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**THE FUTURES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:  
THE NEED FOR A NEW POLITICAL IMAGINARY**

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What does “community organizing” mean today? What kinds of community organizing are needed now and for the future? Questions like these were the focus of a recent talk in Cincinnati (January 8, 2008) by John McKnight, a long-time Chicago community organizer and now Professor of Education and Social Policy and the Co-Director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute Northwestern University. McKnight first described a history of community organizing based on the experience of Chicago and then went on to characterize modern life and the lack of community in terms reminiscent of 1960s discussions of alienation. McKnight painted a modern world emptied of real community and urged his listeners to look for the gifts and assets in their own neighborhoods to rebuild community. Decrying the lack of community in our society, McKnight urged people to self-organize in terms recalled by Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

Questions about the role of community organizing today are especially pertinent in light of an exceedingly complex and integrated world firing on all cylinders at global levels. How community organizers come to theorize that emerging world—characterized by international flows of both capital and labor, the globalization of production and consumption, the near-conflation of governments and the multinational corporate sector, and where more and more of everyday life is impacted by the decisions of the world banking system, WTO, World Bank, and the IMF—has real consequences for community life. As modern day Davids confronting the Goliath of world conditions, organizers face a challenging task reinventing community and democracy within these conditions.

In this paper we offer a different political and historical analysis of McKnight's taxonomy of Chicago-based community organizing. We concern ourselves with analyses of history that offer a different approach in the struggle to restructure American society, one that places community organizing squarely within the economic and political forces that shape communities today such as globalization, deindustrialization, geographic segregation, and gentrification, to name a few. The lessons that McKnight draws from his history of the Chicago experience in community organizing are important, yet incomplete and ultimately disabling to his stated goals. There are other more enabling lessons to be learned from historical narratives of community organizing, which become evident when juxtaposed to the kind of analysis we provide here. Political analysis and practice are always linked, and a limited analysis will limit possibilities for action, but also for political imagination as well. We maintain that the kind of political analysis needed now can only come out of a different political vision, which in turn, can help organizers distinguish the political line of their work, hopefully moving them along from the liberal to a more progressive trajectory that we feel is needed right now.

In his Chicago-based history, McKnight described four types of community organizing exemplified by Jane Addams' Hull House; race-restricting covenants created by the Chicago Board of Realtors as a local improvement goal; Saul Alinsky's anger-based mobilizing to address problems; and his alternative of gift and capacity focused Asset-Based Community Development, the name of his Institute.

### **Jane Addams: Reform, Not Revolution**

According to McKnight, Jane Addams was a girl from a small town in Illinois who came to the city to create Hull House as a center of civic education for immigrants. While that is true, that representation ignores much of what makes Jane Addams interesting and important if we are to understand the trajectory of community-based organizing. Jane Addams was the daughter of a wealthy steel mill owner, an officer in the Union Army, who had been a friend of Abraham Lincoln. She attended to college in Rockford, Illinois, and upon graduation suffered a nervous breakdown, a case of neurasthenia, the illness of the upper class at that time. To restore mental health, like many wealthy young men and women of the era, she went on a two-year tour of Europe, imbibing culture and becoming influenced by new intellectual and social movements of the time. Returning to the United States, she was baptized into the Presbyterian Church and rededicated herself to the democratic ideals she had inherited from her father.

Like many educated and idealistic young women of her class and her generation, she could see no future in marriage and middle class family life, and joined forces with another woman, Ellen Gates Starr,

who shared her views and vision of social reform. The two of them founded Hull House, establishing it on Halstead St. in the midst of Chicago's immigrant West Side. Addams was concerned about the "social question," that is, the working and living conditions of immigrants, workers, and the poor. She was a founder of the NAACP, concerned to lift up and integrate blacks into American society. She was appalled by inhumane factory owners and disgusted by corrupt government. She turned Hull House into a social, cultural, and educational, as well as an organizing center for working class and poor people.

