



“Us Career Organizers”: The Making of Professional Community Organizers in Chicago

Clément Petitjean

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“Us Career Organizers”: The Making of Professional Community Organizers in Chicago

CLÉMENT PETITJEAN

Structural and subjective obstacles to working-class participation in political life are nothing new in the United States (Piven and Cloward). But since the mid-1970s a combination of socioeconomic and political factors—deindustrialization, the broadening of socioeconomic inequalities, the growth of mass incarceration as a new way of disciplining the poor, the decline of the labor movement, the tightening grip of money over politics—have further estranged the working classes from participating in political life. Against such odds, actively engaging hundreds of members of the working classes in collective action to better their living conditions and sometimes actual success are no small political feat.

This is what community organizing claims to be doing in many low-income, working-class neighborhoods across US cities. Community organizing is usually seen as a distinct area within the broader social space of “community practice” (Sites, Chaskin, and Parks). The organizations engaged in “community practice,” called community-based organizations, work at the neighborhood level, trying to address people’s most immediate needs (and sometimes forward their interests) and relying on the voluntary involvement of “the community”—a catch-all category referring to a group of people sharing a common identity, most often on racial and/or territorial bases (Marwell). While most community-based organizations “[combat] inequalities in wealth, employment opportunities, education, and representation in influential institutions” through social service provision (Walker and McCarthy 335), community organizing uses protest and direct action to achieve its goals. While it is often viewed as a means to empower people into a more rewarding sense of self and to “revitalize” US democracy (Warren; Smock), more radical analyses see in it the potential for bridging intra-class antagonisms and building working-class political representation (Talpin).

Because community organizing is the more explicitly political wing of “community practice,” it is necessary to look beyond the sole area of “community practice” to make sense of community organizing practices. One must take into account other areas of practice within the broader political field: union organizing, electoral politics, social justice philanthropy, and what Lilian Mathieu calls the “space of social movements” (Mathieu), all directly connected to community organizing. It is within this broader network of relations that the history and practices of community organizing can be made sense of. But while most of the existing literature on the topic focuses on issues of participation, democracy and citizenship (usually in a laudatory rather than critical fashion) without including it into “the space of social movement,” the aim of this paper, and of the larger PhD project it stems from, is to take a step aside and look at how community organizing as it is practiced in one city in particular, Chicago, fits within the broader social division of political labor. The social and political conditions of the possibility of community organizing, rather than its alleged effectiveness, are the central focus here.

This paper draws upon ethnographic research conducted in Chicago in the winters of 2015, 2016 and 2017. Over the course of the fieldwork, a total of 76 interviews, lasting 86 minutes on average, were conducted with community organizers, members of community organizations, staff from local philanthropic foundations, union officials, organizing trainers, academics, and political and social movement activists. I also engaged in participant observation, taking part in four canvassing efforts on the South and West Sides of Chicago, spending two weeks at the offices of two organizations, and attending a five-day organizing training, several public meetings and collective actions.

It is my contention that community organizing has professionalized into a “career” and that community organizers make up a distinct, though paradoxical, occupational group. After providing empirical evidence for the professionalization of organizing in Chicago, I will look at the contours of the occupational group of community organizers. Finally, I will argue that professionalization has not so much translated into the depoliticization of organizing as into an original division of political labor between organizing and activism.

The Professionalization of Organizing

Since it was first practiced and theorized by Saul Alinsky in the late 1930s, community organizing has always been supported by paid staff. The “heart” of organizers’ trade lies in their interactions with “leaders” of the community organizations they work for. The distinction between “organizer” and “leader” goes back to Saul Alinsky’s work in Chicago’s Back of the Yards

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neighborhood, which he then formalized in *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1946, and *Rules for Radicals*, published in 1971. While the “leader” should be from the targeted neighborhood and should be a volunteer, the “organizer” should be an outsider, who cannot be a member of the organization he/she is building; while the leader should be the spokesperson, the official voice of the organization – itself the “voice of the community” – the organizer should refrain from speaking for others and work behind the scenes to develop a leader’s skills and abilities to speak in public, whether it is during public actions or at meetings.

Between the late 1930s and early 1970s, Alinsky formalized and spread his own model of organizing to different cities across the US. Starting in the mid-1970s, as the mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s were receding away, the development of community organizing fell outside of Alinsky’s direct influence and spread nationally as a locally-grounded response to the downward cycle of mobilization (Delgado). This rise to prominence benefited from broader trends in federal privatization and devolution, which spurred the development of the nonprofit sector—and community-based organizations in particular (Marwell). The Alinsky tradition, and particularly the organizer’s outsider status, started being challenged from various sides, but the salaried positions occupied by organizers were never dismantled—quite the opposite.

