

## Episode 7: Popular Education: Organizing Knowledge & Learning to be Political

[00:00:05] Hi, my name is Luke Bretherton, and this is a lesson organized act podcast which focuses on the history and contemporary practice of organizing democratic politics with transformational change. The podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation or IAF and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.

[00:00:27] In this episode, I talk to Ernie Cortez about popular education, what it is and why it's key to good community organizing alongside organized money, organized people and organized action. Building power to affect change requires organized knowledge. Organized knowledge generates the frameworks of analysis and understanding through which to narrate and reimagine the world, destabilizing the dominant scripts and ideas that legitimate oppression in the realm of democratic organizing. This entails in formal, self organized forms of learning otherwise known as popular education. Popular education aims to help those involved discern and describe their political, economic and social conditions, enabling them to develop alternative ways of understanding themselves and their situation. For example, in the civil rights movement, what was called citizenship education pioneered by the likes of Septima Clark Ella Baker and Dorothy Cotton was a vital, if often overlooked, element of the movement's success in Latin America. The work of Paulo Friary has done much to develop approaches to popular education there, while in the European context, traditions of self generated worker education in the labor movement and the folk school tradition in Nordic countries such as Sweden parallels. Crucial to all forms of popular education is enabling people to reflect on their conditions through broader frameworks of interpretation. Such consciousness raising is vital for generating an alternative community of interpretation, one with the knowledge to identify and analyze an issue and articulate a distinct position and make a clear set of demands. I wanted to talk to Ernie Cortez as he's made popular education a centerpiece of his organizing work, even going so far as to describe the work of organizing as creating universities for participating in public life. Ernie is currently national co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation and executive director of its WSW Regional Network. He has been organizing in one form or another for nearly half a century and has helped organize or initiate innumerable organizing efforts and campaigns and the organizing work he did in San Antonio in the early 1970s. In many ways, set the template for community organizing coalitions in the IAF thereafter, the fruits of his work have been much studied and he personally has been recognized with numerous awards and academic fellowships. So join me now on the Lesson Organize Act podcast as I discuss popular education.

[00:03:41] So it's great to have you on the Listen Organize Act podcast. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I want to kind of open a question and open the conversation with just if you can tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you came into organizing, how you came to be involved in doing this work.

[00:04:02] Well, I grew up in San Antonio, and it's a town which is kind of distinctive in many ways because it is now, I think, currently in and around 70 percent Mexican, OK.

[00:04:18] But every year the city shuts down for one week to celebrate Fiesta San Jacinto and Fiesta San Jacinto celebrates the defeat of the Mexican army at the Battle of Seattle. But so I grew up.

[00:04:34] As you can see, there was a lot of problematic ambiguity in my life because being Mexican and being Mexican growing up and then the big celebration in town is the

defeat of the Mexican army kind of people uneasy. And, you know, the the fiesta began with the daughters of the Republic of Texas laying a wreath at the Shrine of Texas Liberty, which includes the Alamo. And the history that we were brought up was that we were taught to believe that the Texans are that they were fighting against the oppression of Santana, Antonio Lopez or Santana, who was who was a dictator and was usurped the presidency as a general. But what was not pointed out was that this was also part of slaveholders fought to extend slavery to Texas. And it was Andrew Jackson as president is saying he is this principle agent to basically do that. And so we were taught that, OK, that's part and parcel of it was slavery. So and particularly in east Texas, where there was the land and it was the water was suitable for cotton growing. So anyway, so growing up in San Antonio was, like I said, created that kind of ambiguity. But it kind of came home to me when my cousins from Mexico City would come to every summer to visit with us because my my my my Aunt Beatrice was my mother's sister. And so my cousins Ramon, Carlos and Maria Cristina would come and spend the summer with us in front of you. And so one summer we would go swimming everyday during the summer. And what I would take of organize all my cousins. OK, so something between 13 and 20 of them, we would go swimming in the pool. And this particular time we took my cousin Maria Cristina. We're going to go into the pool and the ticket taker says she can't come in. I said, What do you mean she can't come in? Well, this is a segregated school. Who she's she's black. She's my cousin. She's she we've all we come from here all the time. She she's coming with us. No, she's not. She can't come in. So I would have and I don't remember this, but my cousin Selena told Christine Stevens, a friend of mine, that what I did was got puffed up and said, if she can't go in, we're not we're we're no one's going to go in. We're going to go because we're going to go in with her. And so there was a kind of a standoff. And I told them all to call her mother and tell her, tell her what was going on. And they wanted to go and they were crying.

