

From: Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship & the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

I

The Origins of Organizing

An Intellectual History

We begin by excavating the philosophical and historical origins of community organizing. Giving this chapter the subtitle “an intellectual history” is something of a conceit, as community organizing is a set of practices rather than ideas. Nevertheless, the different sections of this chapter identify and discuss the key traditions out of which community organizing emerged and which directly shaped its practice and political vision. These traditions are populism, Judaism, the labor movement, and Christianity, with crucial insights being formulated through interaction with urban sociology, organized crime, Communism, and later, a broadly Aristotelian conception of politics. It was not just a relationship with different traditions of belief and practice that was important, but also how these traditions interacted with each other in a particular context: that of modern urban life and the processes of industrialization and deindustrialization that shaped it. The central character in this history is the figure of Saul Alinsky [Figure 1.1]. The main thesis is that Alinsky’s approach to community organizing represents one of the most important forms of contemporary democratic politics available for two reasons. The first is that it addresses a primary problem apparent in most other forms of political mobilization and political theory; that is, it prioritizes social relationships and refuses to subordinate these relations to political or economic imperatives. The second is it constitutes a means of enabling ruled and rulers to arrive at political judgments together.

JUDAISM, THE SHTETL TRADITION OF COMMUNAL SELF-ORGANIZATION, AND POPULAR RELIGION

Born in 1909, Alinsky was a child of Russian Jewish immigrants and lived within a close-knit Jewish community in Chicago that had its origins in the Shtetl traditions of Eastern Europe. Central to the pattern of life in the Maxwell Street area where Alinsky grew up were traditions of self-organization and mutual



FIGURE 1.1. Alinsky at the FIGHT (Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today) offices in Rochester, NY, c. 1966.

care.¹ Given the history of state-directed pogroms and persecution experienced by the Jews who settled in this area, the first point of reference was to look not to the government to solve one's problems but to one's own community. Moreover, social and, crucially, commercial relations were subordinated to a ritual calendar, a set of customary practices, and religious injunctions that determined what was to be done, when, and in what order. The family, not the individual, was the basic unit of society and families were located within a series of interlinked institutions whose very development speaks of a set of clear communal priorities. The first Jewish institution in Chicago was the Jewish Burial Ground Society formed in 1845, followed by the first congregation that met above a shop in 1847, its first school in 1850, and the creation, in 1851, of both the Hebrew Benevolent Society to aid the sick and provide for burials and the building of the first synagogue.² Then they began to build institutions to help their Jewish neighbors, notably the B'nai B'rith lodges, the first one of which was established in 1857. Numerous other institutions followed. Alinsky was part of the last generation to grow up within this environment. By the time he left college, it had all but disappeared as the Jews of Chicago moved from "the shtetl to the suburbs." But, in its development and as Alinsky experienced it, we see exemplified the ancient pattern of Jewish diasporic existence as set out in Jeremiah 29:4-7:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The Biblical reference is wholly appropriate, for not only is Chicago's Jewish context central to the formation of Alinsky's political vision, but his very mode of articulating that vision also draws from Biblical genres – notably universal rules embedded within highly contextual narratives, as exemplified in Exodus – and the rabbinic mode of debating Scripture: fiercely and with sharp contradiction of one's opponent. Indeed, organizing can be seen to embody a form of *Mahloket* or "controversy" that involves well-managed, creative conflict and debate. For Alinsky it was Judaism that constituted the beliefs and practices that helped form him. As will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, community organizing continues to have a symbiotic relationship with religious beliefs and practices, in particular those of Christianity.

Alinsky's experience of Jewish communal self-organization directly contrasted with the primary mode of neighborhood organization that developed from 1900 to 1930: that of the settlement houses. Inspired by Toynbee Hall in East London, settlement houses were founded in New York and other cities from 1886 onward. Most famous of all was Jane Addams' Hull House. Founded in Chicago in 1889, it continued long into the twentieth century but now is only extant as a museum. As in the London settlements, organizers were college educated and upper-middle class young men and women who provided various social and welfare resources such as athletic programs, neighborhood vegetable gardens, nurseries, laundry facilities, employment assistance, and legal aid in poor working-class neighborhoods. What they did not do was directly address structural political and economic problems. However, it is important to note this is not true of Addams and Hull House, something Alinsky explicitly acknowledged.³ Through her work at Hull House, her political philosophy, social ethics, and role as public intellectual, Addams had much to say on political and economic matters.⁴

Alinsky shared with Addams two key assumptions about how to address poverty.⁵ First, in contradiction to a European sociological conception of community as exemplified in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies, Alinsky and Addams did not see "community" as a static or inherited social formation that was subject to inevitable dissolution through processes of modernization. Rather, for Alinsky and Addams, a community was an ongoing project of social and symbolic interaction through which people form meaningful relationships with each other and develop a collective sense of identity and place. Second, poverty was not the result of individual pathologies; instead, it was produced through broader social and structural processes. Addressing poverty demanded

tackling the environmental conditions that catalyzed and reinforced individual and communally self-destructive behaviors.⁶

Addams's involvement in helping establish a number of unions in Chicago, particularly in the textile industry, exemplifies her approach. She was a keen advocate both of union organizing and labor legislation, seeing both as necessary elements of a strong democracy.⁷ In relation to the development of community organizing, Addams can be seen as contributing to a practice of organizing parallel to but distinct from that which Alinsky represents: the emergence of the civil rights movement. Addams was directly influential on Myles Horton, who established the Highlander Folk School, a crucial catalyst in the formation of the early civil rights movement and the subsequent training of organizers involved in both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was the Highlander Folk School where figures such as Rosa Parks were trained and which provided a platform for Septima Clark to develop her distinctive approach to citizenship education and local organizing.⁸ Horton was mentored early on by Jane Addams while, like Alinsky, he was studying at the University of Chicago with Robert Park in the 1930s.⁹

In most settlement houses the social-welfare style of neighborhood organizing remained elitist, and, despite their ideals, they were top-down initiatives that tended to reinforce class divisions and ignore existing modes of mutual association and leadership.¹⁰ In his seminal urban ethnography, the research for which was undertaken during the 1930s, William Foote Whyte notes:

The [settlement] workers had no systematic knowledge of the social backgrounds of the people in their Italian homeland. Furthermore, they made little effort to get to know the local social organization except as it came to them through the doors of their institutions.... [T]he settlement was an alien institution, nevertheless the community was expected to adapt itself to the standards of the settlement house. Some people made this adaptation; most people did not.¹¹

Whyte goes on to note: "The primary function of the settlement house is to stimulate social mobility, to hold out middle class standards and middle class rewards to lower-class people."¹² Whyte's work was done in Boston. Yet Robert Slayton's local history of the Back of the Yards neighborhood, where Alinsky first developed community organizing, comes to a parallel judgment on the University of Chicago Settlement House that was set up there. Slayton identifies the dense networks of mutual aid and associational life that developed in that neighborhood, and contrasts this with the settlement house, which struggled to embed itself within the community and paled in significance when compared to the role of the churches and ethnic associations.¹³ Robert Fisher identifies the response of those the settlements aimed to help: "Instead of relying on settlements organized by upper-class outsiders, neighbourhood residents preferred to use their own churches, synagogues, mutual benefit associations, and ethnic, labor, and political organizations, not to mention informal networks of

support, to advance their collective and personal interests.”¹⁴ In other words, most settlement workers were self-proclaimed leaders without any followers who nevertheless insisted they knew better how other people should live. In contrast, Alinsky grew up within an urban environment organized by religion where there were clear leaders and followers and the kinds of communal self-help that Fisher identifies as central to how poor families could make life better.¹⁵ It is worth noting that this same conflict between the “progressive” liberal values and methods of external, “expert” welfare professionals and “conservative” communal and often religious self-organization is still a feature of contemporary urban social service provision.¹⁶

Admittedly, there were efforts in the provision of welfare to incorporate more democratic elements. Notable among these was the setting up of councils of social agencies for unified fund-raising and social planning efforts. By 1926 there were neighborhood councils in Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Boston, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Detroit, Cincinnati, Columbus, and New York. Such efforts involved organizing cooperative planning and consultation to ensure services were responsive to real needs and accountable to the population served, as well as organizing education about broader issues affecting a community. Early figures in the development of social work such as Bessie McClenahan and Eduard Lindeman were deeply concerned about the ability of communities to engage in democratic decision making and saw the role of the social worker as that of an organizer encouraging a community to recognize and solve its own problems.¹⁷ However, as the historian Roy Lubove argues, the intensive concern with the machinery and financing of social welfare

diverted attention from co-operative democracy and the creative group life of the ordinary citizen to problems of agency administration and service. It substituted the bureaucratic goal of efficiency through expert leadership to what had been a quest for democratic self-determination through joint efforts of citizen and specialist. Community organization had barely emerged as a cause before it had become a function absorbed into the administrative structure of social work.¹⁸

As will be seen, this was a recurrent problem in the history of community organizing that was not resolved until the social service provision elements were separated from the cooperative democratic and civic renewal aspects of organizing.

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Chronologically, the second key influence on Alinsky came in the form not of a tradition but of a method: that of ethnographic observation. Alinsky learned this method by studying another form of hierarchal, communal self-organization that was independent of the state: organized crime. Alinsky was trained in the Chicago school of sociology as it was developing in the 1920s and 1930s under the guidance of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, two of the

founders of urban sociology and, in particular, the emerging method of urban ethnography. Alinsky first encountered their work as an undergraduate when he took one of Burgess's courses.¹⁹ Park and Burgess encouraged an eclectic approach and resisted over-rigid theories. Their focus was more empirical, being concerned with how to find appropriate ways of mapping and describing the urban situation and the social processes and transformations at work within the city. Where it did have a commitment, it was implicit and drew on the view most clearly articulated by the American philosopher George Herbert Mead in *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934).²⁰ The philosophy was pragmatist and anti-positivistic and its basic anthropology can be characterized as communitarian: "Each person becomes human through interaction with others. Institutional patterns are learned in communities dependent on shared language and symbols."²¹ Influenced by Mead and John Dewey, it was an approach that viewed social science as having a special responsibility "to help create democratic decision making and political action, especially in the city."²²

Park and Burgess encouraged intensive local studies of what they called "natural areas" or neighborhoods that encompassed particular cultures and lifestyles within which meaningful social identities and structures were forged.²³ The Back of the Yards where Alinsky set up his first community organization was identified as just such a "natural area."²⁴ The natural areas were then situated within a wider picture of the city as an "urban ecology" within which the areas were integrated and linked. Having studied organized crime for two years, in particular Al Capone's operation, Alinsky abandoned his doctoral dissertation in criminology to work for Clifford Shaw at the Institute for Juvenile Research, established by Shaw in 1926. This involved further study of criminal gangs, this time of teenage Italian gangs on the West Side of Chicago. Then in 1933 he worked as a staff sociologist at the state prison in Joliet, but returned to work with Shaw at the Institute in 1936.