To what ends were Addams' organizing efforts directed? She established Hull House in the center of a hot-bed of existing community organizing by a variety of labor union and socialist organizations. She was a community organizer, but as a self-conscious opponent of socialism. Reading her autobiography, one learns that, in fact, she invited labor unionists, anarchists, and socialists to Hull House specifically to challenge their notions of class consciousness, class struggle, and the goal of socialism. She proposed an alternative to ruthless capitalism and corrupt government based on her Christian and democratic values. She argued against class conflict and for class reconciliation. She saw the Settlement House movement as playing the role of bringing the two sides together much as she did in labor arbitration between bosses and striking unions.<sup>1</sup>

Jane Addams was a Progressive, part of that movement of corporate elites and professionals who at the turn of the century also gave birth to the Good Government or Goo-Goo movement, reforms that sought to make government more efficient. Addams also wished to humanize capitalism and to democratize government, but she did not want to end the capitalist system then being transformed by the emergence of the great corporations. To the radicals and revolutionaries, Addams proposed a politics of social reform that led her to support Republican Teddy Roosevelt and his Progressive Party in 1912—in fact she gave the speech seconding his nomination at the national convention. Addams' politics later found partial fulfillment in the New Deal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Addams saw her role as providing an alternative to a socialist movement focused on raising working class consciousness and class struggle and aimed at a democratic socialist reorganization of the American economy. She offered instead the Progressive program of class reconciliation and social welfare that found political expression first in the Progressive movement and later in the Democratic Party.

### **The Chicago Real Estate Board: Race-Based Organizing**

The novel part of McKnight's talk, and an excellent contribution to thinking about community organizing, dealt with the role of the Chicago Real Estate Board in organizing community organizations in white neighborhoods in the name of local neighborhood

improvement. As African Americans migrated to Chicago from the South during World War I and again during World War II, realtors, whose business was based on an intimate knowledge of the neighborhoods and ongoing relationships with their residents, felt threatened. New black immigrants threatened to disrupt the families and communities that they had cultivated for decades. To defend themselves against this potential economic disaster, the realtors, united in the Chicago Real Estate Board, promoted the use of protective or restrictive covenants, legal documents that prohibited homeowners from selling to African Americans, Jews, and sometimes Catholics. Realtors organized community organizations in Chicago's white ethnic neighborhoods to promote the use of these covenants, and in that way created scores of community organizations throughout the city based on white racism.

What McKnight might have played down somewhat in his account is the role of white ethnics themselves, middle class and working class people, who, motivated by profoundly racist feelings, rushed to join such community organizations and to adopt such covenants, often enforced in Chicago not only in the courts, but also by fire-bombing the homes of blacks who moved into white neighborhoods. Nevertheless, McKnight's discussion of race-based, white community organizations is an important contribution to the discussion.

### **Saul Alinsky: The Unmaking of a Radical**

Clearly for McKnight, as for most who take up the subject, the major figure in the history of American community organizing is Saul Alinsky. McKnight told the story of Alinsky, the student in the Sociology Department of the University of Chicago, who got involved with John L. Lewis in organizing the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago to support the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Alinsky's experience of organizing in the Back of the Yards helped form his model of the community-based organization of organizations that engages in confrontations with corporations, local government, and political leaders in order to make social change. In particular, Alinsky created the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the progenitor in one way or another of many other American community organizations. For McKnight, Alinsky remains his mentor and an inspiring figure, even if he has now concluded that his teacher had only seen half the picture, namely, the glass half empty.

McKnight did not talk about Alinsky's alliance with and subsequent decision to break from the Communist Party and the American left. Alinsky had worked closely with the Communists not only on organizing the Back of the Yards and PWOC, but also aligned with them on the struggle against fascism and for racial desegregation.<sup>2</sup> While never a Communist Party member, Alinsky was a fellow

traveler who worked closely with the Communists throughout the 1930s. Gradually, however, John L. Lewis, the leader of the United Mine Workers and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, became his hero. (Alinsky would later write the stirring, novelistic account *John L. Lewis: An Authorized Biography*.<sup>3</sup>) Lewis was a conservative who had put himself at the head of the CIO in order to head off the Communist Party and other radical forces. Lewis was a business unionist who, after fighting to get the coal bosses to recognize his union, formed strong partnerships with them.