[00:07:23] But anyway, we got in, no doubt about that. But I think I was my first act of either.

[00:07:35] So I was going to call it civil disobedience or organizing or so, you know, you can kind of get a sense of the ambiance was like growing up. There was places that were no go for Mike Gecan and in San Antonio. And that was reinforced when I went to college or to college to A&M in College Station when segregation was rampant. And you can see it rampant. And there was all kinds of evidence of that. So I began to study economics and got interested in poverty and studying about different strategies to deal with poverty. I came across Alinsky, OK, and also and then I found out that Alinsky influence, Fred Ross and Provost and the United Farm Workers had learned their organizing under the IAF with CSO. And so I worked for the farmworkers for a couple of years. And as an organizer, what roughly what date?

[00:08:36] What dates that?

[00:08:38] Oh, 65, 66, 67, and then. I was working with the farm workers, I got introduced to a guy named Gilbert Padilla at that time, was secretary treasurer of the former United Farm Workers. And he would talk to me about Fred Ross and the organizing roster with CSO.

[00:08:56] And just to say that those listening CSA was the community service organization, which is of out of which the farm worker movement emerged.

[00:09:05] That was a kind of an organizing.

[00:09:08] And Ross and Chavez were all on the payroll of the industrial, Larry, at one time or another. And there was a relationship between Alinsky and but Chavez and Rostom. But he used the N word, but they split over the fact that Alinsky thought they ought to stay in the cities and organize, organize the cities, and they wanted to organize farmworkers. But what impressed me was that when I was getting oriented and learning about both the farmers and learning about Texas, we would drive around to Texas and he would say, you need to build a political machine here. You need someone like Fred Ross to come in here and show you how to organize this. And so that intrigued me as a young person. I was, I guess, 65. I was twenty two, twenty three. But so I read everything I could find about Alinsky talked to people about it. And then the a farm worker strike ended. I went to work for an African-American church in Beaumont, Texas, and I began to try to do some different kind of organizing and did that in Beaumont, east Texas, that I went to Colorado for a while and did some similar kind of work and came back to San Antonio to do what I thought was going to be organizing, but ended up being economic development for our position called the community council. But they had hired me to be in charge of the organizer. But because I had an economics background and Ford Foundation at that time was demanding that their grantees go into what they called hard programs, economic development, housing, etc.. So I was designated as the person to be in charge of it. So that was a bit of a detour for a couple of years, but always had in mind coming back to organizing. And then I figured out a way to get to Chicago. And that's when I met Chambers in 1971.

[00:10:59] I hadn't realized you connected with it at Chambers' in 1971. So then as I gather from talking to you in the past, that there's a kind of slightly tortuous process where you eventually end up working with the full time and and and central to that work and in many ways a kind of foundation stone of your your approach to organizing over many decades now has been this focus on popular education. And in some ways, you've even gone so far to describe organizing as a university for participating in public life. Can you just unpack that for me a little bit? And what what do you mean by that?

[00:11:39] You build a broad based organization primarily in order to identify, to test out and to train leaders. That's the purpose of it. And so if you think about it that way, it then becomes a university of public life. Right? A graduate school and the organizers or the instructors and the really good organizers think of themselves as teachers, that they understand that organizing is teaching and teaching people not through theoretical constructs, but through their own experience, getting them to reflect on their own experience, getting them into action and around things that matter to them so that they develop a sense of process and combine that with judgment, which ends up being Peronistas. Practical wisdom in the end of organizing is the teleology of organizing is always open for business and developing that kind of insight, that understanding.

[00:12:36] And this is the ideal thing, or you build a broad based organization, which is an organization of organizations. Now it's a power organization. It's about power. It's about politics, about teaching people how to be political. And the first part of it is always organizing against our in and around issues which are winnable. OK, you want a stop sign, you want a sidewalk, you're on a curb. And so you teach people how to be assertive, how to be how to be even aggressive, how to be initiatory, how to speak up for themselves ought to be advocates for themselves. So the first part of organizing is getting people to get over their reticence. Remember when I'm going to write a paper one day and it's going to be the title of the paper is going to be, is this legal?