Today, maybe more than ever, community organizers play a decisive role in building “poor people’s mobilizations,” to adapt Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward’s famous phrase (Piven and Cloward), addressing a wide variety of issues, from wages, healthcare, and housing to criminal justice reform, gentrification, and public education. Without community organizers, it is unlikely that these mobilizations would ever happen. Community organizers are full- or part-time paid staff who engage in “base-building” activities: “canvassing” a neighborhood through systematic door-knocking to engage with residents or conducting one-on-one interviews to recruit new members or to ask members of the organization to take on more tasks; identifying shared problems which could be turned into “winnable issues” and demands; designing campaign strategies to win tangible local victories; preparing for direct actions and planning public events; but also writing grant proposals to obtain money from philanthropic foundations, building coalitions with other organizations.

That the development of community organizing was accompanied by its professionalization is acknowledged by practitioners and scholars alike (Sen). But while there is consensus over the process, critics disagree over its meaning. On the one hand, writers like Jane McAlevey or the Incite collective, building on a rich left-wing tradition of critiquing the bureaucratization of political organizations and unions, have launched bitter attacks against professional organizers, who are criticized for hijacking power from their base and neutralizing the radical potential of protest (INCITE! Women of

Color Against Violence; McAlevey). On the other hand, scholars with a more sympathetic approach to organizing acknowledge professionalizing trends without criticizing them: political scientist Julien Talpin for instance views professionalization as somewhat inevitable “given the enormous amount of work needed to recruit individuals who are fairly remote from the logics of collective action” (Talpin 302). In both cases, however, professionalization is taken for granted without being defined or analyzed, thus obscuring the various social determinants that make it possible in the first place.

As Didier Demazière, Pascal Roquet, and Richard Wittorski point out, “professionalization” is an ambiguous notion to which various institutional actors attribute multiple meanings (Demazière, Roquet, and Wittorski). They argue for a distinction between two separate processes: on the one hand, the social division of labor and the formalization, codification, and crystallization of certain tasks and activities; and on the other, training processes. Therefore, professionalization is not solely about the performance of a given activity resulting in monetary reward—about organizers being paid staff, in other words. And because Chicago has long been at the heart of the historical development of community organizing, looking at the city’s “organizing scene” is a valuable tool to crack open the black box of professionalization.

Organizing Metropolis

Chicago is arguably the most archetypal place to analyze community organizing practices. It is one of the main community organizing platforms in the country, with the longest history and the densest network of professional organizers; it is also a city where neighborhoods and “communities” have played an important role in shaping social practices, more so than in any other city, some scholars argue (Sampson).

Historically, Chicago is indeed where Saul Alinsky first developed the organizing practices which he later formalized. In 1939, in order to better the living conditions in the Back of the Yards immigrant neighborhood, he set up the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), an organization of organizations bringing together churches, block clubs, and civic associations. After the success of the BYNC made him a prominent figure on the national scene, Alinsky launched the Industrial Areas Foundation network in 1940, in order to formalize and expand the techniques he had used in Chicago (Horwitt). In the 1970s, a younger generation of Chicago-based, Alinsky-trained organizers created their own organizations, training institutes and networks throughout the country.

Today, Chicago is home to several of these national networks (Industrial Areas Foundation, National People’s Action, Gamaliel Foundation), whose local affiliates are important players in the field. It is also home to powerful,

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unaffiliated community-based organizations. The more prominent of these unaffiliated groups include Action Now, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH), the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO), the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), and Southside Together Organizing for Power (STOP). In total, these community organizations bring together tens of thousands of working-class and lower-middle-class members; they employ one hundred or so paid staff. The tightly-knit “community” of community organizers is thus significantly bigger than in any other major US city, including New York and Los Angeles.

The increasing role organizing training has come to play since the 1970s supports the professionalization thesis, if professionalization is defined as the formalization of a certain set of skills that must be acquired through training. Up until the early 1990s, most of the training happened on the job: organizers hardly ever went through formal training sessions. Ron Celkis, the former executive director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, remembers his early days as an organizer in the late 1960s, working under former Alinsky disciple Tom Gaudette:

I remember, there weren't like formal training sessions, "this is self-interest, this is power, this is relation." It was all done through... analysis at staff meetings. Where Tom would use these principles, but he would do it in the course of whatever people's work. (...) Everybody had a turf, everybody had to work in that turf, and learn organizing, and then come to the staff meeting, explain what they're doing, trying to fit it in into a broader picture.

