join the dots for me a little bit about how things like the one to ones and house meetings—the processes of

building relationship—connect to this ability to act together through relational power? Can you draw some of the lines between those things for me?

RH [00:17:31] Well, relational meetings—one on one relational meetings—small group house meetings, those are the building blocks for people—for how people build a set of relationships and network, of relationships that, then, is relational power. As an individual actor in the world, you go out and you start to do relational meetings with people and you build relationships with people and then can you pull those people together for meeting? Then there's more power in that meeting. You're able to do something with these new relationships that you've built.

LB [00:18:03] And that sense, then—it seems to me part of the work of relational power, it's built on a sense of social trust—that there's trust between diverse people who are often not trusting one another. I'm thinking back to the origins of the IAF in something like the 1940s, 1930s—1940s in the Back of the Yards—and Alinsky was organizing people who were often at each other's throats: smaller ethnic enclaves who were in conflict with each other, getting them to trust one another and then use that trust and the relational power it generated to, in this case, attack the meatpacking industry, who had all these terrible, very oppressive practices and employment practices, and the kind of terrible social conditions they were generating. So is that something, then, of the relational work through one to ones and through house meetings and other kinds of things, and building trust between people—means people can actually act together? Is that something of what's going on there?

RH [00:19:11] I think that is something of what's going on. That building of relational trust is critical and the attentiveness to self-interest. And people bring—they get clear about their own self-interest. Their sense of their self-interest changes as they're in relationship with other people. And they build this organization together that enables them to act together on their interests. And then, as Ben said, an organization that is funded by their own money—it's really critical to understand that power is both organized people and organized money. And so, for people—they're mixing their interest together; they're also mixing their money together.

LB [00:19:52] So one of the things—one of the kind of pushbacks and critiques of IAF-type organizing is this focus, almost exclusive focus on organized money, organized people. Often we see in social movement work a strong emphasis on creation of culture. So we might talk about organized culture—think about civil rights movements, the place of songs, art, even in the place of the black arts movement, black power—and then also there's the question of organized knowledge. It's there at a certain level—popular education ideas—but martialing academic knowledge, writing books, thinking, theorizing about things—that takes organizing as well—and the knowledge which is in relationship to and helps generate the concepts which frame the organizing work. How do you see those? How do you see the critique in terms of the missing aspects of this focus on organized people, organized knowledge, and the exclusion—often in the training and in the talk of organizing, of—organized knowledge and organized culture?

BG [00:21:07] Well, perhaps the discussion in our training in the Industrial Areas Foundation needs to acknowledge organized knowledge or organized culture. I think these concepts are consistent with what we talk about, what we teach, and are tied to what we think of as the first challenge, really, in any fight or engagement with opposing power: an elected official, a bank official, a corporate leader—and that is recognition. We say that the first fight is getting to the table, getting the other side to understand and agree that they have to deal with us. That word "recognition"—meaning to re-know or to understand differently—means that you have to understand the

interests of the parties in play, the context that you're working in, the history of a place, its people, its institutions—to be able to re-know or remake those relationships in a way more favorable for regular citizens or workers. When the IAF organization in Milwaukee, for example, Common Ground, waged a campaign to restore the Sherman Park neighborhood in the midst of the foreclosure crisis 2008 to 2009, even in 2010—the community leaders there knew the history of the neighborhood. They took on the campaign because they had member organizations, churches in that neighborhood. They knew residents with knowledge of what had been and what had changed in researching who held the mortgages, meeting people door to door, and finding which cataloging, which foreclosed properties had been abandoned, asking people who was a renter and who was an owner, which banks and finance companies had been willing to work with residents and which had not. Armed with that local knowledge, they were able to engage city government, the mortgage companies, banks, and wage a campaign that was ultimately successful to take over abandoned properties, rehab dozens of foreclosed and abandoned properties, and help restore a viable housing market in Sherman Park. But certainly that knowledge—that sense of place, those people, those institutions—was critical to that.

LB [00:23:21] In my world—in academic analysis of the world around us—there tends to be this strong emphasis on large scale structures and systems—capitalism, racism, patriarchy, these kinds of things—and little attention to the ways people come together to make their lives better, to the actual agency they have often in quite local situations. And it's always struck me that in organizing worlds, there's this attention both to structure—how financial or schooling or medical systems work, and quite detailed analysis of that to understand the operations of power within them—and then also this focus on building the agency of ordinary people to be able to change and affect their living and working conditions. Can you comment on this relationship between structure and agency in organizing, and how you how you approach how you think about that relationship?