[00:13:22] So I just thought that if that was in the back of the minds of so many of our leaders, is this legal? Is this appropriate?

[00:13:28] Is this right? Because they always felt like maybe they had crossed the line and by speaking up at a meeting or saying something or maybe I lost it here or did I? They would always ask those kind of questions. Did I cross the line? And I was just always remember having to sort that out with people who felt like maybe they had broken out too much or raise too many questions or they were rude or whatever it is to get them over.

[00:13:57] That was an enormous undertaking. But then once you do that, then you have to teach them that it's not just being able to speak out, OK? It's also learning how to negotiate because you operate differently once you get recognized. And I remember coming back to that. I was in Houston and Christine Stevens had been working with me as an organizer. And then she went to San Antonio to become the lead organizer for cops, and she did an incredibly outstanding job. Anyway, we're trying to shift the cops leaders thinking.

[00:14:33] And so instead of being always confrontational with the corporate community, could we be more could we leverage them? Could we negotiate with them? Could we figure out a way to to find allies among some of them? And that was just them and ask them why they're the enemy.

[00:14:51] Right. Right, Ted. Only ever that it's only ever going to be an antagonistic relationship. There can be no conciliation developing of the relationship. Right.

[00:15:01] It was not just not just agonistic. It was antagonistic. And so so the question then was, can we reframe the conversation and see that there are some they have some interest. Which are in our interests. OK, so if so, and we begin to work on a flood plan. OK, and Christine figured out that there was no real flood plan in we had cops have been working on all these drainage projects, but but there was never any connection between the two drainage projects. And so she figured out that there needed to be a flood plan. And so they did a composite, a presentation to the corporate community of the need for our plan that might work, and they were just astounded by we didn't know that there was no floorplan, number one. Number two is they were amazed that these people that they tend to look down upon could come up with something like this and make these kind of effective presentations. So learning getting people to think, well, not only can you organize against you can also organize for, but if you're going to organize for, you're going to organize, then you have to have allies and you've got to be able to leverage some corporate, some university, some political allies. OK, and that's going to require that you deal with them differently. So that's when we begin to realize that there needed to be a lot more thought given to politics. OK, and I had read Bernard Kerik in defense of politics and was just amazed with it, but it seemed to really capture. What we're trying to get out to, which was teaching people what it means to be a political person and how to think about politics, and it's so, so popular education is not just kind of analyzing particular issues.

[00:16:57] It's this it kind of inculcating a vision of what it means to be a political animal, as someone who both takes power, uses power and has standing in a community to act with and for others. Is that a fair kind of.

[00:17:14] Yeah, in fact, we are. When I went to Los Angeles again from Mitchy. We put together a initiative called Standing for Families, right, and we wanted to have a double and triple meaning. So I met standing for families, but it also meant standing for families,

too, with families having standing where you have standing in a court of law. And we will spend a lot of time asking people, what does it mean to have standing in a court of law and we get lawyers to talk about. That means you have the right to interrogate the means. You have the right to be present at critical decisions, etc.. So we went through all the dimensions of what does it mean to have standing? And that's what we want to do with public officials. Right. And I remember we first did that in L.A. when we asked Edelman, who is a county supervisor, that we wanted to know everything that was coming down. We wanted an early warning agreement with him to it. We wanted to be able to be notified if there was anything that was going on that was different, whether it was Public Works Department or Public Policy Center. We wanted to be we didn't want to read about a newspaper or hear about on the radio. We wanted to find out from him in his office this is coming down. And he agreed to that. And so that was a first step in my mind to teaching people that you have the right to have standing to it. You are the first one to be notified about anything. And then we use that and leverage that in the city, in the use of community block grant money.

[00:18:47] So that that sense then of because I think there's a one view of Democratic politics, you kind of take to the streets, you you have marches, you have demonstrations and that that that emphasis on protest rather than politics as the kind of negotiation formation sustaining of a common life in which you have standing. You have a say in determining the conditions of your determining your living and working conditions. And that is a it does seem to me a very different kind of vision of of a kind of radical form of democratic politics is how you get that standing as against simply being locked in a cycle of protest. I guess the classic statement on that that I know you have organizers read is, is Bayard Rustin in 1965 essay From Protest to Politics written to address exactly this this dynamic. So what I mean, coming out of all of that, like what? How would you define popular education and what role do you think it plays in organizing? Why is it so key to building power?

