

Obama and the politics of community organising

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As the world's attention is focused on the United States in anticipation of the presidential election, Austen Ivereigh looks at the Democratic candidate's campaign and his approach to politics. How has Barack Obama's background in citizens' organising influenced his candidacy?

Whoever wins the US election, Barack Obama's campaign will be earnestly studied years from now. Not for decades has a presidential candidate so electrified politics. Not since 1968 has a campaign been so well organised. And never has one been so well funded by ordinary people donating \$5 a time. How does he do it?

There is something new about Obama – something a little hard to get a grip on. It puts some people off him. The “who is he?” question is not just a figleaf for racism; it's also because Obama doesn't fit easily into the right-left spectrum. From the start his pitch to America has been precisely that he represents a new kind of politics, one which refuses to slice and dice people into “blues” (Democrats) and “reds” (Republicans), “liberal” and “conservative”. “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red States,” as he once declared.

This can look like spin – an attempt to transcend ideology by embracing an asinine “third position” – but in Obama's case it is authentic. He doesn't have an ideology so much as a methodology, one shaped by his experience working as a community organiser among the inner-city parishes of Chicago in the 1980s. Here is the key to Obama's politics. He is the vessel of the hope of ordinary parishioners.

It was while working with the churches on the city's South Side that Obama, aged 24, discovered a differ-



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ent kind of politics, one that connected him with the black civil rights struggle but which had deeper roots still, in the radical tradition of Thomas Paine and the labour unions of the 1930s, carried forward in the US by, among others, Catholics such as Dorothy Day and César Chávez.

To those interested or informed enough to ask – as did Ryan Lizza for the *New Republic* in March 2007¹ – Obama is

very direct about this legacy and its influence on him. When he announced his candidacy for president in February 2007 he said the “best education” he ever had was not his time at Columbia or Harvard Law School but his years learning the science of community organising in Chicago. He was employed by the Developing Communities Project (DCP), the inner-city arm of the Calumet Community Religious Conference (CCRC), an alliance of churches which sought social change: it was here, he told the DCP three years ago,² that he found his calling.

The CCRC is an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in 1940 by Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), the pioneer of “people's organisations”, of which there are now more than 60 across the United States. The backbone of these organisations are church congregations – Catholic, Protestant, evangelical – in poor areas of American cities. Obama's arrival on the US national stage is the best advertisement for its radical brand of grassroots politics nurtured in America's inner-city churches.

After a fragmented youth and an earnest search for identity – his Kenyan father was absent from the Hawaiian home where his white mother brought him up – Obama found among the churches of Chicago's South Side a community with which he could build lasting relationships, a church (whose pastor, Rev Jeremiah Wright, would later cause him embarrassment), and a political identity. Using the skills and wisdom gleaned from Alinsky's writings and the training of professional organisers, he honed his talent for listening, learned pragmatic strategy, practised bringing varied people together around "self-interest" and developed a faith in ordinary citizens that would shape his campaign message. He discovered the importance of personal storytelling in politics and began to write short stories to refine his own. He learned the art of the "one-to-one" relational meeting, in which an organiser sits for half an hour with a potential leader in order to hear his or her "self-interest", what makes him or her "tick" – the core experiences that drive them. As he later recalled:

That's what the leadership was teaching me, day by day: that the self-interest I was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of issues; that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinions people carried within them some central explanation of themselves. Stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories.³

An organiser is not a guru or a messiah; not a facilitator, adviser, service-provider or do-gooder; not an ideologue or an activist. An organiser is essentially someone who provides the technical know-how for citizens to build power. When Obama tells his supporters on the campaign trail that he is but "an imperfect vessel of your hopes and dreams", he is speaking the language of community organising.

In his book *Going Public* Michael Gecan, one of the IAF's present-day full-time community organisers, describes the organisations which organisers help to build:

Our groups are made up of nearly three thousand congregations and associations and tens of thousands of ministers, pastors, rabbis, women religious, and top lay

and civic leaders ... They do not have an opportunity to do what citizens did in 1860, in a period where public debate was of the highest quality and public engagement was at its most intense. They don't walk or ride great distances with their neighbours, stand by the thousands in the hot sun, hear Douglass and Lincoln debate, then argue among themselves about the issues of the day. But they do the next best thing. They spend untold hours mastering and using the full range of public arts and skills. They learn how to listen to others, to teach and train their members and followers, to think and reflect on the issues and pressures of the day, to confront those in power who obstruct or abuse them, and to build lasting relationships with allies who support or reinforce them. As leaders in large and effective citizens organisations, they practise how to argue, act, negotiate and compromise.⁴