RH [00:24:23] Well, certainly it's important to understand larger structures: economic structures, capitalism. You mentioned racism, patriarchy—those those kinds of frameworks. But power—the ability to act—that means people need to be able to see themselves as actors. They need to realize that they have power. They have agency in their lives. Oftentimes in the modern world, we may all feel like we are powerless, helpless to address the things that are affecting us and our families. Organizing is trying to turn that around—that together we can build power and we have agency together. And one of those is recognizing, yes, what is the tacit knowledge that we actually have? So, when we work on health care, yes, it's important to be able to analyze health care systems and single payer and so on and so forth. But starting with a basic question in house meetings: What do you do when you get sick? And when we asked that question in Los Angeles, we got a range of answers and people have lots of local knowledge of how they actually try to get health care, of how they deal with big, huge bureaucratic structures that they have to get up and get in the line at 5:00 in the morning outside of a public health clinic, because that's the only way to get seen—and that that health clinic doesn't give out appointments. That's a piece of local knowledge that is missed in an academic discussion.

LB [00:25:44] And do you think it makes sense to talk about anyone being powerless in this context?

RH [00:25:51] No. Everybody has power. People can feel powerless. But we all have the ability to act. And by organizing, we have a greater capacity to act together with that, with others. And that is relational power.

LB [00:26:05] On that theme: Ben, many are familiar with the aphorism of Lord Acton that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is, then, I think, often taken to justify a wholly negative view of power. A counterpoint to this is Bayard Rustin, a key organizer in the civil rights movement. He argued in a famous essay that the experience of powerlessness is often as corrupting as the concentration of power in the hands of the few. Given your experience in organizing, what do you make of this claim? And how would you coordinate Lord Acton and Bayard Rustin's view on power and powerlessness.

BG [00:26:42] Acton, who I think was referring to the Pope or kings, certainly makes sense to me. And we see that at all levels. When decision makers self-deal: elected officials hiring family members and friends or insider trading in the corporate sector—are fed, at least in part, from feeling that they're powerful, they're insulated, they're not going to get caught. Clearly, power can corrupt. But I think Rustin is right as well. Powerlessness can also be corrupting. Despair or apathy or rage can result in violence—can be the byproduct of homelessness, racism, unemployment, poverty, all these kinds of examples of feeling powerlessness, and that can be corrupting. But I don't think anyone is necessarily powerless. Part of organizing is challenging or inspiring people who might not otherwise feel powerful to engage with others, to overcome that sense of powerlessness and imagine something better. I tend to think of it as akin to the difference between potential energy and kinetic energy: energy stored or available to be drawn upon versus energy to move or power, and that's actually moving or powering a machine.

LB [00:28:09] So that sense of—those who are structurally marginalized, they might not have access to the commanding heights of the economy or the kind of mechanisms of the state and processes of the state. But they can have friends, and everyone has relationships. And so it goes back to what we were saying before about—that is precisely what union organizing always worked on. You can build relationships and build relational power to counteract the dominance of market and state and their ability to—their attempts to monopolize a command and control forms of power.

RH [00:28:52] Now, the other thing I would add is that the quote is often misremembered by Lord Acton. It's power "tends" to corrupt. We often leave that word out and then absolute power corrupts absolutely. And I think the thing to take away from that is when power is unaccountable, then it corrupts absolutely. And Lord Acton was, in fact I believe, responding to people—infallibility—the tendency of power to corrupt. And that's why we have to we have to build collective structures of power, power that's accountable—in our organizations, we don't have one charismatic leader. We have collectives of leaders. We try not to violate—succumb to the iron law of oligarchy of a power clique at the center of the organization. But it's absolute, unaccountable power that corrupts absolutely.