[00:19:58] Well, it's taking those granular experiences, dealing with those grander things and then teaching people how to reflect on that and make the connection between what they're dealing with and larger questions of power, larger questions of economics. Why is it that they have to fight so hard for sidewalks and curbs? And and flooding is a relationship between the flooding of inner city neighborhoods and development in the suburban areas, which builds over the natural drainage that exists in a particular community by building off that I mean that sense, I'm thinking also the in the Highlander Folk Center, where public education was the key thing in September, Clark was kind of sponsored by them, was key influence and development of their self.

[00:20:47] They always talk about popular education, is rooted in addressing concrete issues, and that if it wasn't, you could get very, you know, as you've already discussed, their political ideas, political thought, wider frames of reference and analysis, a key, but it's all the time addressed to the concrete issues which either make life better or make it worse. And that's a kind of key element of popular education, is grounded and focused on the actual problems where people live and work.

[00:21:21] It's also been part of the difficulty is that you have to be you, the educator, predisposed to learning and to revisiting your own preconceived notions about how things work, OK, which may come out of very, very erudite study of abstract ideas, but they they collapse as soon as you run into actual experience, as Mike Tyson says, you know, every plan breaks apart as soon as the first punch is thrown.

[00:21:50] OK, so that sense of kind of both it's it's there's reflection on the concrete realities and attentive to that broader theoretical and broader theoretical reflection and the kind of back and forth of critical reflection on experience and kind of putting that in conversation with wider frameworks. And so one has to be situated in a context, attentive to that, not all preprepared towards interrogate one's own.

[00:22:19] Suppositions and not the hidebound by ideology, the same time constantly exploring kind of different ways of framing and understanding things with people, there's a guy named Scott at Yale who writes a lot on this forum, I find very interesting because he is concerned with tacit knowledge of the importance of test knowledge and the importance of constantly reviewing both being attentive to and a very creative way within reviewing and reinterpreting your perceptions of what you're experiencing.

[00:22:53] OK, so there has to be that disposition to to suspend the theoretical formulations, OK, to suspend the judgments that you develop out of ideology and then take a look at that situation and ask, what does it say? What does it mean? What what how does it challenge how I think about things?

[00:23:15] So what? So what kind of activities? I mean, that, you know, this can sound quite abstract, but what are some actual activities that constitute popular education? What does it involve in practice?

[00:23:26] Well, you know, you start off with questions like, you know, what is it you're trying to do? What are you trying to accomplish? Or is it a build affordable housing? What are the impediments to it? You talk to people who build houses and ask them what? Why, why can't you build more houses? OK, what what gets in the way?

[00:23:48] Is it a permitting process? Is that an approval process? OK, is that land cost? Is it construction cost? Is that the availability of credit? What is it? What are the impediments to you? What do you want to build more affordable housing? Do you see that as a market where you check it out that they really want to do that? And if they do want to do it and it looks like they do, what gets in the way, what would we then do is do what we call a severe kind of OK, right.

[00:24:12] And then kind of lay out to people, well, this is what so-and-so said.

[00:24:15] This is what so-and-so says.

[00:24:16] This also said, given the people the meetings we've done and you lay those out, this is our hypothesis about what the situation is, OK?

[00:24:25] And I hypothesize just certain. However, we think we need a lot more understanding, so we need to do a lot more research actions. Right. So these are the prospective targets for those research actions. OK, the director of Public Works or the director of housing or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, this banker, et cetera, the clearinghouse who is willing to do research actions with those folks. So you pursue that.

[00:24:52] But so that's so you've got to let it go and get information. You've got to work both leaders, organizers finding out what's going on and actually doing some quite detailed analysis to get at the heart of actually what is the problem here and how might we come up with a kind of constructive alternative. I'm reminded of one of Alinsky rules that the price

of a successful attack is a constructive alternative and the price of constructive criticism is a successful alternative.

[00:25:21] And so I was telling the organizer, you can't just critique what they're doing. You've got to come up with a proposal, OK, which suggest to them what they could do, because these folks, as you say, they were, they're putting their profits.