The leaders of these citizens' organisations are "ordinary" members of parishes, or mosques, or synagogues. They might be lay people, or religious, or clergy; or they are members of voluntary associations and other "third-sector" organisations. This third, or civic, sector to which churches belong is neither "public" – it is not part of the state, national or local, and has no formal political power – nor "private": it is not part of the wealth-generating market. It seldom figures in the plans of either the state or the market. Its key product – what is sometimes called "social capital" – will very rarely be mentioned in an assessment of a society's health and performance; nor is it counted as part of a nation's wealth. It is underappreciated, patted on the head, seen as "soft" – or irrelevant to the real business of money and politics.

Too often churches and other "third-sector" organisations accept this view of themselves. Many perform very poorly as institutions, with few good leaders and very little influence on the world outside them. Think of a little justice and peace group meeting in a Catholic parish on a cold damp evening, in a rambling meeting that involves signing petitions and getting pointlessly indignant about some injustice or other in the world, and you have both the image and the reality of much of this sector. Good people are given over to pointless activism or embittered scepticism or naive optimism – which is what people who are powerless take refuge in when faced with the realities of a world they appear to be able to do anything about.

Citizens' organisations in the organising tradition of Saul Alinsky are the opposite. They begin by addressing the central problem, which is lack of power. Its leaders learn how to manufacture and manage power, by which Alinsky meant not the coercive power of money or political authority, but simply the ability to act. It is the power to demand recognition and reciprocity, which is the essential ingredient of meaningful public relationships. Put simply: you bring about change when you have the power to be recognised by those that have the power to affect your life. And you build it by forging alliances constructed – as all enduring alliances are – on mutual self-interest. “The key to creating successful organizations was making sure people’s self-interest was met,” Obama told the *New Republic*, “and not just basing it on pie-in-the-sky idealism.”

In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama’s memoir, he spends 150 pages on his years as a community organiser, but there’s little discussion in it of Alinsky, the Chicago University sociologist whose insight was that to improve their lot the urban poor needed to develop some of the hard-headed tactics used by unions in their dealings with public officials and corporations. In the 1930s Alinsky created the Back of the Yards Neighbourhood Council – an alliance of Catholic churches and labour unions – which won a series of victories against corrupt city councillors, local meatpacking plants and criminal gangs, and improved the lot of the people who lived there. The Back of the Yards became the template for other People’s Organisations in Chicago, New York, California, created by professional community organisers trained in Alinsky’s methods and insights.

Alinsky had been dead for more than a decade when Obama arrived in Chicago but his legacy lived on in the organising school Alinsky had founded, the IAF. From the IAF Obama learned a set of rules – a clear-eyed, systemic approach that ordinary citizens can use to gain public power – which have their feet firmly planted in “the world as it is” rather than the “world as it should be”, to use a classic Alinsky phrase.⁵ Another “universal” taught by the IAF is that “the action is in the reaction”: power will tend to react in hysterical or morally degrading ways in response to a threat from the powerless. Provoking such a reaction is often the best weapon in the citizen’s armoury – and the best thing a people’s organisation can do, having prov-

oked it, is to stay cool. Obama’s preternatural calm – in contrast to McCain and Palin’s panicky hysteria – has been often commented upon in the campaign.

Organising remained central to Obama long after his stint on the South Side. He remained deeply involved in the city’s constellation of citizens’ organisations, attended organising seminars and served on boards of foundations affiliated to the IAF. He kept his ties to DCP and worked out of its office when he ran a drive that registered 150,000 new voters in 1992, which became the springboard for his own grassroots campaign for Illinois State Senate. “Barack is not a politician first and foremost,” his wife Michelle once told a reporter. “He’s a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change”.

In 1990, Obama wrote about community organising in this way:

Organising begins with the premise that (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organising people and money around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organisation can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership – and not one or two charismatic leaders – can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.

This means bringing together churches, block clubs, parent groups and any other institutions in a given community to pay dues, hire organizers, conduct research, develop leadership, hold rallies and education campaigns, and begin drawing up plans on a whole range of issues – jobs, education, crime, etc. Once such a vehicle is formed, it holds the power to make politicians, agencies and corporations more responsive to community needs. Equally important, it enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other, to reshape their mutual values and expectations and rediscover the possibilities of acting collaboratively – the prerequisites of any successful self-help initiative.