LB [00:29:38] There's a very, I think, important academic discussion in political theory at the moment that connects directly to that, which is this notion of freedom as non domination. We tend to have this "freedom from" idea. But going back to a republican ideal that, in many ways, you could situate Lord Acton as working within—the sense that it's not that there are differences of power, which is always the problem. It's that when power is unaccountable and exercised in arbitrary ways—and people have no means of control or responding to or acting over and against and therefore just have to simply accept the terms and conditions they're given—that's when power is bad. And that's really what domination consists of. And so, obviously the situation of slaves being the extreme version of that. But any situation—and going back to Ben's example of worker-manager relations—when actually the manager can act and change your terms and

conditions of employment and just take away your wage. If you're working in a poultry plant and you've got no means of recourse, that's arbitrary, unaccountable power. You're in a situation of domination. I don't know if that expands a little bit of what you're saying, Robert.

RH [00:31:00] Absolutely. And in organizing, we talk about countervailing power—that that's what we're doing by building broad-based organizations. That's what happens in labor movements—the power that comes when people come together and can then hold their employer or the government or a corporation accountable. Dana Villa talks about "public freedom"—so not freedom from things, but actually the freedom to—freedom of assembly, freedom of organizing, an overlooked element of freedom, which is our ability to build power together and then initiate in the world.

LB [00:31:34] Do you want to turn a little bit—there's a very important distinction in organizing work around public—private. And I want to throw out a story and get the both of you to react to this. It comes out of experiences of organizing in London, where we'd often be organizing to hold the mayor of London accountable. And this was both Boris Johnson, who's now prime minister of the UK, and before that Ken Livingstone, who was a famous socialist Labour mayor. And in both instances, it was an important insight I learned—when we were having meetings with them or in assembly contexts, they would always want to say, "Just call me Boris" or "Just call me Ken." There would always be this move to render personal what was a public relationship, as if somehow we were then relating to them as their friend and they were just a mate we were going to have a chat with rather than they were the mayor of London holding a public office, who we were holding them accountable to—as holders of that office. And it was always a work working with leaders to get them not to fall pray. Because it's very attractive when power says to you, "Hey, just call me Boris" or "Just call me Ken." You suddenly feel there's a recognition there? Can you explain a little bit like, why do those with unilateral power do that? Why do they always want to pretend to be your friend when they're not really your friend and avoid that public accountability bit?

RH [00:33:04] I think you hit the keyword: it's accountability. So when we do—in Industrial Areas Foundation—we do our training in public versus private relationships, in public relationships we should be seeking accountability. Whereas in our private relationships, we may be looking for sincerity. We want to know that our intimate relationships with our friends or family—that we're seeing honesty, we're seeing the real you, et cetera. And so, I think, what politicians, when they try to confuse the public and the private, that's really—it's like Bill Clinton saying, "I feel your pain." Or, which candidate would you rather have a beer with? So they're trying to make us think like, "Well, you know, he's a good guy. He's an honest guy. We can trust him. We can work with him." It's really irrelevant. The issue is accountability. Are they accountable to their commitments and broad-based organizations? We try to get mayors and city council people to make commitments. And then it's about, do they follow through on that?

LB [00:34:12] Expanding on that, let me ask you this. On a version of that in the corporate sector, we have the figure of someone like Warren Buffett who—he's seen as a nice guy, gets his is Egg McMuffin in the morning. He lives in a small house and drives his car he's had for ages. And there's a sense in which, "Oh, he's a he's a nice downhome kind of guy." And therefore we don't ask serious questions as, "Why—in what kind of world should he have billions and billions of dollars?" We don't actually ask the systemic question because we're distracted by thinking he's a nice guy and I don't have any negative feelings towards him. And, in a sense, wealth becomes this personality test: We don't like Trump because he's seen to be a vulgar character, but somehow we do like Warren Buffett. But we don't ask questions about the kind of world which enables him to

have billions and others not to be able to put food on the table. Can you just comment on that side of that dynamic?

BG [00:35:09] I don't know whether some of this is genuine or contrived. Warren Buffett may or may not be genuinely a regular guy, just one who controls billions of dollars himself and an enormous investment fund that takes a huge stake in major corporations. But I do think that in many cases, there is an intentional attempt to confuse or conflate public and private. And it's intentionally designed to thwart confrontation or, as Robert said, the creation or exercise of countervailing power. Look at the bigger systemic picture. He even raised the question of whether it's legitimate for one person to have such wealth or power—is considered sort of out of bounds as a as a question we face. We tend to avoid confrontation in close, private, family relationships. The essential question in a union organizing campaign, for example, is whether the employees at a particular company or organization want to form a union. And in order to have a say in the terms of their jobs—wages, benefits, hours, conditions—or continue to leave those decisions unilaterally to the employer—employers often use the analogy of a family to describe the relationship between workers and employers. Why? To disarm those who are proposing a different order or a different understanding, because they prefer the cozy private parent-like relationship with employees, benevolent or not, that they have without a union. They want to avoid the accountability and transparency of a somewhat more equal public relationship, where the employees, through forming a union, have a different standing and can bargain over terms.