(Interview with Ron Celkis, February 3, 2017)

When Ron Celkis started organizing, the training of new staff happened during staff meetings, “in the course of people’s work.” The formalization of training meant that a certain number of “principles” were taught outside of the work day, during specific “formal training sessions.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, several independent training institutes were founded that formalized training curricula (Sen). One of the major national training institutes, however, was founded in Chicago as early as 1973. Founded by Heather Booth, a leading figure in the women’s movement in Chicago and nationally, the Midwest Academy’s original goal was to pass on tools and lessons learned from the Sixties movements to the next generation of organizers—women organizers in particular. Booth recognized that transmitting all the resources that had been collectively accumulated by “the Movement” was key to building a powerful progressive movement against the conservative backlash of the 1970s and 1980s. Today, the Academy’s five-day organizing training session is a *passage obligé* for most community organizers in Chicago, especially when they are new to the job. Over the course of a five-day session I attended as a participant observer in March 2016, I saw trainees learning

organizing skills and techniques. For instance, they learned how to use the Midwest Academy's "strategy chart," a five-column chart that helps organizers to rationalize campaigns and devise campaign strategies by identifying its resources, its potential allies, the balances of forces at play, its goals, and the path to get there. In the process, trainees not only learn a specific expertise based on a pragmatic, managerial approach towards mobilization building, they also incorporate a sense of social boundaries, a sense of their place within the division of political labor not just as individual but as *organizers*.

"Growing up, you hear about doctors and lawyers and mechanics"... and organizers?

The professionalizing of community organizing pushed further the division of political labor and led to the constitution of a distinct, yet paradoxical, occupational group of organizers.

Following Didier Demazière and Charles Gadéa, an occupational group can be defined as

a group of workers exercising an activity bearing the same name, who are therefore endowed with social visibility, who enjoy identification and recognition, occupying a differentiated place within the social division of labor, and characterized by a symbolic legitimacy. They do not necessarily enjoy legal recognition but at least tacit recognition, symbolized by their name, which differentiates them from other professional activities.

(Demazière and Gadéa 20)

This definition seems to hold for community organizing. What ethnographic fieldwork reveals is that while there is no official legal status or certification for community organizers, people in the "social justice world" in Chicago have a very clear sense of what community organizing is and how it is different from other activities such as labor organizing, advocacy, social work, or activism: they are clearly identified and recognized as such. Comparative fieldwork conducted in Detroit for two weeks in April 2016 showed that no such sense of a distinct professional activity exists in this other, not-too-distant city.

Like other social practices, what organizers do cannot be understood without replacing it within a broader system of differences and taking into account the other figures and groups from which they distinguish themselves (Bourdieu, 1979). At the same time, as sociologist Everett C. Hughes argues, the establishment of a job cannot be accounted for without looking at the other professional tasks with which the job is directly and indirectly related (Hughes). In his analysis of worker centers in Chicago, drawing on Hughes's interactionist analytical framework, Sébastien Chauvin shows that the organizers' job is defined in its interactions with, and distinction from, four

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“specters”: the “activist,” the “advocate,” the “social worker” and the “enemy” (for instance, the day-labor agencies against which worker centers operate) (Chauvin). While the specter of “the enemy” does not play a significant role in Chauvin’s relational definition of community organizing, the other specters do. During the five-day Midwest Academy training, the first activity in which trainees engaged was role-play focusing on the differences between organizing, on the one hand, and social services, self-help, advocacy, and research and education, on the other. As Karel Yon and Nathalie Ethuin have shown for labor union trainings in France, trainings are part of the various sites where the meaning of union organizing is “administered,” shaping their members’ categories of thought as well as sense of belonging to a collective entity and enterprise (Ethuin and Yon). Hence the importance of outlining what symbolically distinguishes organizing from other collective endeavors at the outset of a training session for organizers and would-be organizers.