Alinsky says of his time studying organized crime, "I learned, among other things, the terrific importance of personal relationships."²⁵ This was something that became a central feature of his political vision. For Alinsky, organized crime represented a form of community organizing. As he put it, only half jokingly: "I came to see the Capone gang as a huge quasi-public utility servicing the population of Chicago."²⁶ The stories he tells of how he first gained entry into the circles of both the Capone gang and the teenage gangs he studied illustrate the importance of building trust and relationships when working with the gangs. Trust and strong relationships, in addition to the threat of violence, are crucial to maintaining the effective management and power of any organized criminal group who necessarily operate outside the law and avoid transparent, accountable procedures. In his work in Back of the Yards, Alinsky sought to use the same emphasis on trust and relationship in organizing the poor to resist the power of organized crime, substituting the threat of violence with the threat of nonviolent means of exerting pressure, means he elaborates on extensively in his writings.

Arguably, Alinsky drew directly from his experiences working for Shaw's Chicago Area Project (CAP). Steven Bubacz, lead organizer from 1935 onward of the initial CAP project based in Russell Square, described the Russell Square Community Committee – the first of CAP's community organizations – as nothing less than a “vigilante organization.” In addition to its youth club, its “vigilante” activities consisted of a wide variety of communally organized programs to address issues such as minors entering taverns, stopping the fencing of stolen goods, and neighborhood improvement schemes. These were aimed at reducing criminality, directing gangs into more productive activities, and developing a sense of pride in and responsibility for the neighborhood.²⁷ Alinsky discerned that for those without power and who cannot deploy either the resources of the state or the power of money to achieve their ends, relational power is the only means available through which they can act. To be effective – that is, for association to generate power – it demands the kinds of discipline and loyalty (or faithfulness) that Alinsky saw at work in the mafia. Faithfulness is vital for developing any kind of common life, whether civic or religious. Without it, trust cannot develop, promises are broken, commitments are not kept, and so the possibility of long-term reciprocal relations is dissolved. In short, faithfulness and relational power are inextricably linked.

Alongside organized crime, the other great model of community organizing based on loyalty, turnout, pragmatism, and personal relationship that Alinsky encountered was that of the urban political boss and the machine politics of the Chicago Democratic Party. Nowhere does he cite it as a direct influence, and ward captains and bosses were a frequent target for attack, but with his keen eye for how organizations work, Alinsky cannot have failed to take note of how the Party machine operated. Central to ward politics was loyalty and reciprocity: the Boss helps you and you help the Boss and together, through coordinated, disciplined action, you achieve the aims of the organization.²⁸ However, like the illegal capitalist corporations of organized crime, the ward bosses had no interest in either contesting the power structure, generating political opposition to the owners of the factories that dominated the living conditions of everyone in the area, or promoting unity between their own neighborhood's different ethnic enclaves.²⁹ Instead, they were clientalistic rather than participatory and preferred to preserve the status quo rather than transform it.

As part of his research, both for his doctoral dissertation and for Shaw, Alinsky engaged in the long-term study of criminal gangs, triangulating these observations to develop a detailed picture of the locality in which the gang operated. As with other “Chicago school” researchers shaped by Park and Burgess, Alinsky was actively encouraged to live in the area being studied, walk the streets, and include these autobiographical dimensions as part of the data collection.³⁰ The training Alinsky offered his early organizers such as Edward Chambers, Richard Harmon, and Nicholas von Hoffman was basically a version of the urban ethnographic method, as is evidenced from the extraordinarily detailed reports they produced for the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago.

Alinsky required regular detailed reports from his field staff and insisted that they read a wide range of books in order to develop broader frames of reference. What urban ethnography gave to organizing was the importance of developing first hand, local knowledge through sustained attention to the people of a community while simultaneously developing broader accounts of the relationships and social transformations at work within those places.³¹

THE CHICAGO AREAS PROJECT AND THE BEGINNINGS OF NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING

It was through working with Shaw that Alinsky developed a key insight that formed the basis of the Back of the Yards initiative. Shaw developed what is now called a "social disorganization theory" through his long-term observations of juvenile delinquents.³² A key part of his work was examining the consequences of a community's inability to solve its own problems. He contrasted his own experience of growing up on a rural Indiana farm with that of the urban situation. He frequently recounted how as a child he stole stove bolts from a blacksmith and was caught, shaken upside down by the heels until all the bolts fell to the ground, and then helped by the same blacksmith to repair the toy wagon he had stolen the bolts for in the first place.³³ For Shaw the incident illustrated the role of community self-policing and intervention that was often absent in urban neighborhoods.³⁴ Shaw can be seen as a "missionary" and "agrarian conservative" who was "zealously hoping to kindle a popular return to hamlets and ethical humanism within the confines of the city."³⁵ In this concern, Shaw echoes other early developers of social work who, in the words of one such initiative, sought to restore "the advantages of village life to city people."³⁶ For Shaw, community organizing was a way to save the American city from its own self-generating forces of social disintegration.³⁷

Shaw and his colleague Henry McKay argued that delinquency was not an individual issue, but a normal response to abnormal conditions.³⁸ If a community is not self-policing but imperfectly policed by outside agencies, some individuals will exercise unrestricted freedom to express their dispositions and desires, often resulting in delinquent behavior as young people seek alternative ways to meet their social and material needs. A key need was for recognition and respect, which, if not given by adults and those in authority, would be sought among peers and through delinquent behavior.³⁹ Alinsky's assessment of the Italian teenaged gangs he studied directly echoes this analysis.⁴⁰ Only by organizing itself could a community contain criminal action and provide viable institutional means by which to meet real needs. Crucial here was reconnecting young people to families and institutions that could "house" them instead of leaving them to form surrogate families in gangs. Ethnic diversity, lack of communication between different groups, and differences between first- and second-generation immigrants within the same family

all exacerbated the problem of disorganization and so allowed greater scope for delinquent behavior. On this account, crime was correlated with poverty because poor people were disorganized.⁴¹ But this did not mean that the urban poor lacked their own institutions and potential leaders; rather, they were often disconnected from or antagonistic toward each other, lacked direction, or were narrow or fragmented in focus. To organize them first required disorganizing them so that they could work together in pursuit of a common life instead of working against each other and their own best interests.⁴²

The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) began in 1935 as an initiative of CAP, which was set up by Shaw in 1934 to address juvenile delinquency. At its inception, CAP, which is still going, had a number of aims.⁴³ These included the following:

(2) the area project stresses the autonomy of the actual residents of the neighborhood in planning and operating the program and contrasts this with the traditional organizations in which control is vested in the lay and professional persons who reside in or represent the interests of the more privileged communities; (3) the area project places great emphasis upon the training and utilization of neighborhood leaders and contrasts this with the general practice in which dependence is largely placed upon professionally trained leaders recruited from sources outside of the local neighborhood; (4) the area project seeks to utilize to the maximum established neighborhood institutions, particularly such natural social groupings as churches, societies, and clubs, rather than to create new institutions which embody the morale and sentiments of the more conventional communities; (5) the activities program in the area project is regarded primarily as a device for enlisting the active participation of local residents in a constructive community enterprise and creating and crystallizing neighborhood sentiment with regard to the task of promoting the welfare of children and the social and physical improvement of the community as a whole.⁴⁴

Along with its self-organizing ethos went an emphasis on self-financing. CAP projects raised much of their money from and through local people.⁴⁵ The BYNC held its first formal meeting on July 14, 1939 and was attended by 350 people representing 76 institutions.⁴⁶ BYNC was in effect a forum where people could come together for common purposes.⁴⁷

Although it had antecedents, notably the short-lived but influential Cincinnati Social Unit experiment (1918-20) and the Social Center Movement (1907-30), it was Shaw and the Chicago Areas Project that systematically developed key elements of what came to be Alinsky's analysis and approach.⁴⁸ But the differences between Alinsky and Shaw are also highly significant.⁴⁹

Alinsky discerned the essential flaw in Shaw's approach to community organizing. While alert to the reality of how the people and land were subordinated to the demands of business and industry, Shaw's approach to neighborhood organizing did not address structural dynamics. Instead, the interpretation of the causes of delinquency stayed at the communal level and tended to ignore the economic and political sources of delinquency arising outside of the community, thereby leaving business and industry immune from any responsibility.⁵⁰

This helps explain why Alinsky is so dismissive of his time with Shaw. He states:

Finally, I quit Joliet and took a job with the Institute for Juvenile Research, one of those outfits that were always studying the causes of juvenile delinquency, making surveys of all the kids in coldwater tenements with rats nibbling their toes and nothing to eat – and then discovering the solution: camping trips and some shit they called character building.⁵¹

In the CAP organizations, organization itself was “the dominant goal and the dominant good.”⁵² In effect, CAP organizations were apolitical and lacked any engagement with or analysis of power. Instead, following Park and Burgess, Shaw’s analysis was governed by an ecological paradigm that envisaged urban development as a natural process; this rendered the creation of cheap labor, slum housing, and social disorganization inevitable.⁵³ It assumed that the expansion and prosperity of industry took ultimate precedence over the social flourishing of the people it affected.⁵⁴ Alinsky refused to see these outcomes as a result of a “natural” or inevitable process of evolution. For Alinsky, the haves were responsible for the immiseration of the have-nots and needed to be held personally accountable for their actions. After falling out with Shaw and frustrated with CAP’s wholly social and apolitical focus, Alinsky set up the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940 to continue the work in the BYNC independently of CAP.

Alinsky learned much from Shaw’s approach, but in order to learn political organizing and gain an understanding of and address directly the economic processes creating social disorganization, he turned to the labor movement.

LABOR ORGANIZING: COMMUNIST AND DEMOCRATIC

While working for Shaw, Alinsky began volunteering as an organizer with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was active in the Back of the Yards area.⁵⁵ This was a time of intense union activity and tumultuous and often violent labor relations. The origins of the labor movement lay in the craft unions that dated from the 1790s onward. The first recorded strike is said to have occurred in 1763 in Charleston, South Carolina, although earlier agrarian and urban rebellions against proprietary and royal restrictions on liberties and chartered monopolies can be seen as part of the early history of both the labor and populist movements in America.⁵⁶ To this archeology of resistance should be added the opposition and outright revolts by slaves; for example, in New York (1712) and Stono, South Carolina (1739). It was with the development of industrial manufacturing that a self-conscious labor movement emerged. The formation of the Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations in 1827 and the Workmen’s Party in 1828 in Philadelphia are key moments in its inception.⁵⁷

As in Judaism, and in its early history, the labor movement was built on inherited practices and the values of reciprocity, mutuality, and cooperation.

