Book review: Heidi Swarts, *Organizing urban America*

Maite Tapia


What can local grassroots organizing achieve in a climate of political hostility, decreased public expenditure, a crumbling labor movement, and a bleak Left? To what extent do the organizational infrastructure, the political strategy, or the “mobilizing culture” differ between secular and church-based movements? What lessons can be learnt from the successes and failures of community organizing in America? These fundamental questions are the thread running throughout Heidi Swarts’ book *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-based Progressive Movements*. To compare congregation-based community organizations (CBCOs) with the secular community organization ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), the author focuses on four local groups in two cities: ACORN St.-Louis, ACORN San Jose, the Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU) of St. Louis, and People Acting in Community Together (PACT) of San Jose. MCU and PACT are affiliations of two different national networks of church-based groups, the Gamaliel Foundation and PICO (People improving Communities through Organizing) National Network respectively.

Swarts argues that “different styles of organizing make different contributions to American urban politics and political participation” (xvi). Church-based community organizations, according to the author, develop a unique, innovative, and exemplary cultural strategy both for overcoming the challenges other social movements face, and for reconciling the tensions of American political culture. Through a combination of cross-class and multiracial membership, articulation of shared religious values and beliefs, ideological tactics, participatory democracy, and efficiency, these organizations are able to surmount differences in class and ethnicity, to link pragmatic self-interest to a vision of moral altruism, to reconcile liberal with conservative mindsets, and to integrate private life with public action. ACORN, on the other hand, excels for its innovative organizational and political strategy. This poor people’s movement takes on a more instrumental and utilitarian approach by focusing intensively on fundraising, house-to-house recruitment, and issue campaigns rather than on constructing a collective identity. ACORN is perceived as task-oriented, building coalitions, and using innovative insider and outsider tactics simultaneously in order to win campaigns. Since ACORN is a national, centralized organization with local and state chapters, it is easier for it than for CBCOs to mobilize coordinated national campaigns. As a result, this “low-class
“Swarts, Organizing urban America” has been able to empower, organize, and give a voice to thousands of poor and working-class citizens, winning significant victories in living wage agreements and low-cost loans programs, among others.

The author compares the “mobilizing culture” and the style of organizing of secular and faith-based groups in St.-Louis and San Jose over a period of ten years, from 1997 to 2006. The data has been collected through field work (1997-1998), using participant observation, interviews and documents. The author participated in numerous meetings, negotiations, training events and campaigns in St.-Louis and San Jose, conducting over 200 interviews with activists, staff, members, city officials, and others, and collecting data from organizational files, local newspapers and city government departments. This qualitative approach has resulted in four rich, descriptive case studies presenting, analyzing and comparing the mobilization capacities of secular and church-based movements in the two cities. The author’s decision to compare the rapidly growing, high-tech, sunbelt city, San Jose, with a declining, industrial, rustbelt city, St.-Louis, yields important variation revealing the influence of external factors.

The importance of this study lies in its emphasis on local grassroots organizing. Swarts, rightly, not only describes the significant victories, but also, in great detail the campaign failures of the local activist groups, unlike the bulk of social movement scholars, who too often pinpoint only national social movements, describing their cyclical spikes of success, or most public policy literature, which is biased towards national and elitist policy changes. As a result, continuous local community organizing remains under the radar, or ‘invisible’. Paradoxically, local activism is rapidly growing, involving far more American citizens than any other organizational form, channeling mass-capacity building into public policy innovation. Stressing the importance of local community organizing and its policy impact pushes local grassroots activism to the forefront.