When Alinsky created the IAF he followed Lewis' example of collaborating with the powers-that-be. Aided by Catholic Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, Alinsky pulled together a collection of businessmen and government officials to form the board of his organization (1940). Alinsky's first members were: his friend Herman Dunlop Smith; Marshall Field, owner of the Chicago department store; Britton Budd, president of the Public Service Company of Illinois, the gas and electric company; Stuyvesant Peabody, owner of the Peabody Coal Company; Bishop Sheil; Kathryn Lewis, daughter of John L.; Judge Theodore Rosen of Philadelphia; and G. Howland Shaw, an assistant secretary of the State Department.<sup>4</sup> While Field, Budd, and Peabody were progressive capitalists who aimed at reaching an accommodation with the unions and other social movements and in improving conditions for working people and the poor, they and the others on the board were not people who challenged the assumptions and structures of the economic system.

Nor was the IAF interested in challenging the political system. Alinsky, like many of his generation, while initially skeptical of Roosevelt, welcomed the New Deal and the modern welfare state that it created, but took no public position on political parties or candidates. He urged community organizations to pressure the existing parties and the government in power to make the changes that were needed. He accepted that community organizations would have to continually fight city hall, the state government, and the feds to win their demands. Consequently, after the 1930s, he resigned himself to capitalism and the political system that had grown up with Roosevelt. He was cynical about the possibilities of profound social change. He had given up on a vision of a better society, and fought rather to make the one he found a little better.

In the communities where he organized, Alinsky's method, as carried out by the IAF, was generally to identify existing institutions and to find the natural community leaders, and draw them into an organization of organizations to fight for issues of concern to community residents. The result all too often was that Alinsky worked with the priests and pastors, the homeowners' organizations, and the increasingly bureaucratic unions that existed. Alinsky sought out those who already had titles, organizations, and a power base, and helped to them make change. Consequently, he generally worked with moderate groups whose conception of change was narrow. He

organized at the level of the parish and not surprisingly the people he organized were parochial. Having turned away from radical critiques of the economy and government, he had no critical concepts to give people, only tactics of confrontation. Unlike the labor unions that had organized by occupying factories and bringing production to a standstill, over time Alinsky's tactics turned from such direct action and became increasingly symbolic. The community called meetings and "beat up on," that is, criticized local politicians and government officials. Through the years these confrontational sessions became highly ritualized, exciting only to newcomers who had never before spoken up to the aldermen. The thrill of calling the local city council person a jerk soon wears off. By the 1960s and 70s the New Left activists, who wanted to challenge the racism and imperialism of American capitalism, were ridiculing Alinsky-style "dog shit and stop sign" organizing, the kinds of issues that IAF community organizations often took up.

The IAF itself became a kind of bureaucracy of community organization, akin to the labor bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO. IAF organizers were required to wear white shirts, ties, and suits, they were paid a middle-income salary, and they were trained in the organizing techniques following Alinsky's method. Alinsky's IAF, like labor union business agents, came to service dozens of community organizations around the country. Throughout more than 60 years, and even after Alinsky's death in 1972, the IAF continued, and continues, in the same methods without developing a more radical critique of the economic and political system that created the problems to begin with.

### **McKnight: The Glass Half Full**

McKnight's criticism of Alinsky, however, was not that he had given up his radicalism, but that he had remained too narrowly radical. McKnight acknowledged a place for Alinsky-style organizing, but he feels the approach was too negative. Alinsky focused on a community's deficits, the community's felt need that something was missing or wrong, rather than on its assets. He would stir up the community's anger at having been cheated, abused, or neglected, and then organize folks to march off to protest at a company headquarters or at city hall over the need for more jobs or better community services. McKnight saw two weaknesses with Alinsky's approach. First, it is hard to keep people angry all the time. Second, he suggested that today there is nowhere to take the march. This takes us back to McKnight's critique of contemporary American society: a place without community.