The formalization of organizing positions also opened space for “affirmative action” recruitment policies and a deliberate diversification of the organizing staff’s racial makeup. The example of the ACORN federation shows the deliberate efforts to “diversify” the workforce and to recruit “organizers of color” and women in order to more accurately reflect the demographics of the communities ACORN organized. Originally founded in 1970 in Arkansas, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now was, at its peak in the early 2000s, active in more than thirty states and claimed to represent over 500,000 low-income households; it was later dismantled due to a combination of internal conflicts and an all-out attack from the conservative Right (Atlas). Between the 1970s and 2003, ACORN’s organizing staff went from 10% to 64% organizers of color (Brooks). In organizers’ professional standards, an organization’s legitimacy in organizing (and politically representing) low-income communities is predicated upon its ability to “look like” the communities it organizes. As Jon Firestone, a Latino MIT graduate, who serves as the executive director of the South Side organization STOP, puts it, “given the racial politics in Chicago, there really should be a black person leading STOP, as the director.” (interview with Jon Firestone, February 20, 2015) As Firestone’s words suggest, racial representativeness is a social norm by which organizers must abide. Looking at organizers’ social background, the democratization of community organizing that racial diversification supposedly embodies should not be overemphasized, however. It is true that more organizers come from a working-class background now than in the 1970s and 1980s. But even when organizers come from working-class families, they usually are on an upwardly mobile trajectory and tend to possess more cultural capital than the people they organize. This is most perceptible in the case of African American organizers. Whereas 11.1% of African Americans in Chicago had a bachelor’s degree in

2011, out of the eleven African American paid organizers I met, ten had at least a bachelor's degree¹.

But just because community organizing has become “a career” does not mean, however, that organizing disenfranchised groups pays well, that it has become any easier, or that it enjoys broad social recognition and legitimacy. Field organizers usually earn between 30,000 and 40,000 dollars a year (in 2015, the median personal income was around \$30,000); they work long, difficult hours, both physically and emotionally. Although there are no official statistics on the turnover rate, it is estimated that field organizers usually keep their positions for two to three years (Talpin). This is all the more ironic since one of the informal “rules” of community organizing is that “it takes three years to develop a good organizer” (interview with Komozi Blake, February 12, 2016).

Besides, while all the organizers I met readily agree that what they do is their job², they regularly complained about their occupation's lack of recognition—as the absence of any kind of degree or certification illustrates. “Organizing isn't sort of a career track that's taught, you know? Growing up, you hear about doctors and lawyers and mechanics and... that sort of thing. But not organizers,” explained KOCO's executive director Komozi Blake during an interview (February 20, 2015). The “symbolic legitimacy” which Demazière and Gadéa see as a key component of an occupational group's existence is therefore not taken for granted. Community organizing then stands out as a paradoxical activity: it is highly formalized and rationalized, there is an entire field of organizing trainings, both of which are evidence of professionalization processes—and yet it enjoys very little legitimacy and recognition. I would like to argue that this unfinished professionalization has to do with the specific division of political labor of which community organizing is a part.

“Occupy pissed off a lot of us career organizers”

The fundamental effect of the constitution of an occupational group of community organizers is not so much the bureaucratization and subsequent depoliticization of organizing activities as the fragmentation of political labor and the intensification of the US divide between “organizers” and “activists.”

1. I want to thank Mary Pattillo for sharing this data, which she created from the Census website with data from 2010-13 for the City of Chicago.

2. On April 12, 2016 I met with Komozi Blake for lunch. At some point, he had to get up and take a phone call, which lasted ten minutes or so. When he came back, he apologized saying: “If this isn't a job, I don't know what it is, 'cause it definitely doesn't feel like recreation!” (field notes)

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In one of the very few analyses providing a general picture of the social make-up of organizers, Sébastien Chauvin argues that US organizers are “highly professionalized” and “usually have no activist background” (*passé militant*). Instead, they come from other nonprofits, from the academic world or from intellectual professions” (Chauvin 43). Chauvin does not specify further what he means by “activist background,” but if one understands “militant” in the broad sense of “engaged” (not only political, but also civic engagement) then the empirical evidence gathered in Chicago belies this analysis. The proportion of organizers who had no engagement experience prior to entering the job is relatively low; before becoming organizers, all my interviewees had already been involved in their communities (church, high school or college student government, student tutoring, political groups) and socialized to meeting attendance, collective deliberation and debate, and organizational tasks, thus acquiring dispositions towards and a taste for working with others and fighting against injustice (Teske).

That community organizing has not professionalized into a depoliticized, “9-to-5” career is evident when looking at the symbolic struggles over the legitimate definition of their work in which the group as a whole engages. As Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell have argued, the making of a specific occupational group implies collective struggles by practitioners of that occupation “to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control ‘the production of producers,’ and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (DiMaggio and Powell 152). I argue that among Chauvin’s four “specters,” the “activist” is the one against which organizers primarily compete for the establishment of their occupation’s legitimacy.