LB [00:37:10] That's very helpful. I think that—in many ways, reactions that against paternalism—it's bound up in the name there—that sense of, you know, I'm just a fatherly figure who's taking care of you. And it obviates and empties out the the place of them as an office holder who's accountable to those who work for them, or is an office holder in that community, who has particular responsibilities and duties of care and needs to be held accountable for that. And I think that's an interesting way—the work of the familial to kind of evade those responsibilities of office.

RH [00:37:47] I think that's absolutely right. And let me give a couple other examples. When I step on a plane, I'm not thinking, is this pilot a nice man or nice woman? It's, can they land the plane? If I'm going into surgery, my primary concern is not, do I like my surgeon or not? It's, is this surgeon going to keep me alive? Somehow, I think it is intentional or it's instinctive on the part of a lot of politicians to confuse us—you come out of meeting—What do we think? Do we like the mayor? Do we not like the mayor? That's really not the most relevant question. I'm not gonna say it's completely irrelevant. They are a human being. Warren Buffett's a human being. But first and foremost is we should be looking at our mayors and our senators, our elected officials, the way we look at our surgeons and our pilots. Are they accountable to that role?

LB [00:38:31] This is very interesting. So, now the question is—it's central to democracy as an approach to politics that power should be distributed as widely as possible so that everyone is not simply acted upon and made to accept what they're given, but can have a say in determining the conditions under which they live and work. Yet many, particularly in progressive and academic circles, tend to be suspicious of power, identifying it almost wholly with violence or oppressive hierarchies of one kind or another. Why do you think that is, and how should we imagine and talk about power constructively while also not being naive about its operations or overly suspicious of power?

BG [00:39:11] I've certainly heard this concern expressed in more than one church basement or mosque or synagogue social hall—in organizing sessions or discussions: What if we develop too

much power ourselves? For most people, this suspicion of power as being destructive—or eschewing wanting power—comes from too often being on the receiving end of power, I suspect. Being bullied on the playground, being fired from a job, experiencing downsizing or a plant closing, facing the effects of redlining by banks or government entities. Feeling that power is remote. This is a learned suspicion. In the Industrial Areas Foundation, we talk about the tension between the world as it is in the world as it should be. We live at present in the world as it is, characterized by too much power and money in the hands of too few people, where there's racism and violence and economic dislocation and a pandemic, certainly not all bad. There are good things about the lives we lead as well. But we live in the real world, and power gets things done in this world. We aspire, on the other hand, to live in the world as it should be, where love governs and justice and righteousness prevail, where everyone is cared for and has freedom and opportunity, a pure form of democracy exists where everybody's views and votes count, and diversity and inclusiveness abound and are valued. In that world as it should be, power may seem unnecessary or even wrongly placed, and too many people who eschew power are confused, I think, about the world. They idealize and aspire to that that world as it should be, but don't appreciate the kind of power and organizing for power that it will take to move us in that direction.

LB [00:41:21] I think a variation on that—and Robert, I'd be interested in your thoughts on this—in my experience, many Christian leaders specifically and faithful folk generally don't like to think they have power. It's a kind of dirty word. Or, if they do, they think they should somehow renounce it: The best thing to do with power is to be powerless, because that's the most Christ-like thing, and true Christians lay down their power. And, of course, you've gotta show how that squares with Christian history. But often there's a sentiment that's expressed there. And then they also think that they only—to be a real Christian, you don't have self-interest; you just have moral commitments. What are the dangers with this kind of view in your experience? And how do you address it?