These values were central to building self-organized institutions that gave primacy to social relationships over and against the demands of the market and the state. We overhear such sentiments expressed in Abraham Lincoln's 1861 address to Congress: "Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."⁵⁸ Unionization enjoyed high points in the 1830s, 1880s (with the rise and demise of the Knights of Labor), and during World War I; by the early 1930s, however, union membership was low.⁵⁹ Through the passing of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act in 1935, which guaranteed the right of employees to organize or join a union, followed by a series of other legislative measures in support of fair working conditions, space was created for a renewed effort in unionization.⁶⁰ From fewer than three million members in 1933, union membership rose to more than ten million by 1941.⁶¹ A vital factor in union growth was the CIO's move away from the existing craft union approach of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in order to develop industrial unions that included mass production workers in the auto, steel, and rubber industries. Although preparations had been going on since 1935, the first CIO convention was held in 1938, so Alinsky encountered the CIO at its foundation. It was through collaborating with the union organizers that Alinsky learned how to organize large assemblies, focus attention on the issues that were of central concern to the people living in an area, raise money, and recruit members.⁶² Through this he came to know John L. Lewis, head of the CIO, from whom he learned a great deal in terms of the tactics and strategies of political organizing.⁶³

Alinsky interacted with two distinct groups within the unions, both of which taught him the techniques of organizing. Arguably the most effective organizers at the time were the communists. Alinsky seems to have learned many of his militant, confrontational tactics from the communist organizers he met when volunteering for the CIO, mirroring their tactics in his own work but without adopting their ideology or party structure.⁶⁴ However, the group Alinsky identified with most closely was the non-statist democratic left. The democratic left found a distinctive voice in the life and work of the writer Upton Sinclair, whose 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, was famously set in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. Like Clifford Shaw's theory, Sinclair's novel also has an ecological metaphor, only his jungle is not natural; rather, it is a man-made inferno where nature is completely inverted. Unlike the sociology of Shaw, Sinclair's social-realist novel portrays the relationship between capitalism, political corruption, and social disorganization and how this produces crime and family breakdown. The industrial processing of food in the Chicago meat-packing industry serves as an analogy for what happens to social relationships under conditions of unfettered laissez-faire capitalism. In the novel, Sinclair presents union organizing as the road to both personal and social redemption for its central character Jurgis Rudkus. The basic tenets of its political vision

are captured in John L. Lewis's 1937 "Labor and Nation" speech, which set out the rationale for the CIO:

The workers of the nation were tired of waiting for corporate industry to right their economic wrongs, to alleviate their social agony and to grant them their political rights. Despairing of fair treatment, they resolved to do something for themselves. They, therefore, have organized a new labor movement, conceived within the principles of the national bill of rights and committed to the proposition that the workers are free to assemble in their own forums, voice their own grievances, declare their own hopes and contract on even terms with modern industry for the sale of their only material possession – their labor.⁶⁵

Lewis, while seen as a radical and even accused of being a communist, saw labor organizing as the "middle way." For Lewis, the triumph of the Wall Street financial elite over ordinary workers (in other words, the subordination of workers' interests to financial interest) would lead to an industrial revolt that would result in either Communism or Fascism. It was on this basis that he argued for union support of the New Deal during the Great Depression. Lewis stated:

If I may speak as a prophet, I ... say that full organization on the part of free labor, with the free right to enter into collective agreements with employers, is bound to come sooner or later, if the economic system, as we know it, is to endure ... Labor cannot, and will not, and should not ever be content until its partnership becomes a real one and is not merely one in theory. To oppose such a move is, to paraphrase an old saying, not only a crime against labor – it is a social blunder which may lead to the toppling over of our whole economic edifice.⁶⁶

Alinsky shared much of this analysis and envisaged his organizing work as anti-Fascist and, while, like Lewis, he worked with communists, he was clear that his work was also deeply opposed to Communism.

For Alinsky, place-based neighborhood organizing was a complement to the work-based organizing of the unions, hence the name *Industrial Areas Foundation*, which drew on Shaw's emphasis on natural areas, yet located the emphasis not on the need for social control of the people in those areas but on organizing those people to address the real source of their problems: the industrial conditions under which they labored and lived. Focusing on this "external" target rather than exercises in character building was the best means of addressing delinquency. The first meeting of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in 1939 voted to support the efforts of the CIO in reviving union membership in the meatpacking industry.

The rationale for Alinsky's opposition to Communism and his commitment to democracy can be illustrated by reference to another novel, John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*. Written in 1936, *In Dubious Battle* tells the story of a strike in a California valley by apple pickers and the attempt by two organizers, one experienced and the other a rookie, to initiate and develop the strike and provide for the striking pickers. Many of the tactics Alinsky set out in

his *Rules for Radicals* are articulated in the novel. Again, Steinbeck has an ecological paradigm shaping the novel – this time it is of how the individual becomes wholly subsumed to the collective organism and the loss of autonomy that ensues. The novel is clear-eyed about the instrumentalization of people for economic purposes and how organized money deliberately tries to oppose the organization of people. However, through the figure of the doctor, Doc Burton, who helps the strikers but who is pointedly not a member of the party, it constantly raises questions about how to uphold the dignity of the individual while neither instrumentalizing people for economic purposes nor subordinating them to a utopian political project.⁶⁷ The title of the novel itself indicates the ambiguity of the strike – it is a quotation taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and describes Satan's battle with God. The contrast for Steinbeck is between the communists' prideful usage of people for lost causes and Doc Burton's advocacy of more realistic change that recognizes the legitimate interests at work on both sides of the conflict. This may seem to be nothing more than an interesting period piece, but in the contemporary context we can substitute any number of utopian political projects for the communist organizers, ranging from political Islam and deep ecologists to free market and cultural libertarians.

Alinsky had similar concerns.⁶⁸ He rejected Communism as a form of enslavement that demands unqualified political loyalty, does not allow for self-government, and does not uphold the dignity of the individual.⁶⁹ What he wanted was a free society in which all may participate actively and in which the multiple loyalties of each individual are accounted for; that is, where social relationships are not subsumed to the needs of the state or the market and where there is scope for a more complex space. As Alinsky puts it:

Democracy is that system of government and that economic and social organization in which the worth of the individual human being and the multiple loyalties of that individual are most fully recognized and provided for. Democracy is that system of government in which we recognize that all normal individuals have a whole series of loyalties – loyalties to their churches, their labor unions, their fraternal organizations, their social groups, their nationality groups, their athletic groups, their political parties, and many others.⁷⁰

In contrast to the communist organizers for whom loyalty to the party was paramount, Alinsky envisaged the role of the organizer in the following terms:

This, then, is our real job ... it is the breaking down of the feeling on the part of our people that they are social automatons with no stake in the future, rather than human beings in possession of all the responsibility, strength, and human dignity which constitute the heritage of free citizens of a democracy. This can be done only through the democratic organization of our people for democracy. It is the job of building People's Organizations.⁷¹

For Alinsky, the slow building of an organization by ordinary people pursuing their real interests and addressing concrete issues was preferable to chasing the ideological and idealistic goals of the communists of the 1930s and 1940s.

A parallel concern was the basis of his disenchantment with the student radicals of the 1960s. As Alinsky would say of the New Left, they wanted revelation, not revolution.⁷²

In addition to the problem of instrumentalizing people for political purposes, Alinsky also came to be disenchanted with union organizing as a whole. The key point of contention focused on the differences of analysis about the real conflict between what he called the "haves" and the "have-nots." For Alinsky, both the democratic socialists and the communists had no account of a common life (the conflict was a class war or a necessary conflict of different sectional interests) and tended to reduce everything to the need for economic well-being. He called for a complete change of philosophy in the U.S. labor movement, stating that

instead of viewing itself as a separate section of the American people engaged in a separate craft in a particular industry, it will think of itself as an organization of *American citizens* – united to conquer all of those destructive forces which harass the workingman and his family. The traditional union cry of "higher wages and shorter hours" then becomes one of a wide variety of objectives.⁷³

Alinsky's analysis was not class-based. For Alinsky, the interests of the poor were not intrinsically opposed to those of the rich. His concern was the identification and pursuit of a genuinely common life premised on justice, understood as the right judgment to be made for the benefit for all. Hence, he was equally critical of the sectarian interest-group politics pursued by organized labor and business, and the identity-group politics pursued by religious groups and the Black Power movement, all of which, in his view, denied the possibility of such a good.⁷⁴ What Alinsky developed was a common life politics. Refusing to be bound by sectional interests and "community chauvinism," his approach was broad based. This is illustrated by the very first meeting of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, which overcame deep hostility and mutual suspicions between different groups in order to draw together different ethnically constituted churches, unions, athletic clubs, and communists to pursue goods in common: a living wage and just working conditions.⁷⁵ Perhaps the most startling evidence for its broad-based character is the fact that it was an agnostic, ethnically Russian Jew who was organizing devout Catholic and probably anti-Semitic Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, and Irish. Herein is embodied an important distinctive feature of Alinsky's approach to organizing: the organizer has to respect and work within the experience of the internal culture, values, and structure of the institutions being organized and have relationships with the leaders of these institutions, but the organizer does not have to identify with or come from those institutions.⁷⁶ We can summarize this as the *relationship-but-not-identification* approach. The positioning of the organizer in this way constituted a refusal of identity politics and embodied the possibility of a common life.⁷⁷ So, for example, the IAF can be justly criticized for not recruiting enough African-American organizers, but not for reasons of

representativeness. Rather, it is the need for white congregations in the U.S. context to learn from and be organized by African Americans.

For Alinsky it was through the interaction between democracy and Christianity that he was able to realize and articulate his common life politics and his distinctive approach to organizing.⁷⁸ Although the influence of Shaw and Lewis is significant, the majority of Alinsky's primary interlocutors throughout his life were clergy (for example, Bishop Sheil), theologically trained individuals (for example, Ed Chambers), or even theologians of major standing (for example, Jacques Maritain).⁷⁹ And it is churches of all denominations that have most intensively and fruitfully engaged with and funded Alinsky's approach to organizing, both during his life and subsequently.