[00:25:36] They're well-meaning, they're well-intentioned. They're trying to do everything they can, OK? And they don't know why it's not working. Well, you got to point out to them why it's not working. And that means you've got to know more than they do about what the facts on the ground. OK, and you're not going to know that unless you're actually sniffing out, doing individual meetings. You're doing an awful lot of both a combination of being a detective and investigative journalist. It's a good way. But again, that's good ethnographer. OK, so you organizer, he's got to learn how to be both an ethnographer, an investigative reporter, OK, a detective, OK. And a novelist.

[00:26:14] OK, right.

[00:26:15] Yeah, I'm remembering that kind of if you read the archives of the kind of early training of people like Nicholas Hoffman and other early organizers, the Alinsky with, he drew on his own training by Poxon Birgersson, University of Chicago, who developed the whole field of urban ethnography and the early reports in the ARPANET, these very, very detailed analysis of the kind of areas of Chicago they were working and they had exactly that feel.

[00:26:42] It's part detective work and an investigative journalist, but had this detailed ethnographic in the sense descriptions of the social, political, economic conditions of people of their lives, really. So I think that's a very that's a wonderful way of getting at something of what this work of education goes on, because it's also then that knowledge gives you the power both to understand the situation, but also then to generate these constructive alternatives.

[00:27:12] One of the words that I like an awful lot that Microsoft uses is intimations, and I think part of being a good organizer. Intimations or if you agree with that or not.

[00:27:23] Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think that it's that again, because we actually saying that tacit knowledge. I think that's what's so hard in a lot of political work. We want nice, clear ideas or nice clear proposals or policies. But so much of politics operates. It's having to kind of catch intimations, catch and get hold of those tacit mythologies and the senses of things. You might just feel something in your gut and one has to bring it to speech to be able to articulate it and catch a mood, if you like, which and all these things seem very ephemeral. And yet they're key to actually understanding what's going on here among these people in this place. And I think that there's the kind of hard empirical analysis. But there's also, as you say, that sense of intimations and being able to open and be sensitive and attuned to that is key and also developing the capacity for friendship and understanding. What does it mean to have public friendship to that sense that it's not just about having the right knowledge? That's also part of popular education and a sense the process of becoming attuned to what's going on and understanding it and knowing how to act in ways that can bring change is being able to keep kind of keep going the quality and character of relationships that enable change to happen. It's can we can have the right policy or the right analysis. But if we're not the kind of people who can sustain public friendship and the ambiguities, tensions, compromise, being able to polarize this minute

and depolarize the next minute and the kinds of judgment involved in that, we're not going to be able to bring about the change and sustain the winds over time. Is that is that a fair kind of sense of.

[00:29:19] I think it is, but it's incomplete because the other part of it is what's in it for you?

[00:29:24] Right there is the Alinsky was to be able to get people, Catholic priests, who thought that labor organizers, OK, regardless, communists and labor organizers who thought Catholic priests were fascist, OK, supporters of Franco and Mussolini put them together because they all were concerned about the interests of the member of their parishioners and their workers and their members and potential members. Put the ideology at the door. Start with the actual live situation that people are undergoing. Start with their children, OK? And ask people. What's going on with your kids? What's what are the impediments to their flourishing or the impediments to their development?

[00:30:05] What are the impediments to their health care, their nutrition, their education, their safety?

[00:30:12] What are what are the impediments to safe neighborhoods? What are the impediments to good schools as well as a good transportation? What are the impediments to you being able to work in a situation which is dignified and sustainable because Catholic social thought teaches the importance of family? Wait, so what does that mean? OK, in this particular context and time. So can we have conversations about the safety and flourishing of our children, the health of our neighborhoods and what happens to our property and our families being able to sustain themselves, OK, with living decent wages and working conditions? And that is the work of politics or in our budget. And so don't tell people we're going to be political. No, we're going to talk about kids. We're going to talk about family. We're talking about.

[00:30:59] But that is the work of politics destroying the last couple of questions. So just and one of the kind of key things in your own work and experience of organizing is the role of churches and religious congregations. More broadly, what do you see as their role in popular education? And how can popular education form part of congregational development and building a strong institution?

[00:31:22] Well, we spent a lot of time with three questions. What is the church? Why do we need it and what is our responsibility and obligation to the church?