McKnight evoked Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and the young French author's astonishment at the American practice of creating associations to address all aspects of communal life. Tocqueville described a society where Americans joined together in clubs, societies, and associations to build houses, roads, libraries, and

schools. McKnight compared this to his mother's account of her youth and how one family member helped heal people, another helped them deal with their social problems, and others cooked and cared for one another. Today, said McKnight, we have given over all of these functions to others—social workers, teachers, and doctors, to McDonalds, and construction contractors—leaving no functions to our communities. Everything has been systemized and professionalized to the extent that people have become disconnected from their own communities. McKnight described the positive stance of his work—starting with a community's assets and capacities rather than deficits—as a fourth model of community organizing. He proposed coalescing the Addams and Alinsky models with his own work in asset-based community development to create a new form of community organizing.

### **An Alternative History of Community Organizing**

Before commenting upon McKnight's taxonomy of models of community organizing to address the current reality faced by today's organizers, we might sketch out another history of community organizing in Chicago. The alternative would begin with the German immigrants who brought their democratic and socialist clubs and paramilitary organizations from the Old World, and who when discriminated against by Chicago's city hall in the 1850s, picked up their pikes and guns and marched to defend their community. Some of those Germans took those units into the Union Army to defeat the Confederacy and end slavery in the South. There would also be the railroad workers who in 1877 defended themselves against a wage-cut on the Baltimore & Ohio railroad and did in Chicago as workers did throughout the East: struck the railroad and fought the scabs, the police, the guard or the Army. The center of the strike in Chicago was on Halstead Ave. just south of where Jane Addams would later open Hull House. Then too there would be an account of the workers of many nationalities who in 1885 and 1886 fought for the eight-hour day, until the Haymarket events when Chicago police suppressed the movement, ending the national struggle for a shorter workweek. That was just before Hull House opened.

Perhaps the most famous, Chicago-based organizer in the history of the country, Eugene V. Debs, led in 1894 the newly founded American Railway Union out on strike in defense of the workers at the Pullman Plant on the far Southside of Chicago. When the strike occurred, Jane Addams at Hull House would not use her reputation and influence to support the workers on strike, but instead engaged in vain efforts at bringing management and union together into a process of arbitration. Using the pretext that the strike was stopping the mail, the governor called for federal troops who came in and broke the strike. Debs went to prison, but emerged in 1895 a socialist and took many of his railway workers with him into the Socialist Party when it was founded in 1900. At the occasion of the most momentous event in the history of Chicago labor organizing and

perhaps in the history of American labor until that time, Jane Addams would not answer the question posed by the famous song: “Which Side Are You On?”

Throughout the 1900s labor unionists, Socialists, and then Communists continued to organize in Chicago’s working class and poor communities. When the Great Depression came and landlords began to evict tenants from their apartments because they could not pay the rent, the Communist Party organized in local neighborhoods to defy the Sheriff’s deputies, broke open the locks on the doors, and returned families to their homes.<sup>5</sup> Leftists also organized the Unemployed Councils in Chicago that fought for relief (that is, assistance) or jobs for the unemployed. During the 1930s, Socialist and Communists active for decades in Chicago’s neighborhoods were among the cadres of the organization of the new industrial unions of the CIO, in particular the United Steel Workers, the Packinghouse Workers, and the United Electrical Workers. This was the movement that Alinsky turned his back on to join forces with Bishop Sheil and Marshall Field.

While Alinsky’s style of community organizing became dominant in Chicago during the period from about 1940 to the 1960s, it was soon challenged by the more radical projects of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), local civil rights activists, and then by the Black Panthers. The Panthers movement so threatened the Chicago establishment that the Chicago police assassinated local party leader Fred Hampton in a hail of bullets while he slept.