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY, CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND ORGANIZED RELIGION

Whereas Clifford Shaw, the former farm boy and Lutheran seminarian, had left the church and the country only to try and recreate agrarian moral communities in the middle of the city, Alinsky had grown up in a religious community in the city and understood that mutually responsible and faithfully committed relationships beyond the family required more than self-organization and socially beneficial activities.⁸⁰ Likewise, while union organizing had taught Alinsky that only organized people could oppose the power of organized money, he knew that a political organization could only serve as a salve and never offer salvation. To sustain faithful relationships and prevent their subordination to either politics or economics, moral traditions and institutions were required. It is in the churches that Alinsky found the moral basis for common action and the means of sustaining mutually responsible, committed relationships beyond political and economic self-interest. While often scathingly critical of churches, Alinsky nonetheless contended in 1966 that "the only major institutions fighting for justice, decency and equality in America are the churches. The labor unions are no longer doing it.... They've become part of the status quo."⁸¹

Alinsky's insight about the churches and his close collaboration with the Roman Catholic churches in particular builds on and is in many ways a fulfillment of Tocqueville's aspiration for Catholicism in America. Underlying parts of Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America* is a twofold argument.⁸² On the one hand, he develops an apologetic on behalf of Catholicism, arguing that American democracy is best aligned with Catholicism rather than the deist tendencies of Protestantism, and on the other hand, he argues that French (and by extension European) Catholicism should reconcile itself to democracy.⁸³ It was an analogous appeal that lay behind the embrace of community organizing by certain sections of the Catholic Church in Alinsky's day. From the perspective of the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, involvement in Alinsky-style organizing represented a way of "Americanizing" their largely immigrant clergy and overcoming ethnic enclaves developing within the church.⁸⁴ It is important to



FIGURE 1.2. Signed photo of Maritain sent to Alinsky.

remember that at this time many viewed Catholicism the way Islam is often viewed in North America and Europe today: inherently antidemocratic and subject to a foreign power. For the younger clergy, organizing represented a way of overcoming this prejudice, contributing to the “common good” and, at the same time, avoiding being co-opted by the Democratic Party machine. For Alinsky, it was the connection with the emerging expression of Christian Democracy and Roman Catholic social teaching, most notably through his relationships with Bishop Sheil and Jacques Maritain (Figure 1.2), that Alinsky found a political vision to complement and help him articulate his own. Christian Democracy was envisaged as a truly “middle way” between fascism, communism, socialism, and an anticlerical liberalism.

Maritain identifies a direct link between his political vision and that of Alinsky's. He comments in a letter to Alinsky concerning the latter's book *Reveille for Radicals*: “It reveals a new way for *real* democracy, the only way in which man's thirst for social communion can develop and be satisfied, through freedom and not through totalitarianism in our disintegrated

times.”⁸⁵ The editor of Alinsky and Maritain’s correspondence, Bernard Doering, points to key areas of synchronicity between their conceptions of the relationship between Christianity and democracy.⁸⁶ They shared an emphasis on the centrality of the dignity of the individual, the priority of common over particular goods, and the principle of subsidiarity. Alinsky’s neighborhood councils were in a way the embodiment of Maritain’s vision of a personalist and pluralist pattern of social, economic, and political life that was a precondition of true democracy.⁸⁷ This positive vision was built on a trust in the practical wisdom of ordinary people as opposed to technocrats and ideologues.⁸⁸ This trust was coupled with the need to identify and work alongside the poor and marginalized, moving beyond charity and welfare paternalism. Yet at the same time, their opposition to injustice took as a given the ambivalence of the world and the sinfulness of human relations.⁸⁹ While Maritain chides Alinsky on his rhetoric of excess concerning the relationship between means and ends – with Alinsky at times seemingly taking the posture of an outright “Machiavellian” – they basically agreed that in the world as it is, one must, out of tragic necessity, occasionally resort to bad means for good ends.⁹⁰ The analogy here is with just war theory where the use of force is at times a moral imperative in order to truly love one’s enemy and defend the innocent. Maritain pushes Alinsky to go beyond this and see a complementarity between what he advocates and the approach of Gandhi and Martin Luther King; that is, rather than constitute the use of bad means for good ends in exceptional circumstances, Maritain urged Alinsky to see his approach as the use of moral power to overcome evil.⁹¹ The moral basis of this power is that the power used is relational rather than unilateral and seeks to respond to others as ends rather than as means, thereby avoiding instrumentalizing others as a means to a private, uncommon end. Lastly, both saw the need for prophetic figures that could awaken people from an unjust status quo. For Alinsky and Maritain, contentious political action was not simply appealing to an already existing moral register such as “American values.” Community organizers, like civil rights activists, had to exercise a “prophetic imagination.” Such figures were not propagating the false messianism of political revolution, forcing the people to be free, but were setting out new visions that call into question the existing political order while at the same time reformulating and deepening the justice and generosity available within it.⁹² Robert Fisher clarifies how the organizer acts in such a “prophetic” manner, noting that

[t]he organizer’s most valuable skill remains the ability to challenge the accepted vision of things.... It rests with the sensitivity that brings people to recognize the ways in which a deep and authentic commitment to “human solidarity, mutual responsibility, and social justice” demands a profound re-examination of the values on which their society, and way of life, is based. Such transformations of consciousness do not emerge without intervention and engagement.... The task for organizers is to tie people’s understanding of their grievances to an analysis that expands as well as addresses the problems, constituencies, and communities with which they immediately identify.⁹³

A point of connection that Doering does not identify is the common concern for a more pluralistic body politic. It is this connection that has perhaps the greatest salience for contemporary political debates. Alinsky and Maritain advocate the need for a genuine institutional plurality as a means of holding in check the centralizing and totalizing thrust of the modern market and state. As Alinsky puts it:

The best insurance of an open society is a whole complex of voluntary organizations, each with a large following and each so involved in action that they deserve and derive strong loyalty from large sectors of the population. Such powerful organizations would resist the surrendering of their power and of the loyalties of their followers to a central power. Therefore strengthening your organization becomes a high priority for the reinforcement of the political openness of our society.⁹⁴

Likewise, Maritain argues for a genuine plurality and a consociationalist conception of civil society as a way of limiting the power of the state and the market. Maritain describes the plurality of civil society as "an organic heterogeneity" and envisages it as being constituted by multiple yet overlapping "political fraternities" that are independent of the state.⁹⁵ Maritain distinguishes his account of a consociationalist political society and economic life from fascist and communist ones that collapse market, state, and civil society into a single entity *and* from collectivist and individualistic conceptions of economic relations.⁹⁶ Crucially, civil society constitutes a sphere of social or "fraternal" relations that has its own integrity and telos but which nevertheless serves the defensive function of preventing either the market or the state from establishing a monopoly of power, thereby either instrumentalizing social relations for the sake of the political order or commodifying social relations for the sake of the economy. Within this sphere there can exist multiple and overlapping and, on the basis of subsidiarity, semiautonomous forms of institutional life and association, forms that are not reducible to either a private or voluntary association. Indeed, in contrast to his overall theological framework, Maritain's account of a consociationalist body politic overturns the kind of divisions between public and private at work in, for example, John Rawls and late-modern liberalism more generally. As will be argued in Part II, Alinsky's approach displays what such a consociational political life that nevertheless seeks to discern and uphold goods in common might consist of in practice. Community organizing as Alinsky envisages it therefore offers an alternative imaginary to how Christian Democracy developed in Europe after World War II, as it turned to the state as both the sole keeper of the "common good" and as the primary or only means of addressing social and economic ills via legal regulation and welfare programs. What this alternative political imaginary entails will be set forth in Part II, but what can be said now is that Alinsky's approach points to what a non-statist, decentralized, and pluralist Christian democratic vision might look like in practice.⁹⁷ Indeed, Alinsky seems to have understood community organizing as just such an alternative.⁹⁸

Before moving on from the relationship between Maritain and Alinsky to consider the later development of the IAF, it is important to distinguish between how Alinsky understood the relationship between Christianity and broad-based community organizing and how Maritain envisaged it. Maritain reads Alinsky theologically, refusing Alinsky's own contrarian self-descriptions. In a letter to Alinsky he states: "All your fighting effort as an organizer is quickened *in reality* by love for the human being, and for God, though you refuse to admit it, by a kind of inner *pudeur*."⁹⁹ And in a letter to a third party describing Alinsky, he posits an inner theo-logic in Alinsky's work:

Alinsky's methods may seem a little rough. I think they are good and necessary means to achieve good and necessary ends. And I know (this is the privilege of an old man) that the deep-rooted motive power and inspiration of this so-called trouble-maker is pure and entire self-giving, and love for those poor images of God which are human beings, especially the oppressed ones – in other words, it is what St Paul calls *agapé*, or love of charity.¹⁰⁰

However, Maritain is perhaps too quick to claim Alinsky as a saint and in the process elides the ongoing tensions between Christianity and democracy. William Cavanaugh critiques Maritain's conception of church-state relations for so spiritualizing the church that he cedes too much ground to the state.¹⁰¹ In effect, Maritain subordinates the church to the political order and converts Christianity into a civil religion, albeit one that conforms to Maritain's conception of a mediating "democratic secular faith."¹⁰² On Maritain's account, democracy is not merely a set of mediating *practices* but a mediating *creed* to which all must subscribe if they are to gain entry into the public sphere.

In contrast to Maritain, Alinsky does not demand that the church should adopt democracy as an additional article of faith. Alinsky, as a careful reader of Machiavelli, is more alert to the tensions and temptations in the relationship between democratic politics and Christianity.¹⁰³ For Machiavelli, a prophet armed is far superior to an unarmed prophet. Christianity on his account makes humans humble, self-abnegating, and contemptuous of worldly things, and thereby enervates and undermines political order. By contrast, armed prophets such as Moses or Muhammad found civilizations that are strong and glory seeking and so foster robust political orders (whether or not Machiavelli's characterization of Moses and Muhammad is fair is another matter). It is in light of Alinsky's Machiavellian insights into the nature of politics that we should read his notorious dedication of *Rules for Radicals* to Lucifer as the first radical. Alinsky was making explicit the fundamental conflict between the pursuit of Christian virtue and the virtues demanded by republican politics. There is a constant tension to be negotiated between the transcendent, universalistic obligations and theological virtues of the Christian faith and the particularistic loyalties, materialistic ends, and potentially martial, self-glorifying virtues demanded by a place-based republican and democratic conception of citizenship.¹⁰⁴ Alinsky is thus more Augustinian than Maritain. For Augustine,

there is an inherent division between the harmonious life of the City of God and the kinds of social peace available in the earthly city. Such an Augustinian view does not disavow the peace of the earthly city, but it does relativize, desacralize, and critique it as inherently oriented toward immanent, penultimate ends and as inescapably inflected with patterns of domination.