[00:31:33] Because you're trying to create a community of obligation over against the community of gratification. So churches are countercultural. When he was cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger wrote a book on the Vatican to the theology of Africa, too, and he has an essay on Metanoia, which I think should be required reading for every organizer. I know if you're familiar with what I said or not yet. And so I reread that essay a lot. And what does it mean to be counterculture? What does it mean to be against the dominant culture of materialism and individualism and gratification? OK, and so, you know, congregations, churches. Then there's an essay by Philip Murnane called A Complex Task of the Parish, which is required reading for the organizers. And he argues that I make you guys read that, number one, because he uses cops as an example of a congregation which is fulfilling or trying to fulfill all three of those obligations to a priest, do profit and to be king. The symbol for kingship in Israel is a separate step so that the role of King was not to be a ruler, but to be a shepherd, to gather the flock and to protect the flock. And so the parish

needs to be both protecting and gathering and protecting needs to be healing and forgiving.

[00:33:01] It also needs to be confrontational to heal, to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted so that there has to be that role of all three of those rules. And so not everyone, not everybody in the parish can be that all three, but the entity, the corporate entity needs to be exercised all three. So the question then is how do we do that? And we use Paul's letter to the Corinthians and to talk about what is the body, what is the body of the post talking about and how do we incorporate recognize that we are baptism incorporates us into that body, that body politic, which is a community of obligation. And so how do we understand what are those obligations and what are the habits and practices that need to be cultivated? So we try to go through that process with.

[00:33:50] And then go through a process of House meetings, you know, with parishes and teach them role play that scripture so that theology and the and the study of scripture becomes part of the popular education process.

[00:34:05] Then know we ask them, as Paul did, write a letter to the Corinthians, wrote a letter to the Church of Houston to write a letter to the Church of Scientology, to the Church of Los Angeles. Right. And is it is it our meeting is doing more harm than good because some of you go hungry and others get drunk and then we teach hard. That whole concept of Rep. Paul talks about he eats and drinks without recognizing everybody eats and drinks his own damnation.

[00:34:31] What does it mean to recognize the body? My mother used to say that the worst thing a Mexican man could do and would not recognize his own children. She didn't mean just to identify that she would take care of them, be responsible. It's a recognition means living out, fulfilling the obligations that you have to the body.

[00:34:49] So in church, often there's a move we can go through that and have an understanding of that, but it can often be translated into very service oriented and engagement.

[00:35:00] So then we go from there to an analysis of what's happening to children, what's happening to families. Right. And that whole notion that you heard a story of the accident ministry. No, don't tell me that, OK, this church there was it was it was on a hilltop on a dangerous intersection. And there was always actions taking place at the church, set up a first aid station to take care of people who were transfusions up to the embassies. So they were so successful, they began to expand it and they raised money to build a clinic. So instead of people having to be taken somewhere, they actually have a clinic for the actual ministry and they raise so much money that they want to turn that clinic into a hospital. And then one day they're in a meeting and a little kid asks the question if the reason why all these actions are taking place is because there's this narrow intersection and it's dark and white.

[00:35:50] Why don't we get organized to get the lights, Lifespring and the intersection white and rails put out so there won't be so many accidents, although leaders of the church looked at each other will be involved in politics. Right.

[00:36:05] So they went back to raising money for the hospital, for the Oxygen Ministry.

[00:36:10] Yeah. And it's a that's a variation of the old the other stories used is, you know, the fishing, the babies out of the out of the river and then go up river and work out why so many children are being thrown in. Yeah. Yeah. So that I see. So that then that process of popular education as part of congressional development is actually getting churches to situate themselves, understand the situation in that concrete place, in the kind of realities of that and how they can be involved in actually transforming that, using what metanoia, the kind of conversion is a set where off that place as it as a better place to live.

[00:36:49] Mm hmm. And you still story the critique. But but a lot of people would be surprised how many people when they asked when you told them canonically the pastor and their leaders of the congregation are responsible for every person inside the boundary of that parish, their well-being. That's part of the teachings of the church. Canonically, it's like Alinsky saying you got to make the other guy live up to his own book of rules, right? Yeah. So as you point out, well, this this is not me saying this.

[00:37:18] This is your church saying this to you. And, you know, how do you grapple with that? OK. And so I also raise those kind of questions with what is it that the scriptures that's what we start with, the scriptures, because people might say, well, that's that's what church said at this time of the. But no, but what is the scripture say? What is the letter to the Corinthians?