Swarts is moreover going counter to two mainstream social movements theories. In their classic book, Poor People’s Movements, Piven and Cloward argue that poor people’s organizations and mass disruption are irreconcilable: the logical consequence of a formally structured organization with a mass membership, will be the abandonment of oppositional politics. Swarts shows that poor and working-class Americans can be organized and that organizational infrastructure and coordination is indeed indispensable. Crucial policy changes, such as the nationwide implementation of an anticrime and antigang program thanks to the efforts of PACT, would not have been possible without the full development of this networked organization. Another big paradigm in social movement literature emphasizes political processes to explain the emergence of social movements. Swarts, however, by focusing on the micro-level, demonstrates how community organizing has achieved significant gains even in hostile political climate by emphasizing the strategic choices of social movement entrepreneurs in selecting campaign issues and deciding strategies and tactics.
According to Swarts, in order to achieve gains or policy changes, a grassroots organization’s most important strength is its ability to mobilize members; the combination of organizational resources, strategic capacity (Ganz’s term, 2000) and “mobilizing culture” will produce this fundamental power to act. Indeed, as demonstrated through her case studies, the bundling of these three factors explains the differences in mobilizing outcomes. Instead of echoing the political process theorists’ term “mobilizing structures”, Swarts introduces a new concept to the field, “mobilizing culture”, which she defines as “shared meanings, norms and practices...tacit norms and values that are nonstrategic and underlie more conscious strategic framing of group identity and issues” (xviii).

This ethnographic study indulges the reader with meticulous and fine-grained illustrations providing rich insights into grassroots organizing. As in every other book, however, certain gaps still remain. First, I believe that Swarts’ theoretical contribution to the field could be pushed a bit further. She starts off by defining “mobilizing culture” and integrates this new concept in her case studies, but fails to give a more abstract, general model. How generalizable can this concept be in explaining outcomes? Where does this “mobilizing culture” come from? Is it inherent in the type of organization (church-based versus secular), or can it change over time? To what extent can the “mobilizing culture” predict the success or failure of a campaign? An organization can have a little or a lot of resources or strategic capacity (Ganz 2004), but what about mobilizing culture? In the case studies, both the ACORN chapters and the church-based organizations have mobilizing cultures, albeit in a different forms. Is there any organization without a mobilizing culture, and if so, how does this affect its mobilization capacity? Does a lack of mobilizing culture mean that the organizational infrastructure and strategic capacity must be buttressed? I argue that giving this concept more analytical strength, and comparing the case studies through an abstract, theoretical lens as well, would stimulate fruitful debate among ‘cultural paradigm’ proponents.

In her introduction, Swarts states that “the larger issue that motivates the book is the quality of American democracy” (xv). What she presents, however, is a micro-level study with a clear-cut agent-centered view, which does not leave any space for the broader socio-economic or historical contexts. Indeed, although her last chapter is entitled “American inequality and the potential of community organizing”, it gives the reader a bouquet of recommendations, without going deeper into America’s societal problems. To what extent do the grassroots organizations affect American society? What is the role of community organizing for a democratic America? I believe that bridging the agency-centered approach with a bird’s eye view would give more insight into the role of community organizing and its impact on American society.

Finally, in presenting her four case studies, two each in St. Louis and San Jose, the author does not expand on the potential collaboration between the secular and church-based organizations. To what extent do PACT of San Jose and ACORN San Jose compete for the same resources? Did each organization create its own niche in order to survive? Why, how and when do they build coalitions
and cooperate? To what extent would this collaboration affect their different “mobilizing cultures”? These questions remain unanswered.

In conclusion, despite these criticisms, Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-based Progressive Movements by Heidi Swarts is of great value for social movement scholars and practitioners interested in how the internal life of a local grassroots organization is critical to its success. This clearly written, accessible book not only demonstrates different styles of organizing between secular and church-based groups, but shows how seemingly underrepresented groups of society can become empowered, get a voice and effect positive change.

References


About the author

Maite Tapia is currently a PhD Candidate at the Industrial and Labor Relations School, Cornell University. Her main interests revolve around trade unions, community-based organizations and worker centers in the US and Europe. Currently she is focusing on member commitment, organizational structure, and mobilization. Her work also analyzes the diffusion and adaptation of core organizing elements from the US to the UK and Germany and how these processes are moderated by institutional, socio-economic context.

Before coming to the US, she graduated in Law (cum laude) at the University of Ghent (Belgium), pursued a Master in European and International Law, and a Master in International and European Relations at the University of Parma (Italy). After her studies she worked at the Institute of Labor in Bologna (Italy), focusing on European labor relations. Email: mt348 AT cornell.edu