RH [00:42:05] Well, I think it sanitizes history. It sanitizes the Bible, scripture, but also to misinterpret the incarnation. Power is—it's part of our reality. And I think Scripture says that we are given power by God. So I think it's also part of this larger cultural—both for in academic circles, but also in religious circles in general—to think about dominant power and "power over" and being on the receiving end of power—something we all experience. But to not remember that positive things also come about because of power: civil rights movement, Gandhi, Mandela—that's all about power, power that we recognize as being used for incredibly just and socially beneficial things. But anything we want to accomplish in the world requires power. I mean, creating these vaccines to counter Covid meant organizing corporations and the private sector and government to produce these vaccines in record time. I live in Los Angeles. The entire West—the American West is probably not possible without the Hoover Dam. That's an exercise of power. Anything positive in our life took some power, people organizing to create. It's really that our experience of the world is entrenched, unaccountable power—and why in organizing we're pushing back in the other direction and trying to create a different model of power.

LB [00:43:41] Picking up on something you mentioned earlier, and how that connects to this question of self-interest, I think another reaction I often get—and I've seen it in training scenarios in organizing—it is a kind of reaction by a lot of faithful folk against the notion of having self-interest or identifying self-interest. Can you just explain the meaning of self-interest as it's understood in organizing terms?

RH [00:44:11] So we look at the etymology of interest from Latin "inter esse"—to be—to be "between and among," and so to be between and among is really how to understand our interest—that our self-interest is shaped by the people whom we are in relationship with. So I can say personally in the last year—you can say the last couple of years I got married and we just had our first child in July. That has profoundly shaped my sense of self interest because I have these relationships in my life. But that also happens in organizing. Going back to relational meetings and house meetings, every relational meeting you do has the capacity to change how you view your interests—that over time, as people from different neighborhoods and different religious and ethnic backgrounds build relationships with each other, their sense of their self interest changes so that people living on the west side of Los Angeles, as they're in relationships with people in South L.A. or East L.A., their sense of their moral universe, their sense of their interest changes. That's how we think of self-interest. But it is critical, we all have it.

LB [00:45:23] It's a very interesting dynamic. When people hear the word self-interest, they often think about it in economistic terms, or what they're really hearing is selfish interest. And there's obviously a long tradition, particularly in Christianity—you can think about something like the Golden Rule, Matthew 7: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; or, Mark 12 in the command to love your neighbor as yourself. So deep in scripture, there's a sense of—you've got to coordinate appropriate or proper love of self as constituted through and with love of neighbor and how you act towards others—and that you can't have one without the other. And also you need a sense of one to be able to do the other as well. And so love of others evolves as an appropriate treating yourself as a neighbor who needs to be loved appropriately. And that contrasts with notions of selfish interest—cognate terms like vanity or hubris or pride. Obviously, a figure like Augustine wrestles with it, and you get it all the way through to someone like Rousseau, who talks about amour de soi and amour propre, and this kind of—or to Tocqueville, what's enlightened self-interest—the sense of how do we have an appropriate sense of who I am in the world and a valuing of that and a valuing of that in relation to others? And I think what you're saying is fascinating, and how organizing—it actually builds out one sense of self through connecting you to the realities of other people's lives and how you can have a sense of shared flourishing or mutual interest. We might kind of put it in those terms.

RH [00:47:09] Just to add quickly, in our institutions, that's a crucial role they play. Our churches or mosques or synagogues or schools, historically our unions—to help form us in understanding those commitments and that dimension to our interest. So maybe we begin by wanting to get to heaven because we don't want to be punished. But hopefully we grow as moral people into doing good because we care about other people and we have these relationships. And that is present in the way we think about organizing.

LB [00:47:37] One of the one of the ways I think about this is—the stated reason or motivation is a kind of moral commitment. And through the organizing process and through involvement with other folk from other situations and contexts, there's a—if it's going well, there's a recognition that I may have a deep moral commitment to this, but I can—when I understand what it takes for this neighborhood or this city or this region to flourish, it can't—I do have skin in the game. I am caught up. There is an existential element to it, at a most basic level. If I can't go to the synagogue, the mosque or the church without being harassed on the street, then that's affecting us all and that's going to shape everyone's lives. It's not just for a moral reason. There's a tendency, particularly among Christian folk, to have these very abstract ideas of neighbor love. And part of the work of organizing is rendering them very concrete and the ability to see oneself and understand one's own story in the actual concrete realities of the folk one lives amongst. And so, I

think that's a strong element. I want to turn now to this notion of a power analysis. A central tool of organizing is the power analysis. Can you say, what is it? How do you do it? What work does it do in organizing? And can you give an example and practice and what it led to? Robert, if you just say what it is, then I'll turn to Ben for his sense of those other senses. Robert, can you could just give a definition, a working definition of the power analysis?