Within the division of political labor, organizing falls within the category of what Hughes calls “dirty work”: it involves repetitive tasks, lacks social recognition, and is overwhelmingly invisible (Hughes). Some scholars argue that “community organizing is neglected for the same reasons that women’s work in social movements has been neglected. Women’s work and community organizing are both, to an extent, invisible labor” (Stall and Stoecker 731). In organizers’ language, the distinction between behind-the-scenes organizing and social movements is couched as an opposition between organizing and activism. The opposition is paramount in shaping and defining community organizers’ activities and sense of belonging to a distinctive group. According to Louise Young, the organizing director at Action Now and a former “professional” canvasser during the 2003 antiwar campaign, activists are “idealists” who read radical books and attend protests but lack any real social base that they can mobilize, whereas organizers are “cynical” realists who painstakingly build a membership base through door-knocking, regular face-to-face interactions, one-on-one interviews, follow-up calls with the organization’s members and community residents (field notes, February 20, 2016). While activists do not

necessarily have demands, one of the cornerstones of community organizing is to *develop* demands from community input—realistic demands that can be won through building realizable courses of actions, called “strategies”. This dichotomy is deep-seated and it supports the kind of categories of thought and judgment that organizers learn to use as they are socialized to the “practical sense” of community organizing (Bourdieu, 1980). Hence Young’s acid remark that the 2011 Occupy movement, a symbol of (volunteer) activism rather than (paid) organizing, “pissed off a lot of us career organizers”: by not engaging in what Young and her fellow organizers perceive as legitimate activity (they did not go door-knocking, for instance), Occupy activists transgressed the norm of political activity by which organizers abide (*ibid.*). To a certain extent, it could be argued that the organizer’s role is similar to that of Belinda Robnett’s “bridge leaders,” who, during the Civil Rights Movement, “provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations” (Robnett 1664). But the difference between community organizers and Robnett’s African American women acting as “bridge leaders” is that the former occupy formal, clearly identifiable positions within organizations and within the broader political field.

As a result, and contrary to what most of the existing literature argues, community organizers’ practices cannot be fully accounted for by looking solely at their alleged effectiveness: the distinction between “organizer” and “leader,” one that is presented as central to community organizing practices (Delgado; Warren), is not in itself the analytical key to understand community organizing practices. As Bourdieu puts it, “the relation that the professional sellers of political services (politicians, political journalists, etc.) maintain with their clients is always mediated and more or less always determined by their relation to their competitors” (Bourdieu 1981, 9). To understand how the role of organizers was historically and socially constructed, it is necessary to factor in the relation between activists and organizers. The norm that organizers must refrain from speaking in public and must “let the people decide” (Fisher) conjures up the image of the activist who “speaks too much at meetings” and who speaks on behalf of “the people.”

The distinction between activist and organizer is real; it is in people’s hearts, minds, and bodies, but it is not monolithic: there are overlaps, and instances of organizers who participate in activist spaces and activists who become organizers. More importantly, even when organizers participate in social movements like Black Lives Matter, they keep making sense of what they see and do through the perception and thought categories they were socialized to—among other things, they keep thinking as organizers, “pragmatically.” This is most obvious in the following excerpt from an interview with Catarina Torres, a former Action Now organizer who then worked for the Fight for 15

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campaign to increase the minimum wage to 15 dollars, where she talks about her relations with Black Lives Matter activists:

When I was working with them [Black Lives Matter activists], they would say they were gonna turn out 500 people. They didn't, they turned out like 70 people maybe. And I saw it happening. I knew they weren't turning... (...) But I would be like "you guys have to phone-bank. And how many events are you doing beforehand to build excitement about 15 [dollars an hour]. And what's your goal for that event?" Numbers, numbers! And they don't think about it like that. (...) And actually, we had a fight, I think, over it all (laughing)!

(Interview with Catarina Torres, February 21, 2017)

Even if Catarina Torres tries to laugh away the conflict between herself and the activists, the anecdote illustrates the deep-seated dichotomy between "organizing" and "activism," one that exists both in concrete practices (phone-banking, "building excitement") and in people's categories of perception ("they don't think about it like that").

The ethnographic research conducted in Chicago suggests that the professionalization of community organizing resulted in the constitution of a specific, though paradoxical, occupational group of community organizers. But no matter how formalized and rationalized their activities are, they still lack symbolic legitimacy and recognition. This paradox can be accounted for by placing community organizing within the broader division of political labor. Organizers wage the symbolic struggles that define the meaning of their activity not against other "professionals," such as social workers, but against activists. Because of the specificities of community organizing in Chicago, further comparative research in other cities would be necessary to assess the depth of the organizer-activist dichotomy and the contours of the occupational group.

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