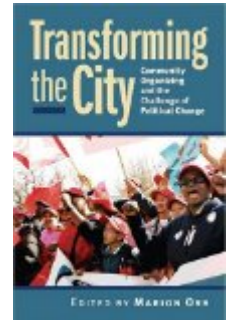


**Marion Orr, ed..** *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Politics of Change*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. 264 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-1514-8.



**Reviewed by** Sheila Radford-Hill

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Barack Obama's stump speech always includes a reference to his days as a community organizer in South Chicago, a community that in the 1970s and 1980s was devastated by the downsizing and eventual closing of the U.S. Steel Mills-South Works. This plant closing was among that decade's most visible symbol of an emerging global economy as well as a harbinger of the massive economic dislocation that characterized the late seventies through the early nineties. Millions have never recovered from this economic restructuring in postindustrial United States. The political rhetoric of most Democratic candidates for president in 2008 tries to connect the will, work, money, and dreams of the working class to the revitalization of American communities. No candidate makes these connections quite like Obama, yet even he would benefit from reading Marion Orr's edited book, *Transforming the City*. This collection of ten essays discusses community organizing in central cities and how it differs in such places as Chicago, New Orleans, El Paso, and Baltimore, based on both the issues involved and the political economy of the specific cities. In addition to these case studies, contributors also discuss the

strategic ability of community organizing to foster progressive political movements and to influence state and national policies. Because the contributors developed their material together at working group meetings held at Brown University, each chapter reinforces the other. Similarly, the authors' insights strongly support the conceptual framework that they created to analyze organizing strategies and tactics and to provide an overall assessment of the field. Most of the twelve contributors are well-known sociologists, political scientists, and historians, however several have experience in community development, education, and social work.[1]

Three important aspects of this study on community organizing make this book a "must read." The book contains analytical discussions about the history of community organizing in the United States. Several of the book's authors discuss the nature of community organizing and how it has changed in response to transformations in American political culture. Finally, each author approaches organizing from the perspective that these grassroots efforts, including those that di-

rectly involve poor people in developing and implementing an organizing strategy, continue to make a difference in communities even as new modes emerge. These three aspects speak directly to those whose analyses of community organizing have predicted its demise; according to this book, the doomsayers' predictions are not sufficiently research based. For instance, Orr uses Robert D. Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001) and Theda Skocpol's *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (2004) to make a key point. He argues that their concept of civic disengagement does not adequately represent the experiences of low-income central city residents. In low-income communities, organizing is still an effective strategy for reinvigorating civic engagement.

This book's central premise, therefore, is that to judge the validity of community organizing as an aspect of civic engagement requires to go beyond general observations by systemically engaging the complexity, diversity, and limits of community organizing. The authors accomplish this goal through a series of urban case studies on community organizing campaigns. Most of the essays include micro-level studies about organizing for environmental justice, living wages, education, and immigrant rights. In addition, the contributors analyze organizing across race, ethnic, and class boundaries and also discuss how organizing is being changed by the Internet and by technology-based organizing models as well as by a new generation of Americans that want to make the world safer, sustainable, and more just.

Because the book is about organizing in cities across the United States, it takes a critical look at the urban fiscal crisis that began in the 1970s and assesses the impact of the crisis on several models of community organizing. In some cases, the organizing efforts described failed, but the essays present these shortcomings as a response to the changing ecology of civic engagement. These

shifts include changing political constituencies and the different structures of political regimes (or non-regimes) in cities across the United States.

The authors lament the fact that such reformist strategies as community development corporations, partnerships with business rather than (or in addition to) labor, and the emergence of professionally managed civic organizations have replaced more participatory forms of grassroots organizing. Yet, they conclude that these trends are in response to a political culture characterized by diffuse systems of power that are difficult to target and negotiate; the growing number of low-wage jobs that have replaced the skilled and the semiskilled jobs protected in the industrial economy by unions; changes in family structures due in part to work demands, including an increasing number of workers who are single heads of household; the increasing number of single wage households who are working full and part-time to make ends meet as well as the growing number of families that need two full-time wage earners to maintain their standard of living; and the hyper-materialism and consumerism that undermines collective action.

The book's weaknesses include a much too limited discussion of women's womanist or feminist organizing around employment, economic development (including micro-lending), HIV-AIDS and other health care issues, and antiviolence. The book is also somewhat limited by its focus on national organizing groups, like Industrial Arts Foundation and Associations of Community Organizations for Reform Now. While the authors concede that there are possibly hundreds of thousands of organizations and volunteer efforts working on numerous issues, they give community organizing a tepid rating because the "gold standard" of organizing involves affecting policy at the national level. What is lost in this honest and entirely appropriate critique is that there are other variables that have an impact on the poten-

tial of organizing, a few of which I enumerate below.

First, groups are developing transnational and multinational organizing models; none of these is included in this book's case study approach. Second, while acknowledging that local organizing mobilizes and helps to develop individuals' skills, resources, and consciousness necessary to remain active, the book contains a limited discussion on the implications of organizing for ordinary people. Moreover, while acknowledging that local organizing can empower citizens to think more deeply and act decisively on social issues, there is little discussion about the fact that organizing creates *an expectation* of change that may be necessary before local groups can coalesce around national initiatives.

Further, college campuses are important incubators for social activism. Increasingly, young Democrats and independent voters are as active as young Republicans on campus. There are a host of campus chapters, like Amnesty International and other global concerns groups, that increasingly link U.S. foreign policy to injustices in trade policy, civil liberties, and human rights. Social networking and Internet sites have become a vehicle for connecting organizations that fight for global causes in local areas. Instead of thinking locally and acting globally, thanks to the Internet, more groups are thinking globally and acting locally. The Internet is also playing a role in strengthening research about the field itself. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein's (with Don Cohen) recent work on social capital and civic engagement in the United States, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (2004), and Paul Hawken's latest book on the environmental movement worldwide, entitled *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming* (2007), are fine examples of Internet-based research and organizing. For instance, both books include data-based methodologies and research collaborations with

such nonprofit organizations as Putnam's Saguaro Seminar and Hawken's work with the Natural Capital Institute.[2]

Of course, it is difficult to write a book about a topic as dynamic as community organizing without leaving something out; so despite wanting to hear more about the points discussed above, I think this book will make an important contribution to academic and strategic discussions about the topic. As the landscape of community organizing grows and changes, those who are interested in this field will be well served by reading this book carefully and by using it as a resource to guide future discussions about local, regional, national, and/or transnational organizing. There is also no question that urban organizers and community developers will appreciate the authenticity of the urban landscape that each author describes.

Finally, as I read this book, I was struck by the idea that since Americans across the political spectrum are increasingly dissatisfied with the presidency and Congress, there could well be an increase in the type of organizing that promotes oppositional strategies and confrontational tactics. What the authors describe as slow-moving reformist strategies may yet be replaced by calls for more robust reforms and/or for fundamental changes in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. This widespread dissatisfaction may be one main reason why community organizing is experiencing a resurgence.

#### Notes

[1]. In addition to Orr, contributors include Peter Burns, Peter Dreier, Michael Evans, Robert Fisher, Mark Santow, Dennis Shirley, Eric Shragge, Kathleen Staudt, Clarence Stone, Heidi Swarts, and Richard Wood.

[2]. Putman founded the Saguaro Seminar to "significantly increase Americans' connectedness to one another and to community institutions." See <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro>. The Natural Capital Institute is a California-based non-

profit organization "committed to the restoration of the earth and the healing of human culture." See <http://naturalcapital.org>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

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