What separated all of the organizations in this alternative sketch of the history of Chicago community organizing from the Alinsky and Addams traditions was their commitment to creating a different economic and political system. While they would not all have agreed on exactly what that was, for most it would have meant a socialist economy and a democratic political system. The point is that there was a long history and a broad movement of progressive community organizing almost always linked to labor organizing and to national and international politics that stood to the left of Alinsky. The community organizations active in Chicago in the period from 1870 until the 1950s were often linked to socialist organizations with not only a local, but also a national and even an international, vision of social struggle and social change. Alinsky-style organizing flourished during the conservative late 40s through the McCarthyite 1950s when the left was driven from the scene, and experienced resurgence again in the 1980s after the ebb of the New Left. In other words, it was the organizing style of the ebb tide, of the doldrums.

### **What Does Community Organizing Mean Today?**

If we are to learn something from de Tocqueville, Addams, or Alinsky, it has to be by critically analyzing their ideologies and different models of organization, and being on guard from falling



into nostalgia. Social, economic, and political conditions today are drastically different from the times of Addams, Alinsky, and de Tocqueville, but the irony here is that many of the questions faced by these historical figures are still the most important ones we must face now: Is humanizing capitalism enough? Can community be rebuilt without envisioning a different economic and political system?

These questions focus a primary concern in this paper—to distinguish the political lines between liberalism and contemporary progressivism, or to put it differently, between reformism and more fundamental social change. To what ends ultimately is political analysis and community organizing directed?

American society is at the historical moment of globalized neoliberalism where the state itself has been transformed to serve the needs of contemporary corporate capitalism. This is not some see-saw game where the state declines in light of the ascendancy of the market. It's more that the state has been reorganized to serve contemporary corporate practices and initiatives. In the name of so-called free markets and free enterprise, economic and political responsibility is only to the market, no matter the human cost. A primary objective of the political trajectory over the last thirty years has been to rollback the New Deal/Great Society programs and gains of the welfare state. No longer is the state the guarantor of the public realm and the whole body politic. As one social critic put it: "the idea that government will guarantee the welfare of all citizens is gone."<sup>6</sup> Others have come to call this new political-economic condition "econocide,"<sup>7</sup> which refers not to death by economic means, but to the mobilization of military ideology and practices to "arrange the disappearance" of those that have been left behind by global trends. Rather than radically address the global political-economic patterns producing joblessness and underemployment, increased geographic racial segregation, increased family debt, a stepped-up imperialist campaign to control land internationally and domestically, and the dismantling of the welfare state and the public sphere more generally—patterns that are behind the hollowing out of community and go unremarked by McKnight<sup>8</sup>—politicians knee-jerk their way to enact militaristic measures such as more police, more jail space, more anti-panhandling legislation, more police sweeps, more surveillance cameras.<sup>9</sup>

Such are the world, political-economic conditions within which organizers function today. And they are conditions that are drastically changing everyone's understandings of what community means, what democracy means, and even what social change means. Organizers have to face these realities.

The implications for not facing them are the further decline of both community and democracy. Organizers may not see how their mental conceptions of community and democracy may effectively be limiting or counterproductive to their goals. Models of community

organizing today may actually be disempowering in a new world order where forces are played out globally. Organizers need to rethink the parameters of “community organizing,” and to look at their work through an internationalist lens, in effect, to see how global forces and local conditions intersect and move through each other in a myriad of ways. One of the great lessons of many community organizing efforts of the 1960s and 70s was that groups sought to understand their own contexts in light of liberation movements worldwide. Links were made. Learning exchanged. Organizing at the community level today may not be enough—the focus is too parochial, accentuating one piece of turf, one constituency. It is too much a practice of self-interest. Instead of community organizing we need social movement building that spans geography.

As one example, today many immigrant organizations organize not only locally, but also internationally. In particular, the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities brings together grassroots Latino immigrant organizations throughout the United States and also helps immigrants to organize in their home countries. Even a local group such as the Immigrant Workers Project in Ohio, sponsored by Catholic Rural life, organizes in Ohio but also back home. Immigrants in Chicago who come from Michoacan have a dense network of connections between Chicago and their home state in Mexico. As well, many local community organizing groups participate in gatherings such as the U.S. Social Forum and the World Social Forum. The most local community organizing must now also be national and international in perspective.