[00:37:37] So I'm just partly using then in the frames we might do parallel exercise in a mosque or a synagogue that it's kind of working with the sources of authority, sources of learning that are authoritative for the people in that place as well. And taking the honoring but honoring that, but also helping relate those scriptures and teachings to the realities of their life. Can I can I close with one final question at Chambers, a little pamphlet on the importance of muling. What do you think he meant by that?

[00:38:20] How do you what what are the kind of ways in which you ruminate on what's going on with you, what's going on around you, what's going on more broadly in the context which you're trying to address? Well, that was my idea.

[00:38:34] OK, I had a suspicion.

[00:38:38] I don't he didn't give me credit for it, but it was my idea. I had read this book on Mudlick and. And came up with the idea that that the the role of an organizer is to do modeling, and I even put that as a requirement in staff reports. They had to report. They had to write a report on what they've done, what they're going to do, and then mudlarks and the MODELING'S were about themselves. OK, and you know and what I mean, I ask organizers all the time.

[00:39:09] Some probably inappropriate questions. OK, what bothers you most about the work or just drives you to tears just out of boredom? What bothers you about our conversations? What irritates you about our conversations? What, if anything, gives meaning to our conversations? Who do you enjoy engaging with? And what about what and and what could make the work more interesting to you from your point of view? And try to give them permission to be curious, to be imaginative, to be thoughtful, and not just about the matters at hand. I told them that when we were in cops or when we got into the kind of budget fight, which is a big fight. But after a while I got bored with it and we were winning big victories, but we weren't.

[00:40:07] We reached a kind of plateau and slugging it out. So I turned the organization over to my associate and I just started reading about development policies or what the water board was doing it with public service workers and celebrities.

[00:40:21] I like some I didn't like, and so I didn't like to give the impression I be the person in the organization.

[00:40:26] I read this book because he could really do that. He could go through it. I Benevides, he was a Catholic priest, and so I got them interested in the water board and so much so that they would read the documents. And I didn't have to read the documents anymore, any of the other stuff, which was more interesting to me.

[00:40:44] So but I found that was boring to me, was exciting to them.

[00:40:50] Right. So that muling process, you're able to get a sense of where your energy was going, but also then that enables you to see where others energies might be, kind of they might come alive around a different set of tasks or issues.

[00:41:04] But the more and I also found out the more historical background I have, the more I can make what they were doing more interesting, but also the fact that I knew that the congressman, Henry Gonzales, had been taking on the public service board and the water board over some of these same issues. That was a long fight. There were people who were part of that fight and introduce those people. So they got to meet them and got to understand from a different historical perspective where they were coming from.

[00:41:27] All right. Fantastic. Hey, Ernie, I could keep talking. And it's always a joy at spending time with you and talking to you.

[00:41:37] Thank you so much for this very rich conversation and for the way you've laid out this vision, very, very comprehensive vision of popular education and its role in sustaining, nourishing and taking forward the work of Democratic politics. Really appreciate your time today. Thank you.

[00:42:05] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen Organize Act podcast in which I explored popular education and its central role in organizing. Reflecting back, I can see that only identified the core focus of popular education as teaching the nature of politics and what it means to develop and sustain political relationships both with each other and with those who hold dominant forms of power. It is these political rather than straightforwardly social or economic relationships that form the basis of democratic politics and transformative change. In many ways, this is an ancient understanding of politics, one which Aristotle gave voice to. But it's also a very modern one, articulated in the work of political philosophers like Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, as Ernie narrates it in this episode. This learning how to be political is rooted in combining systemic analysis of structures and systems with analyzing the concrete reality of one's immediate situation or neighborhood, and then through relational processes of listening via one to ones and house meetings, identifying and understanding issues to act on together. This process of reflection and relationship building and the interplay between them cultivates practical wisdom about what it means to initiate and tend a just and generous common life that is a democratic political life with these people in this place over time. As with other upset, there may be suggestions for further reading, which you can download in the show notes on the website, Ormond Center, [ormondcenter.com](http://ormondcenter.com) backslash listen-organize-act-podcast. Do

sign up at the website for news about events and resources related to the podcasts or to send me questions.

[00:44:26] 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.