It is precisely this tension that the political philosopher Ronald Beiner argues lies at the heart of the emergence of liberalism as a response to the problem of the relationship between religious and political authority.¹⁰⁵ Underlying Beiner's genealogy is an argument for the solution liberalism proposes: the privatization and interiorization of Christianity so that it is politically neutralized and the acknowledgment that liberalism is not an impartial arbiter, but a project of "civil religion" – albeit a philosophically grounded one – that purports to provide the values, virtues, and vision needed to bind people together within a particular construction of political order. In contrast to Maritain and Beiner, who from very different perspectives propose the same kind of solution, Alinsky's approach to community organizing maintains the tension between Christianity and democratic politics in order to simultaneously relativize the claims and demands of citizenship and to recognize the need for both political and religious authorities to give space to multiple loyalties. Politics, as Hannah Arendt argues, is based on plurality; without this plurality, the many are subordinated to the one. Liberalism claims to stop religion's subordination of the many to a single religious authority, but in the process it mimics that which it opposes. For all its vaunting of pluralism, liberalism sublates difference within a univocal moral-political order and thereby consistently becomes antipolitical when it becomes hegemonic, taking a technocratic and proceduralist turn away from politics. In its commitment to being broad-based, community organizing thereby affirms a genuine plurality, the relativization of politics, and challenges all religions to see themselves as but one of many transcendent visions of the good that must negotiate a common life with others through democratic politics. It is the making explicit of this dynamic through an engagement with Arendt and a broadly Aristotelian vision of politics after Alinsky's death in 1972 to which we now turn.

LATER REFLECTIONS: FAITH, CITIZENSHIP, AND THE REJUVENATION OF POLITICS

If the counterpoints to community organizing in urban politics in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were organized crime, organized labor, and organized religion, from the 1960s onward more movement- and network-based forms of social and political activism emerged. Today, community organizers seek to distinguish their work from these forms of political mobilization, campaigning, and "checkbook activism."¹⁰⁶ That being said, the need to embody and advocate a common life politics only intensified as single issue, interest group, and identity politics increasingly denied the possibility of such a good; and the state,

aligned with “neoliberal” economics, transformed citizens into consumers and clients exercising private preferences rather than forging a common, public life. Another key contextual change with which community organizing had to contend was the shift from an industrial economy to rapid deindustrialization in many cities, as well as the emergence of post-Fordist, globalized forms of economic production. However, this did not undermine the relevance of community organizing – in many ways it reinforced its importance. Arguably, in the industrial economy the primary focus of organizing was the factory and workplace. Yet, in the shift to a postindustrial economy with a greater emphasis on service provision (e.g., retail, healthcare, and financial services), it is place-based organizing that becomes the dominant form.¹⁰⁷ This is illustrated in IAF’s “Living Wage” campaign begun in Baltimore in the 1990s, which, in contrast to the Back of the Yard’s, support of unions, was not focused on a factory or sector of industry but on a city, its local government, and an array of institutions within that place.¹⁰⁸ When capital and thence production facilities are highly mobile, then key targets and partners in organizing efforts are anchor institutions such as schools, hospitals, and universities. Within such anchor institutions, capital and people are tied to place (for example, Johns Hopkins University and its affiliated hospital cannot be moved from Baltimore). Moreover, the public officials and authoritative bodies in charge of these institutions can be identified, a meaningful relationship can be built with them, and they can be held accountable for the decisions they make.

From the 1970s onward, there has been a rapid splintering of community organizations and the development of many different – and what, in some cases, came to be rival – networks. Notable among these are PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), DART (Direct Action Research and Training), the Center for Community Change, National People’s Action, and the Gamaliel Foundation. There emerged also a welter of more local initiatives, sometimes referred to as “neo-Alinskyite” groups. All these post-1970s groups trace their history back to Alinsky or a combination of involvement in the civil rights movement and an engagement with Alinsky’s work. Moreover, a number of leading organizers in these networks were mentored by Alinsky himself, hence the description of Alinsky as the “dean of community organizing.” However, this chapter continues to focus on the IAF as it is the IAF with which Citizens UK is affiliated and therefore, its story is the antecedent of Citizens UK’s own story.

Provoked by the changing political environment the IAF engaged in a sustained, if ad hoc, process of critical self-reflection and experimentation. After Alinsky’s death in 1972, two of the IAF’s lead organizers, Ernesto Cortés and Edward Chambers, undertook a self-conscious engagement with Catholic social teaching and the theological basis of organizing and came to understand organizing as emerging from the intertwined values of family and religion.¹⁰⁹ A deeper engagement with the Bible was central to this.¹¹⁰ The 1978 pamphlet *Organizing for Family and Congregations* represents the fruition of

this process. Largely authored by another lead organizer, Michael Gecan, it was produced as a collegial statement from all the organizers.¹¹¹ Against the assumption held by many, including Chambers himself, that what it said represented a fundamental change of emphasis for the IAF, what should be clear from the previous sections is that the emphasis on families and congregations represented a systematization and rendering explicit of what was already central to the origins of the Alinsky approach to organizing.¹¹² However, from Alinsky's death onward, what the next generation of IAF organizers did (and particular credit must go to Chambers, Cortés, Gecan, and Arnie Graf) was to engage in an extensive process of experimentation with the forms and methods of organizing. Through this process a number of innovations emerged.

First, Chambers and the other organizers systematized the work and put it on a more secure financial and administrative footing. This enabled a longer term and more stable involvement with the community organizations that were initiated. This was a major departure from Alinsky who was skeptical about ongoing and long-term commitments to community organizations.¹¹³ Second, they developed a commitment to institutional renewal involving popular education, systematic leadership development, and an emphasis on changing the organizational culture of local institutions so that they embody the desired changes. This involved a far more intentional focus on working with institutions as a whole rather than subgroups and informal associations within institutions that had, up to that point, been the primary point of engagement. Third, they began working in new contexts. Spearheaded by Gerald Taylor, this included organizing in the southeast. By contrast, Alinsky had explicitly rejected working below the Mason-Dixon Line. Enormously significant to the development of sustained models of organizing was the work of Cortes in San Antonio and the formation of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS).¹¹⁴ Fourth, there was an intentional focus on building multiracial coalitions and thereby deepening and extending the broad-based nature of the coalitions.¹¹⁵

Alongside these changes to practice were a number of conceptual innovations spurred on by a broader process of critical reflection. Cortés and Leo Penta were key catalysts in this. With funding from the Ford Foundation, Cortés organized regular seminars for Texas IAF staff with philosophers, theologians, and social theorists that included, among others, Benjamin Barber, James Cone, Charles Curran, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Robert Putnam, Theda Skocpol, Michael Walzer, Cornel West, and Delores Williams.¹¹⁶ At the same time, on the East Coast, beginning with the clergy caucus of East Brooklyn Congregations, Leo Penta (along with Douglas Slaughter and Sr. Maryellen Kane) organized a series of retreats and seminars. These included reflection on selected texts and conversation with invited scholars such as Stanley Hauerwas and Walter Wink. These retreats culminated in the "IAF Reflects" sessions between 1990 and 1996. These sessions entailed sustained reflection on the "public philosophy" of the Industrial Areas Foundation.¹¹⁷

Through these parallel processes a wide variety of philosophical, theological, cultural, political, and sociological texts were engaged. On the theological side,

Walter Breuggemann's work was felt to be the most relevant and significant. The political theorists Hannah Arendt, Bernard Crick, and Sheldon Wolin were felt to best enable the organizers to make sense of their own work. Evidence for this is in the repeated referencing of their work both in training programs and in the writings of the organizers themselves. For example, in an interview, Chambers identifies Arendt as the most significant thinker for him and he calls Wolin "America's finest political teacher."¹¹⁸ Central to the work of Arendt, Crick, and Wolin is an account of politics as the ongoing process through which to maintain commonality and recognize and conciliate conflict in pursuit of shared goods. And, following Aristotle, politics is considered as properly relating to what pertains to the general, comprehensive, or public order of a polity. This broadly Aristotelian conception of politics is contrasted with modern liberal and totalitarian forms of political organization, all of which seek to substitute politics for some kind of legal, bureaucratic, or market-based procedure. The focus here will be on Arendt and Wolin rather than Crick, whose work seems to have been less formative and had more of a crystallizing effect. That being said, the following statement by Crick can be read as a manifesto for what organizers mean by the term "politics":

Politics arises ... in organized states which recognize themselves to be an aggregate of many members, not a single tribe, religion, interest or tradition. Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule. It does not matter much how that unit came to be – by custom, conquest, or geographical circumstance. What does matter is that its social structure, unlike some primitive societies, is sufficiently complex and divided to make politics a plausible response to the problem of governing it, the problem of maintaining order at all.... For politics represents at least some tolerance of differing truths, some recognition that government is possible, indeed best conducted, amid the open canvassing of rival interests.¹¹⁹

The point of politics within this account is to identify points of connection and mutuality between diverse interests and loyalties.¹²⁰ As political theorist and former organizer Harry Boyte notes, the aim of this kind of politics "is not to do away with ambiguity and the conflicts it entails. The aim is rather to avoid violence, to contain conflicts, to generate common work on common challenges, and to achieve broadly beneficial public outcomes."¹²¹ The IAF organizer Gerald Taylor suggests that this approach to politics "means being able to negotiate and compromise. It means understanding that people are not necessarily evil because they have different interests or ways of looking at the world."¹²²

The kind of conception of politics envisaged here is very different to that which tends to equate politics with legal and bureaucratic procedures and decisions. Such a vision restricts politics to pressure on and action by state agencies rather than the negotiation of a common life between multiple actors, with the state being only one among many players. Wolin developed the fullest articulation of the contrast between politics and proceduralism. He gives

an account of the centralization of sovereignty in the nation-state and the subsequent attempt to overcome political conflict within liberal nation-states through a combination of rational administration, use of technology, and the demarcation of the economy as the sphere of free, uncoerced relations.¹²³ For Wolin, the vital task in the contemporary context is the recovery of what he calls "politicalness": the "capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life."¹²⁴ In Wolin's analysis, the recovery of politicalness depends, in part, on local patterns of association born out of cooperative institutions and what he calls "archaic," and, in many cases, very "conservative" traditions such as Christianity. These provide the means for the recreation of political experience and extend to a wider circle the benefits of social cooperation and achievements made possible by previous generations.¹²⁵