RH [00:49:25] Well, first of all, I would say a power analysis is a process. It's not a product. It's thinking rigorously about power, relationships, and who has power and who has more power. And in a specific context, how do decisions get made? Who makes those decisions? So, you can try to do a general power analysis of a city: Who are the most powerful people in the city, which generally we teach are the people who run the largest, most important, wealthiest corporations in that city. But given a context, you're trying to get something done on health care or housing or what have you. You have to do a more specific power analysis of who are the players in that given arena. But in the process of looking at and thinking about people in power and who has it and how—what is the process by which decisions actually get made? And again, you can go—a very simple way to often unravel that is to follow the money.

LB [00:50:27] Ben, can you just give us—in the context of concrete situation that Robert just set up—can you give us a sense of how you do a power analysis, when you do it, what the process is that goes into that? And if you can discuss that around a concrete example you've worked through.

BG [00:50:45] One example might involve the organization in Milwaukee I talked about earlier, Common Ground. A lot of preparatory work had been done, put in by Common Ground leaders for a few years before its launch. And the organization went public, officially launched in 2008, right in the teeth of the foreclosure crisis and an economic downturn. Interestingly enough, shortly after Common Ground was waging a campaign connected to a proposed plan to use two hundred and fifty million dollars of public money from the city of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, in the state of Wisconsin to subsidize the building of a new basketball stadium and help facilitate the sale of the Milwaukee Bucks to a new ownership group—the NBA team. Common Ground didn't strictly oppose the stadium deal, but was pushing instead to have an equal amount of money set aside to refurbish playgrounds and play fields in Milwaukee. These two campaigns came together in an interesting way, and it was the power analysis that was critical to this. The power analysis revealed that one of the members of the then-proposed new ownership group was interested—who was interested in buying the Bucks—was also the owner and CEO of Nationstar Mortgage, one of the largest subprime mortgage issuers and holders of mortgages in Sherman Park. The research and the CEO's high public profile—because of the pending sale—created the opportunity to pressure him to do the right thing and put several million dollars into helping keep people in their homes and refurbish some of these homes.

LB [00:52:26] Robert, can you say why—I have a sense of—obviously in that story, we have a sense of how the power analysis enables the power, unilateral power or dominant power to be held accountable and rendered transparent. We can certainly see how the world is operating. But can you say a little bit about why the power analysis is such a key tool in organizing? What work does it do and how do you use it?

RH [00:52:53] Well, in that example, it really speaks to then—that informs your strategy. If you're trying to oppose the stadium or if you're trying to make sure that the stadium gets built with certain community benefits or public benefits, you have to figure out who do you need to get to,

what are the levers, how do you get leverage over the people who are going to be making that decision? Is it even winnable? So when we were in Las Vegas, the first campaign we had was around child sex trafficking, a huge issue in a place with a tourist economy. Being able to recognize where's the governor on this position? Where are the key state senators, state assembly, people who had committees? But then also where are the casinos on this? If all the casinos came out organized, opposed to this, there's no way that the legislature would have passed it and gone against them. So being able to be clear about that and saying, "Well, how do we neutralize any opposition from the casinos to this sex trafficking bill, which could be scary to them, in terms of the PR of a tourist friendly town—and then being able to look at the casinos, not as a monolithic group, but who are the individual players and the owners and the trade association and so on and so forth? Ultimately, the breakthrough there was realizing yes, hey, we have a connection to one of the casino presidents, and meeting with him and getting him to to look at the issue and say, "I support you and I can get my colleagues to be neutral." But that strategy only emerges because you have a power analysis.

LB [00:54:28] So that's a great story. The power analysis there, in a sense, helped determine the tactics and strategy: What's going on here? Where does power really lie? And how should we act in response to what's really going on rather than ideologically driven assumptions or notions about who's bad and who's good but actually attunement to where does—how is power really operating here, shaping, then, the forms of public action that are taken? That's very helpful. So in the kind of analysis—and obviously it's very much in the water these days—how do you in organizing work think about, address, respond to what you might call hidden forms of power? I mean, there's there's the old boys network type of operation that goes particularly in business circles. But then there's also questions of gender, class, racism—how do these get figured into power analysis? And how can or should attention to the shape and analysis of power in organizing—do either of you have thoughts on that?