To this end, organizers need to envision their work as countering corporate hegemony and globalization. The fight against corporate power represents another phase in the fight against imperialism and colonialism. This may sound old hat, but organizing based on the theoretical foundation of anti-colonialism may be precisely what we need right now. Take Cincinnati and Over-the-Rhine for example. At a time when public funds and corporate demands merge, gentrification becomes straight-up urban policy, a new form of ‘urban colonialism’ where private entrepreneurialism and public governance become indistinguishable. Poor people, especially those of color, are not so much the victims of the new urban colonialism as they are targets for removal. Of course, this is not how the alliance of city and corporate powers cast it. They extol the virtues of the private market to produce an “economic mix,” characterized by increased homeownership and economic development. But their claims are belied by their action to militarize community space, which effectively criminalizes homeless folks and racially cleanses the neighborhood as the first beachfront operation in the full-scale occupation to follow. This is nothing close to economic mix. It smacks more of a domestic neo-colonialist venture to dispossess community residents of their land and to herd the “losers” onto the contemporary reservation—the prison.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion: The Creative Tension Between a Deeper Political Analysis and a Vision of Democracy**

We advocate for theories and practices that can move organizers beyond mere reform. We worry about analyses that do not go deep enough to characterize current conditions, and thus end up domesticating change efforts and restricting the bounds of thinkable thought to that which is possible within the status quo. Shallow analyses fall to a kind of political neutering that end up appeasing the status quo precisely because a more skillful analysis is not offered that could provide ideological direction in this time of alienation and disorientation. Fundamentally this is a pedagogical question: What do community organizers and social movements need to learn to create, social, economic and political transformation?

As McKnight rightly argues in his *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits*, nearly every system in the United States is breaking down: Education, healthcare, human services, criminal justice; to which we would add the economic and political systems. Providing a political analysis of this current reality so that new narratives can guide social change is a primary challenge. A new political imaginary—a differently imagined political future—is in desperate need of construction. The implications for not imagining a different future based upon a deeper analysis are serious. As we have argued, organizers may not see their work in light of how corporations dominate the American economy nor the complicit role that political parties and government have played in that dominance. Organizers may not contextualize their communities within the world of economic and political developments, nor the decline of American industry. They may not look at their work through an internationalist lens. They may not see that colonialism has a domestic dimension, displacing lower income families from their communities through the militarization of urban space and the onslaught of gentrification. Organizers may not come to see their work as needing to be explicitly counter-hegemonic and perhaps anti-corporate so they don't end up re-establishing the rules of the present system.<sup>11</sup>

McKnight spoke passionately and abstractly about the lack of community and about how neighborhoods today are mostly hollow vessels, but we need more work discussing the forces that have made them hollow. And we need to ask what forces might create a new community, a democratic human community.

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## **Notes**

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- <sup>1</sup> Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* [1910] (New York: Penguin Signet, 1961), Chapter 13.
- <sup>2</sup> Marion K. Sanders. *The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), the section “The Making of An Anti-Fascist.”
- <sup>3</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Authorized Biography* [1949] (New York: Random House, 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> Sanford D. Horwitt, *Saul Alinsky: His Life and Legacy*. (New York Random House, 1992), 102-103.
- <sup>5</sup> Christine Ellis, “People Who Cannot Be Bought,” in: Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Ranked and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 10-33.
- <sup>6</sup> Andrew L. Barlow, *Between Fear and Hope: Globalization and Race in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).
- <sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Fisher and Eric Shrage, “Contextualizing Community Organizing: Lessons from the Past, Tensions in the Present, Opportunities for the Future,” in Marion Orr, ed., *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007).
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas A. Dutton, “Colony Over-the-Rhine,” *The Black Scholar* (Fall 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas A. Dutton, “Indian Reservations, Trojan Horses, and Economic Mix,” *Designer/Builder Magazine* (forthcoming).
- <sup>11</sup> For an attempt to put community organizing in context in Cincinnati see Dan La Botz, “Who Rules Cincinnati?” at: [www.cincinnatiStudies.org](http://www.cincinnatiStudies.org).