Within this kind of account, community organizing constitutes an important way of rejuvenating politicalness. It acts as a "catalyst," providing what organizers often refer to as "agitation" for archaic traditions. As Penta and Chambers put it, IAF is a

catalyst that brings into relationship and reaction elements which without it would not of themselves interact, or do so only partially or sluggishly. For the IAF the elements are the wounded and struggling institutions which mediate relationship: families, congregations, churches, workers' organizations. These are both out of relationship to one another and internally fractured, yet they are the potential collective, the potential initiators of action, the enfleshment of a new public space and a new public process. The role of IAF organizers is to bring these disparate elements into relationship with one another gradually but persistently weaving a network of new or renewed relationships. This means moving people beyond their usual limits and experiences.¹²⁶

What the work of Arendt (along with that of the theologian, Bernard Loomer) did was help refine the understanding of the kind power through which the poor – and for that matter, any participant in an "archaic" tradition – could overcome their disorganization and act for themselves in public life. In stark contrast to nearly all other modern political thought, Arendt gives an account of relational power as a countervailing force to unilateral power or what she calls the "command-obedience model" of power. For Arendt, "[p]ower corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together."¹²⁷ Through acting in concert with one another in their families and congregations and self-generated institutions, the poor could resist the unilateral power of money and the state in order to establish public goods.¹²⁸ Such goods – housing, education, health, and so forth – were the basis of a genuinely common life as opposed to a practice of politics based on the individual pursuit of private interests. For Arendt, as for community organizing, politics requires a liberal legal-constitutional order to

establish its conditions, but this order cannot be a substitute for politics itself. As Arendt puts it:

The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds." Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it. It is as though the wall of the polis and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself.¹²⁹

Community organizing represents the recovery of this kind of account of politics as it arises out of common speech and action between ordinary people through one-to-ones, testimony, and a myriad of other forms of meeting. Alinsky's approach to organizing aims to stimulate the appearance of those who are depoliticized or excluded from the decision-making process, enabling them to appear and act on their own terms rather than be confined to either a private world of consumerism, a sphere of necessity where they are always responding to the actions of others upon them, or a disorganized arena of hostile, fearful, and broken relationships.

The more explicit, theoretical conception of politics contributed to another significant shift in IAF's practice. Prior to the 1980s, community organizing tended to combine political activism with service provision. This was the case right from its origins in the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. However, the development of The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) provides a salutary lesson in what can happen when political work and service provision are integrated within the same initiative. As Fisher notes:

As a community development agency TWO was a success, the shining gem of all Alinsky organizations in the 1960s and early 1970s.... But TWO was now a neighbourhood development corporation, not a "People's Organization." It was run by a paid, professional staff whose attention was fixed on development and growth, organizational stability, and professional competence, not on social change or even on serving the needs of all the neighborhood people. Predictably, neighborhood resident participation declined as technical expertise grew to paramount importance. TWO became just another business in the community, a non-profit business almost as removed from many of Woodlawn's problems and needs as the profit oriented enterprises.¹³⁰

In effect it had become co-opted and professionalized through a process of "institutional isomorphism," a phenomenon in which civil society organizations adopt the norms and structures of state bureaucracies and commercial organizations such that they conform to rather than challenge the norms and practices of the state and market.¹³¹ This is a frequent developmental pathway for many "third sector" or nongovernmental organizations as they shift from confrontation to coexistence. The question of whether it is possible to combine community organizing with community development programs sparked a widespread debate among academics and practitioners in the 1980s and into the 1990s.¹³²

Organizers addressed this problem head on by separating out service provision from the community organization. An example of this separation is Texas IAF's work with Project Quest (a jobs training and recruitment agency) that it had campaigned to establish with local government funding. The IAF had a close involvement with the project but did not directly manage it.¹³³ As the sociologist Mark Warren notes: "[T]he independent organizational capacities of the IAF proved essential to maintaining funding for the program and to keeping the agency true to the organization's priorities."¹³⁴ A similar pattern of maintaining a cooperative but critical relationship with service providers that emerged as a result of organizing efforts became the norm. However, developing and maintaining such distinct but related arrangements between community organizations and service providers have often proved very difficult in practice.¹³⁵

The development of a more clearly articulated, broadly Aristotelian conception of politics by the organizers helped identify the key task for organizing as not providing for basic social needs, as these can be met by state or other service providers, but fostering politicalness and generating associational forms of power. What became clear is that what was lacking in most civil society initiatives was an emphasis on building power and doing politics. Through processes of isomorphism, the boundaries between civil society, market, and state collapse, leading to the subordination of civil society to the demands of state and market. To focus on service provision at the expense of more directly political-civic work is to collude with this collapse and fail to address the real need: the fostering of political judgment among both the powerful and the powerless and resisting the substitution of politics by proceduralism, whether the procedures employed are legal, bureaucratic, or market based. While developing existing community assets more effectively through "bottom-up" schemes or leveraging new resources into a community is important, the primary need community organizing tried to address was the development of an alternative power structure to that which already existed.¹³⁶

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AS POLITICAL POPULISM

Having identified the streams of thought and practice that formed community organizing, we can now locate its emergence within a broader historical topography. To this end I contend that organizing is best understood as an extension and development of American Populism. American Populism has its origins in the broad-based and fractious movement that emerged from the 1850s onward. It reached its high point in the 1890s with the formation of the People's Party that challenged the duopoly of the Republicans and Democrats but declined rapidly as a formal movement thereafter.¹³⁷ Yet, like an event of nuclear fission, its half-life continues to be felt long after its moment of greatest energy. The vital center of the Populist movement was the midwest, southwest and southeast, with particular concentrations of activity in Texas, Kansas, and

Oklahoma. While primarily an agrarian phenomenon, its political impact came through forging a farmer-labor alliance.

The link between Alinsky and Populism is conceptual, genealogical, and sociological, as well as the taproot that community organizing shares with certain elements of the civil rights movement and other forms of grassroots activism.¹³⁸ However, there are good reasons for rejecting such a linkage when it comes to Alinsky. Not least among these is the consistent failure and lack of relationship between the constituency that formed the Populist movement and the People's Party of the 1890s (primarily Protestant "yeoman" farmers in alliance with miners and railroad workers) and the urban and predominantly Catholic industrial workers of that era, a lack of relationship that is central to the failure of the People's Party to establish itself as a third force in U.S. politics.¹³⁹ It was precisely among the urban and largely Catholic workers that Alinsky developed his craft as an organizer.¹⁴⁰ Yet like the Populists, Alinsky consistently and insistently drew conceptually on the Jeffersonian tradition of democracy and the Federalist Papers, which were for him a key reference point in his teaching and writing, combining these with Biblical analogies and allusions. Related to this Jeffersonian vision of American democracy was Alinsky's use of Tocqueville, particularly Tocqueville's notion of "self-interest properly understood," the importance of association, and the need to resist the *noblesse oblige* of the rich while binding them into the democratic body politic.¹⁴¹ Alinsky's references to Machiavelli can also be understood as a further point of connection. Machiavelli's treatment of Rome and his conception of an antagonistic republican politics where the people seek to limit the domination of elites, but which is itself vulnerable to the lure of "Caesarism," anticipates many populist themes.¹⁴²

If Jeffersonian republicanism interwoven with religious frames of reference represents the conceptual point of connection, then Alinsky's relationship with the labor leader John L. Lewis represents the genealogical one. John L. Lewis should be interpreted as mediating the legacy of the Populist movement into the U.S. labor movement. As already noted, Lewis steered a middle path between capitalism and both socialism and communism. In 1933, he told a Senate committee on labor relations: "American labor ... stand[s] between the rapacity of the robber barons of industry of America and the lustful rage of the communists, who would lay waste to our traditions and our institutions with the fire and sword."¹⁴³ The key point to note here is the valuation given to "our traditions and our institutions," a valuation that directly contrasts with the class-based analysis of socialism and Marxism that viewed the sundering of people's traditional communal and place-based ties as the prerequisite of freedom and political agency. For example, Marx and Engels saw tradition as a great retarding force, from which industrialization enabled liberation. Freedom from tradition was the necessary precursor for the formation of the proletariat and thence the true liberation of consciousness. Such disdain for tradition has been a common feature of most left-wing and liberal political theories.¹⁴⁴

In contrast, like the Populists before him and like Alinsky after him, Lewis worked with the values and traditions of the people, not against them. Populist discursive themes were the wellspring Lewis drew on by which to steer his middle course, themes that in the historian Michael Kazin's view had their roots in the "pietistic revivalism" and Enlightenment rationalism of America's formative Revolutionary period (as well as a third stream that Kazin misses: Calvinist covenantal discourses that shaped the "commonwealth ideal").¹⁴⁵ These themes came to fruition among the Populists of the 1890s and have been deployed in a multiplicity of ways in the ongoing tradition of American populism.

Kazin identifies four themes that shaped Populist discourse and the idioms of its inheritors. First, "Americanism," identified as an emphasis on understanding and obeying the will of the people. Second, "producerism": the conviction that, in contrast to classical and aristocratic conceptions, those who toiled were morally superior to those who lived off the toil of others and that only those who created wealth in tangible material ways could be trusted to guard the nation's liberties. This second theme was counterpoised to a third: the need to oppose the dominance of privileged elites (variously identified as government bureaucrats, cosmopolitan intellectuals, high financiers, industrialists, or a combination of all four) who were seen to subvert the principles of self-rule and personal liberty through centralizing power and imposing abstract plans on the ways people lived.¹⁴⁶ The final theme was the notion of a movement or crusade that was engaged in a battle to save the nation and protect the welfare of "real" America or the common people.¹⁴⁷ Lewis drew mainly on the first, second, and third themes, and for the first time in a populist movement, African Americans were seen as integral to the common people.¹⁴⁸ Lewis also embraced Catholics as key allies in the development of the CIO, quoting Papal encyclicals and giving a prominent place to Catholic clerics in CIO national conventions from 1938 to 1946.¹⁴⁹ Thus, where the Populist movement failed, Lewis was able to succeed in connecting populist sentiment with urban and largely Catholic industrial workers. Within Kazin's account, Alinsky can be seen as taking up Lewis's mantle and counteracting the rightwing drift of populism and the state-centric, technocratic focus of the unions that occurs from the 1940s onward. The four discursive themes Kazin outlines appear again and again in Alinsky's writing and in his genealogical roll call of who are the "radicals" he is seeking to "reveille"; he identifies the Populist Party (along with Thomas Jefferson, the abolitionists, the Knights of Labor, and other early labor activists) as their predecessors.¹⁵⁰

To identify the sociological link between Populism and Alinsky, we must traverse the choppy waters of how Populism is interpreted and navigate the crosscurrents of its historiography. As with the interpretation of many social movements, treatments of the Populists tend to be refracted through the concerns and sympathies of the historian's own time.¹⁵¹ The account given here confirms, deepens, and extends the case put forward by Boyte, who has

done the most to suggest that community organizing represents a form of populism.¹⁵² The contemporary consensus among scholars of Populism seems to be that it was neither predominantly socialist nor capitalist but constituted a broadly republican critique of the overconcentration of “money power.”¹⁵³ This critique was combined with the language of Evangelical Protestantism, the Methodist camp meetings, and Baptist revivals in order to generate a powerful rhetoric with which to challenge the status quo.¹⁵⁴ It was a language that cut across the color line, being shared by black and white populists, but which, at the same time, alienated the predominantly Catholic industrial workers in the northeast.