RH [00:55:35] You're talking about informal networks of power that are not seen by people, that it's important sometimes to unmask, or at least as an organization to be able to help people see that. I think when you're talking about more abstractly—I mean, gender, race, et cetera—those I would maybe think of as lenses to help you see where power is operating. So again, let's take the example of Covid. The fact that the highest infection rates, the highest mortality rates are all in Latino, African-American, immigrant neighborhoods filled with essential workers who live in overcrowded housing. That's not an accident. That's clearly because of power. The fact that the people are getting vaccinated are people who live in wealthier communities, not the communities with the highest incidence of Covid. That is about power. But then if you want to do something about that, you then still have to identify who are the people who can make a decision about that. Who in L.A. County has the power to change the distribution of the vaccine. You can't at that point just rail against racism. That's not going to solve your problem. Racism helps you—that lens helps you see that power is operating. But then to do something about it, you have to identify the people who are in positions of power.

LB [00:56:52] So there's a sense in which frameworks, like racial frameworks—you're analyzing racism that works in housing structures, medical structures, or questions of gender—these are helpful lenses of description. But then the power analysis is again this kind of description of a structure and a process. But then there's—if we're going to move to act with and for others, there's a sense in which there's still this analysis of who actually makes that decision. What is the actual institutional kind of process which generates this outcome? And that's operating in a more

granular level, which then enables you to act in relationship to and change something. So there's a—yeah, Ben, do you have any reflections on that?

BG [00:57:38] So certainly forces—such as racism or gender, class distinctions, homophobia, xenophobia—affect the context in which organizing happens. These forces shape who sits atop powerful institutions, who has money, who gets to make critical decisions that affect people in our communities. And calling out those forces is valuable work, educating the broad swath of the public, confronting those viewpoints is worthy work. I know I participate in that sort of effort here locally in my hometown. When the Saratoga Immigration Coalition calls a march to oppose a Muslim ban or unfair excessive enforcement, rounding up hard working people and separating families here in town, I participate in those marches. I think we would distinguish organizing as operationalizing a particular set of demands or a demand from a particular target for a particular policy change or to move particular resources from that sort of shaping of the context, shaping of public opinion, raising awareness, broader education. And so I think it plays an important role in how we think about things. But our goal is to shape a more specific demand in the case of organizing.

LB [00:59:17] So that kind of targeted focus, rather than the kind of—attention to those aspects of almost hidden, invisible but present forms of power, they're shaping the sense of what the context you're operating in. But when one's trying to move towards specific kinds of action, then one has to do this—a closer read, in some ways, of what's what's going on. That's very helpful. So, one of Alinsky's rules in organizing is: the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative. Much activism is focused on resistance and speaking truth to power and protest, but often doesn't really seem to provide a meaningful alternative. What do you make of this kind of approach? And how does an organizing analysis of power differ from it? And why does having a constructive alternative matter?

BG [01:00:12] I would distinguish between activism or advocacy or mobilizing from organizing in terms of the specific change. It comes down to a specific demand, as I said, of a specific decision maker to change a specific policy or move specific resources. Ultimately, that involves compromise. That involves negotiation. And while I support and appreciate broader forms of engagement—activism or advocacy—I think what distinguishes organizing is whether you think of it as compromising and settling for crafting a particular solution. And it's not as satisfying as opposing redlining—but organizing would perhaps yield a certain number of loans to a certain group of people in a certain neighborhood by certain banks within a certain time frame that hadn't been able to get loans in that area before. So some of it is compromise and negotiation. It really comes down to being able to take a specific—get a specific result from a specific campaign.

LB [01:01:38] So that sense of—you've got to make a particular judgment amongst these people in this place at this time about how we're going to act and what kind of results, reaction, way of taking things forward in meaningful, concrete ways can be enacted here, rather than this general sense of protest against prevailing conditions. So there's something there about the distinction between a problem and an issue—that in organizing, there's is focus on specific, often winnable issues as against generalized conditions like poverty or indebtedness, which are rather amorphous and hard to either act in response to or get a grip on. And breaking that down into winnable issues is key there.

RH [01:02:29] Yeah, so Bayard Rustin—I think it was 1965—he wrote an essay "From Protest to Politics," and he described it as the challenge of the civil rights movement. At that period, it was

moving from a model of protest—protesting injustice, protesting segregation—to politics, which requires negotiation, compromise. You're trying to get something pragmatic, tangible done, which means you have to enter into the rough and tumble world of of politics. And that's really what we build our organizations to do. And because in our experience, that's what people want. Again, we started with this notion of people having an experience of being acted upon, being at the mercy of dominant power—building power together, realizing that they are not powerless. But that gets realized because they build power together and they can accomplish something. It's not enough to be able to protest and say we spoke truth to power—getting, compelling other powerful actors to recognize you, to respond to you, to deal with you, and then to deliver something for your neighborhood—that's politics. And that's at the heart of the broad-based organizations that we build.

LB [01:03:39] And I think there's something very significant in there which goes to the heart of democratic politics about—through that experience of bringing about change and acting with others to bring about change—it sounds too neutral to say it's just a realization of agency. It's a realization of one's dignity, of one's standing as a human being. There's a lovely line in Alinsky's Reveille for Radicals, written in 1947. But that's exactly what he makes the kind of central park or vision of organizing work—it's actually that people realize themselves through being able to act on the world around them with others. And when they're only acted upon, that diminishes them. That demeans them as humans. So if there is an—if it's just protest, there isn't actually realization of change and meaningful movement to action that transforms the world. There's a sense in which one isn't realizing one's self with and through others—and having a sense of one's own standing in the world.

BG [01:04:44] So for me, this is what makes my job as an organizer so interesting, so compelling—why I've done it all these years. When I think back on the moments in my career that have meant the most to me, what brings me the most joy? I tend not to think of winning the National Labor Relations Board election vote to form a new union or winning a raise through collective bargaining or the campaign we just waged in Milwaukee to help over sixteen thousand people vote in the last presidential election. I think about the opportunities for people to grow, to take on the challenges, to try new things that came about because of the organizing. For people to have agency, whether that's writing a poem for the unions, a newsletter or a chance to speak at a city council meeting or school board meeting or to sit down across the table from the boss at the negotiating table. I think of Pam Wells, a family child care provider in upstate New York. I met her as part of an organizing campaign among family childcare providers across the state we waged at CSEA. While they had been thought of as independent contractors or small business people, with some imagination and organizing and legislative work, we were able to build a new union of people who had previously not had the right to organize but operated in a heavily regulated field. Pam had worked hard to reach out to other providers, meet them, learn their interests, and really was instrumental in building the union. So in addition to being able to push back against abusive inspectors and unreasonable rules or policies and achieve some access to and subsidy for health care and improved reimbursement rates, I think of Pam testifying before the state assembly or leading a meeting of several hundred providers and holding the top childcare regulator in the state accountable for commitments she had made—and was nervous before these moments—but so appreciative that the organizing had created the opportunity for her to try these things that she never had imagined she would be able to do. That's what I find so compelling about organizing.

LB [01:07:09] That sense of people discovering something about themselves, discovering themselves, discovering their voice, discovering their agency through involvement and organizing. That's that's where the energy comes from—certainly for myself. That gives the joy to the work.

RH [01:07:27] Oh, I completely agree. I think that—I've been organizing now for fifteen years and colleagues who've been organizing for forty, fifty years—I think all of us, what keeps us in the work is what Mr. Gordon is talking about. The victories are amazing, but it doesn't solve the problems of the world. There will be another issue tomorrow. The meaningful part of the work is the transformation that we see in others and, frankly, the transformation we see in ourselves.

LB [01:08:03] Fantastic. Ben and Robert, thank you so much for this conversation. Wonderfully rich. We really got stuck into a lot of stuff and really appreciate your time and the energy and just the enormous contribution you both make to this work of organizing. Thank you so much.

RH [01:08:22] Thank you.

BH [01:08:22] Thank you.

LB [01:08:30] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast in which I explored the nature of power and how to build and analyze it and to hold those who have positions of authority accountable for the power they hold. As with other episodes, there'll be suggestions for further reading in the show notes on the website. For now, let me say goodbye and I hope you join me next time as I continue this journey through the different elements of community organizing and how it embodies a distinctive vision of democratic politics.