Within their principally Jeffersonian vision, the Populists saw a need for government intervention. Such intervention was necessary to establish the conditions for fair access to public goods such as transport, credit, and a postal service (recognizing that such measures would of necessity involve creating modern centralized government bureaucracies). Elizabeth Sanders, in her history of the Populists and their legacy, summarizes their approach in the following terms:

Its philosophy was anticorporate, though not *anticapitalist*. It sought, as recent scholars have established, not to turn the clock back on industrial development but to harness the new technological power for social good, to use the state to check exploitative excesses, to uphold the rights and opportunities of labor (farm and factory), and to maintain a healthy and creative business competition. The program was profoundly opposed to concentrated corporate power. Where concentration seemed inevitable, and for vital economic functions on which the well-being of the entire society depended, it was best that complete government control be established.¹⁵⁵

At the same time, consistent with their Jeffersonian vision, they developed the rudiments of a “cooperative commonwealth” consisting of a huge range of autonomous institutions, educational initiatives, and mutual associations such as cooperatives in order to address their needs without being dependent on the banks or the state. Contrary to standard narratives about the inherent opposition between a localist civil society and a nationalizing government, the Populists understood that while the state must know its place, it most definitely had a place in securing a common life and that it was sometimes necessary to organize trans-locally and generate institutional forms at the appropriate scale in order to secure one’s aims.¹⁵⁶ Inevitably in such a diverse movement there were a wide variety of people involved, ranging from doctrinaire socialists (of various sorts) to white supremacists.¹⁵⁷

By the 1890s the Populists sought reform in three major areas: land, transportation, and money. These came to expression in what is known as the “Omaha platform.”¹⁵⁸ Populists called for limits to land speculation; the nationalization of railroads, telephones, and telegraphs (as these were natural monopolies and so needed to be operated in the interests of everyone); the formation of a central bank directly responsible to elected officials; and a flexible

currency through issuing paper money (greenbacks) and the free coinage of silver (those who supported this were known as the "silverites").¹⁵⁹ In addition, the platform endorsed measures such as the need to enforce the eight-hour workday, referendums in order to introduce elements of direct democracy into the system of representative democracy, and a graduated income tax. Populists also came to endorse the "sub-treasury plan," a Federally backed farm commodity price-support program after the failure of local and regional efforts to break the crop lien system that resulted in the debt bondage of both black and white farmers.¹⁶⁰

What these measures amount to is, I contend, a countermovement against the effects of unregulated *laissez-faire* capitalism. The notion of a countermovement is drawn from the work of the economic anthropologist and historian of capitalism, Karl Polanyi. For Polanyi, the *laissez-faire* capitalism of the nineteenth century led to a process of "commodification" whereby unregulated, disembedded markets make goods that are not products – notably humans, nature, and money (the key planks of the Omaha platform) – into commodities to be bought and sold. The nineteenth-century alignment between the Republican and Democratic Parties and the northeast banking interest along with the subsequent imposition of the gold standard as the basis for a global market is an extension of exactly the process Polanyi describes. Polanyi argues that the formation of a global market system inherently led to spontaneous countermovements to re-embed market relations within social and political relations as populations and governments struggled to cope with the deleterious impact of an unregulated market on society and on nature. The introduction of regulation and statutory measures (for example, the New Deal as a response to the Great Depression) and political movements such as trade unions are examples of the kind of countermovement that Polanyi discusses.

Populism, which developed in parallel with the labor movement in North America, is another such countermovement. It sought to re-embed labor, land, and money within a wider social and political matrix and thereby inhibit the destructive effects of commodification on place-based political and social relations. In terms of the Populists' own frames of reference, *laissez-faire* capitalism seemed to be destroying the moral community and threatening the nation with God's judgment. The government, as the embodiment of the will of the people, needed to act to make things right.¹⁶¹ Such a view was expressed time and again in Populist speeches and pamphlets. To quote but one example, Milford Howard writing in 1895 states: "The spirit of avarice is devouring the great heart of this nation. The greed for gain gets such possession of men's souls that they become demons. They rush into the maelstrom of money-getting, and soon lose all fear of God and love for their Fellow-men."¹⁶²

As a countermovement, Populism was simultaneously "conservative" in that it sought to inhibit the liquefying thrust of "money power" and "radical" in that it called into question the status quo and tried to forge a new institutional and governmental framework within the processes of modernization, one that

would pluralize monopolistic forms of economic and political power in order to generate a more complex or polycentric space.¹⁶³ As a countermovement, and like trade unions, Populism was both a creature of processes of modernization and a reaction against the deleterious impact of these same processes, and so it is both modern *and* an expression of modernity criticism that sought an alternative path of development. As a countermovement, we can see the sociological link between community organizing and the Populists.¹⁶⁴

Framing both Populism and community organizing as forms of historical countermovement that share a conceptual, sociological, and genealogical link necessitates sounding a note of caution. Crucially, for Polanyi, countermovements can either be democratic or fascist. Indeed, one of Polanyi's primary interests was explaining the rise of Fascism in Europe in the wake of the Great Depression. Polanyi himself identifies the American populist figure of Huey Long as an example of a fascist countermove that was an "ever given political possibility" in every industrial nation since the 1930s.¹⁶⁵ Polanyi's conflation of Populism and fascism is strange given his own sympathies with populist movements in both Russia and Hungary.¹⁶⁶ However, as will be seen, Polanyi's own account can be nuanced and enriched through its encounter with the historically specific phenomenon of American populism.

Historical forms of populism are themselves democratic or authoritarian and often combine elements of both. For example, Peronism in Argentina and Huey Long in the United States are both examples of the integration of democratic and authoritarian elements (rather than being straightforwardly fascist as Polanyi asserts). This is what makes populism (as opposed to fascism) such an ambiguous political phenomenon. The Populist movement was itself a mixed bag (hence the contentious nature of its historiographical reception). Conceptions of "the people" are always contradictory: the people are vicious and virtuous, irrational and bearers of a nation's true spirit, a threat to democracy and the holders of sovereignty. The categories "democratic" or "authoritarian" are perhaps too blunt as analytic instruments with which to explain the paradoxes of populism, tending more toward labeling and stigmatization than rigorous assessment. After all, as Tocqueville observed, democracy can turn into the tyranny of the majority and produce a distinctly democratic form of servility that substitutes politics for philanthropy and paternalism.¹⁶⁷ What is needed, then, is a more conceptually crisp way of framing American populism, and thence community organizing.

There have been various attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of populism. Following the pioneering work of the political theorists Margaret Canovan and Ernesto Laclau, I contend that rather than being deviant or marginal, populism is inherent to modern polities.¹⁶⁸ For Canovan it is a contextual phenomenon that reacts to whatever makes up the dominant power structure and ruling hegemony.¹⁶⁹ Canovan identifies democracy as having two faces: the "redemptive" and the "pragmatic." When democracy, which offers government by the people, of the people, and for the people (its redemptive face),

is reduced to a mechanism for negotiating and resolving conflicts of interest and distributing power (its pragmatic face), populists "move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed."¹⁷⁰ Canovan is right to see populism as an inherent possibility in modern democracy and as playing off tensions within democracy itself. However, while her theory helps explain in part the Populist movement in the United States and its relationship to community organizing – both are, in a sense, reactive – her theory fails to account for how populism is not simply a reaction but rather constitutes a mode of political rationality that draws on practical reason, hence its seemingly antitheoretical position.¹⁷¹

I propose that it is more helpful when discussing the Populist movement and other manifestations of American populism to distinguish between its "political" and "antipolitical" moments. Drawing from what has already been said in relation to Arendt, Crick, and Wolin, "political populism" embodies a conception of politics that works to reinstate plurality and inhibit totalizing monopolies (whether of the state or market) through common action and deliberation premised on personal participation in and responsibility for tending public life.¹⁷² This can be taken as a summary of Alinsky's broadly Aristotelian approach to politics. This contrast between political and antipolitical populism seems to be tacit in the early training developed by the IAF. As Alinsky's biographer notes: "The trainees read Alinsky's biography of John L. Lewis and T. Harry William's study of Huey Long – and spent hours discussing how each had accumulated and used power."¹⁷³

With reference to U.S. history, Alinsky frames his approach to politics as being both revolutionary and conservative.¹⁷⁴ It is akin to the kind of conservative radicalism advocated by Wolin, who argues for the intrinsic connection between "archaic" and diverse historic institutions, traditions, and patterns of local participation and the ability to "tend" democracy and resist centralizing and technocratic forms of modern power.¹⁷⁵ As already noted, the emphasis on the importance of existing traditions and institutions distinguishes this approach to that of liberal, socialist, communist, and the majority of modern political theories that view tradition with suspicion.¹⁷⁶ Wolin's account of democracy helps articulate the interrelationship between Alinsky's conception of democratic politics and establishing a contradiction to totalizing forms of dominatory power. Wolin states, in almost a direct echo of Alinsky, that the aim of democracy should be neither equality nor nostalgic preservation but the restoration of

some measure of control over the conditions and decisions intimately affecting the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, to relieve serious and remediable distress and to extend inclusion beyond the enjoyment of equal civil rights by making access to educational and cultural experiences and healthy living conditions a normal expectation.¹⁷⁷

Political populism and "democracy" as Wolin envisages it can be read as synonyms.¹⁷⁸ And it is as a form of political populism that we can reconnect

community organizing with Arendt whose concept of "the people" (as opposed to the mob, the mass, or the tribe) converges with the concept of political populism developed here.¹⁷⁹

By contrast, "antipolitical populism" seeks to simplify rather than complexify the political space. It advocates direct forms of democracy in order to circumvent the need for deliberative processes and the representation of multiple interests in the formation of political judgments. The leader rules by direct consent without the hindrance of democratic checks and balances or the representation of different interests. In antipolitical populism the throwing off of established authority structures is the prelude to the giving over of authority to the one and the giving up of responsibility for the many. The goal of antipolitical populism is personal withdrawal from public life so as to be free to pursue private self-interests rather than public mutual interests.¹⁸⁰ In antipolitical expressions of populism, personal responsibility is for improvement of the self, one's immediate family, institution (e.g., a congregation), or community disconnected from the interdependence of any such project of improvement with the care of the public institutions, liberties, rule of law, physical infrastructure, and natural resources that make up the commonwealth on which all depend.

Alinsky's approach to community organizing shares a number of elements with antipolitical populism. These include: the emphasis on strong leaders; the dichotomization and simplification of issues; the use and advocacy of direct forms of rule; a certain romanticization of the wisdom of ordinary people; the formation of cross-class coalitions; a localism that distrusts universalist ideologies and the prioritizing of international issues; a distrust of party politics, elites, and bureaucracy; a suspicion of theory and an envisaging of itself as pragmatist; the use of affective rituals and symbols to generate a sense of unity; a demand for loyalty to leader and group; and the mobilization of dissent through the organizing theme of ordinary people/non-elites as both the subject of grievance and the means of correction.

The key differences between political and antipolitical populism are fourfold. First, the orientations and sentiments in political populism are put in the service of forging a political space not limiting, subverting, or closing it down. Second, political populism invests in long-term organization and education (the role of the "lecturer" in the Populist movement and the "organizer" in community organizing). Third, political populism develops a broad base of local leaders rather than relying on one charismatic leader and short-term mobilization of people who are focused not on loyalty to each other and a common life but on the single leader and the cause or issue.¹⁸¹ Lastly, while both political and antipolitical populists frame their proposals as moral imperatives, political populists believe that, in the words of Alinsky, "compromise is a key and beautiful word."¹⁸² In short, political populism seeks to generate a common life as opposed to a politics dominated by the interests of the one, the few, or the many. Such a common life politics is encapsulated

in the closing peroration given at an IAF assembly in Baltimore in 1987 by Reverend Grady Yeargin:

One day it will be said that in the city of Baltimore in the last quarter of the twentieth century, strange and unusual things began to happen. Well known somebodies with something from someplace began to meet with little-known nobodies from noplaces. The upper crust began to meet with the middle crust and with those who have no crust at all. It was a peculiar people. A strange and unusual coalition that negotiated and fought and worked together.¹⁸³

Kazin tells a declension narrative about the “conservative capture” of populism in the U.S. from the 1940s onward. By contrast, the historian Richard Hofstadter gives an ascension narrative about a move from populism to progress. The conceptualization of populism suggested here allows for a more nuanced account.¹⁸⁴ Populism in the U.S. contains political and antipolitical elements and sometimes these elements receive a greater or lesser emphasis within particular expressions of populism.¹⁸⁵ We can contrast the various expressions of primarily antipolitical populism such as Father Coughlin and the Coughlinites of the late 1930s, McCarthyism, Ross Perot, and most recently the Tea Party movement with the primarily political populism of the IAF and other broad-based community organizations such as PICO, Gamaliel, National People’s Action, the development of “community unionism,” and the self-described “new populists” such as Harry Boyte, Heather Booth, and, within the Roman Catholic Church, Monsignor Geno Baroni.¹⁸⁶

Alinsky’s criticism of state welfare programs, the “apostles of planning,” and nongovernmental charity illustrate his political populism.¹⁸⁷ He saw such endeavors as paternalism and the actions of elites that failed to address the real needs of people, which served to reinforce existing structures of injustice and undermined people’s dignity.¹⁸⁸ Expressing central themes of populism, Alinsky’s approach to social, economic, and political injustice aimed to empower those excluded so that they could take responsibility and act for themselves and thereby forge a common world with (rather than against) the existing power holders. This is summarized in the “iron rule” of community organizing: “never do for others what they can do for themselves” – a maxim that is almost a perfect distillation of populist political rationality. Nevertheless, the potential for community organizations to drift from political to antipolitical populism is illustrated by the history of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, which by the 1960s had become vehemently racist and protectionist – a development that deeply grieved Alinsky. It is its populism that helps explain the constant apprehension and nervous responses that community organizing has provoked among liberals and the rhetorical basis of its appeal to “conservative” constituencies.

The roots of organizing in American populism are a hindrance when it is transplanted to other cultural contexts. For example, in the United Kingdom, the lack of available and identifiable populist idioms has meant that the training itself has become a kind of induction into a new language rather than an

extension and redirection of an existing, readily available vocabulary.¹⁸⁹ The constant danger in the British context is not that there will be a drift into anti-political populism, but that community organizing will become reduced to a technique or method of political mobilization as it struggles to embed itself in the lived traditions and values of its member institutions, divorced as it is from any wider cultural-historical frame of reference with which participants can instinctively identify community organizing.¹⁹⁰ Within London Citizens, this is played out in the tension between using frames of reference steeped in the discourses of liberalism and human rights and those that draw from religious and historical narratives and analogies. Such tensions will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5 through an examination of the repertoires of community organizing.

THRESHOLD

This is not the place to rehearse all the “rules” that Alinsky himself spelled out in his own writing. However, there are a number of salutary lessons that the origins of community organizing suggest for its future prospects. For in the formation of the practice we see displayed a number of temptations that constantly present themselves to organizing efforts and which have at times overwhelmed some IAF and other Alinsky-style initiatives.

First, organizing grew out of neighborhood organizing, and Alinsky judged place so important that he even included it in the name of the organization he founded: the *Industrial Areas* Foundation. There is a temptation to ignore the neighborhood and the city amid the clamor for regionally, nationally, or globally “effective” action. A consistent critique of all community organizing efforts is that they operate at the wrong scale to have any effective power: first it was said they were too focused on the neighborhood and ignored the city-wide scale, then it was argued that they ignored the national scale, and now contemporary critics say organizing efforts lack a sufficiently global scale to be effective. Yet if the people are the program, then one can only really listen to people and build relationships between them within particular places and the “natural area” in which they connect. Without sufficient attention to place, organizing ceases to be a relational politics; in fact, it ceases to be politics at all in the sense that Arendt, Crick, and Wolin define the term, and becomes just another form of proceduralism. The challenge for community organizing now is addressing how to maintain a place-based, relational politics that is at the same time attentive to the dynamics of globalization. This challenge will be addressed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Second, if urban ethnography emphasizes the importance of listening to and observing the people and places to be organized in systematic, in-depth, and disciplined ways, then the temptation is not to listen and really pay attention, but to engage instead in a shallow or rushed analysis of the social, political, and economic context. The mechanics of how to listen, develop an analysis,

and thence forge public action appropriate to the context is examined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Third, over and above acting according to some predetermined program or agenda that claims to know better what people really need, there is the temptation to instrumentalize the people and institutions being organized, rendering them campaign fodder even while working within their experience. Here the problem is not giving enough attention to building relationships and honoring familial, religious, and other social obligations by turning everything into an opportunity for action. Organizing grew out of traditions such as Judaism, the labor movement, and Roman Catholicism that built institutions to support cooperative enterprises, mutual responsibility, and committed, faithful relationships as exemplified in the family. Nurturing and sustaining these relationships requires virtue and moral vision. However good its intentions, a politics without such piety is pitiless and impoverished. Conversely, piety without any politics is pitiful, as it has no means to challenge, protect, and pursue the very relationships it loves and values most in the face of their erosion and co-option by the market and the state. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the thesis that organizing efforts that fail to pay heed to the health of the moral vision, virtue, and associational life of its people and its organizers will leave untended not only the basis of its political vision, but also the basis of its ability to make rational political judgments.

Fourth, in Judaism and the early labor movement there was an emphasis on self-organization and not turning to the state as either the bearer of a moral vision or the first port of call to resolve problems or provide for needs. This was an insight the labor movement lost as it turned to the state and the national arena as the proper domain of political action and welfare provision. There is a constant temptation in organizing to go the same way and render itself unto Caesar first rather than encourage its constituent members to take direct responsibility for matters themselves and only turn to the state where it is necessary and appropriate. The implications of this insight will be explored in Chapter 8.

As should be clear, Alinsky's approach emerged as primarily an urban practice of politics. Yet, as the link to Populism suggests, its historical roots lie in forms of political action first developed among agrarian radicals of the nineteenth century. And early civil rights organizers such as Septima Clark and Ella Baker developed a parallel approach to Alinsky in the largely rural southern states. Moreover, those mentored by Alinsky adapted his approach to a variety of nonurban and non-Western settings. Therefore, community organizing is not an exclusively urban or Western phenomenon. However, it was within urban conditions that the kinds of processes to which community organizing is a response are felt most intensely and displayed most acutely. In Chapters 2 and 3 we turn from Chicago to London to discern how the practice of organizing that Alinsky crystallized has evolved and been developed to address the dynamics of globalization as they manifest themselves in a world city.

Faith and Citizenship in a World City

To see how Alinsky's legacy traveled and developed historically and geographically, we move from North America to Europe and, more specifically, to the context and work of London Citizens. The aim of this chapter and of Chapter 3 is to immerse the reader in one specific context – London – and some of the ways in which organizing was adapted to address the demands of working in that context. The chapters provide a backdrop and point of reference for the detailed description and analysis of how to organize, which is set out in Chapters 4 and 5, and the subsequent examination of the relationship between faith, citizenship, and the politics of a common life in the rest of the book.

We begin by picking up where we left off in the Introduction: the events taking place on November 25, 2009. The central figure of the press conference held at the coffee shop on Brushfield Street was Rabbi Natan Asmoucha. Rabbi Asmoucha's story is important because within it two worlds collided: the one represented by those gathered in the coffee shop and the other by those seated in the plush offices of Allen & Overy. Rabbi Asmoucha had hosted a gathering at the Bevis Marks synagogue on July 22, 2009. The Bevis Marks synagogue is Britain's oldest synagogue and centrally located in the City of London. This event marked the beginning of the process that eventually resulted in the proposals that were to be set out at the Barbican assembly. Given the history of the link between usury and anti-Semitism in Europe, it was felt to be symbolically crucial by London Citizens not only to involve the Jewish community from the outset (despite no synagogue formally being a member at this point) but also to launch any initiative from a synagogue so as to decouple the focus on usury and responsible lending from any association with anti-Semitism.¹ The initiating event involved Christians, Muslims, and Jews, as well as representatives from other members of London Citizens gathering at Bevis Marks before marching together the short distance to the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS). Once at the bank, they tried to present its chairman with a copy of the Torah,