By using this approach, the Developing Communities Project and other organizations in Chicago’s inner city have achieved some impressive results. Schools have been made more accountable; job training programs have been established; housing has been renovated and built; city services have been provided; parks have been refurbished; and crime and drug problems have been curtailed. Additionally, plain folk have been able to access the levers of power, and a sophisticated pool of local civic leadership has been developed.⁶

From the start, Alinsky's people's organisations were very closely tied to the Catholic Church. An auxiliary bishop of Chicago, Bernard J. Sheil, was one of his main backers, as would later be Cardinal Bernardin. Alinsky was close friends with the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who encouraged Alinsky to write his bestselling *Reveille for Radicals* in 1946. The great Thomist, often considered the intellectual father of European Christian democracy, saw in Alinsky's people's organisations a microcosm for renewed spirituality and democratic citizenship. In 1958 Maritain arranged for Alinsky to meet Archbishop Montini in Milan because the philosopher thought Alinsky could give Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, some "organisational tips for stopping the Italian Communist Party from making further inroads among Catholic workers".⁷ The US Catholic Church's Campaign for Human Development (CHD) – which financed the DCP's projects in the 1980s, and therefore indirectly paid for Obama's organising – these days spends almost all of its \$8m budget on community organising efforts. The embrace of Alinsky's ideas by both the CHD and the Catholic bishops have led more than one theologian to claim that Alinsky has had the most decisive impact on the American Catholic social justice movement over the last 20 years.⁸

One of the reasons Obama downplays Alinsky's influence is that Alinsky's definition of self-interest could be too narrow. "It's true that the notion of self-interest was critical," Obama tells the *New Republic*, "but Alinsky understated the degree to which people's hopes and dreams and their ideals and their values were just as important in organizing as people's self-interest." Alinsky was more interested in mobilising faith institutions as repositories of resources; he was less interested in what they believed and represented. This was a deficiency remedied later: modern community organising revolves nowadays around the values of faith institutions; the self-interest of Catholic parishes, for example, is in being part of an organisation that can deliver Catholic social teaching on issues such as wages. Hence, in London, the living wage campaign by London Citizens – which reflects the Church's call for a just wage, sufficient to raise a family – or its Strangers into Citizens campaign inspired by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor's

call for a pathway into citizenship for long-term undocumented migrants.

Community organising is these days part of the culture of both Catholic and mainstream Protestant urban churches in the US – the IAF's training, for example, is part of the syllabus of a number of Catholic seminaries – and is increasingly attracting synagogues and mosques.⁹ Community organising has become the principal vehicle in the US for the renewal of politics by faith – something which the US constitution is especially favourable to.¹⁰ It makes sense. The concept of the common good comes out of faith traditions. So if you are trying to unite citizens around a vision, getting them to look beyond their narrow interests and concerns, you have to appeal to their moral values. That is where politics starts. Morality, emotion, and self-interest are bound up with each other. No one understands this better than Obama.

As a community organiser, Obama discovered the power of faith to unify around a shared hope – one that he would later express, in stunning oratory, in his "Yes We Can" New Hampshire speech: "It was the call of workers who organised, women who reached for the ballots, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, a king who took us to the mountain top and pointed to the promised land. Yes We Can."

It is this tradition – citizens' organisations built by community organisers around the hopes and values of inner-city churches – that drives Obama's politics, and it is this that gives the Obama candidacy such a strange tinge: one that is at once familiar and unusual to find in the mouth of a politician. It is not just the efficient, grassroots art of creating a broad political alliance, nor the voter-registration drives which will make this the most voted-in election in recent US history, nor the \$639m raised from ordinary people through the internet that makes the Obama candidacy so exceptional. It is its note of faith-filled expectancy, struck by American civil religion – the non-denominational, but obviously faith-driven, capacity to appeal to what is best in human nature, in which the enlightened idealistic Christianity of the Northern elites meets the capacity for mobilization and revivalist fervor of the evangelical churches.¹¹ It is the melding of these forces in American Christianity which ended slavery in the 1840s and segregation in

the 1960s, and could yet transform America again. It is a tradition nourished, above all, by what happens at church on a Sunday – and especially on that Sunday back in the 1980s when Obama heard the Rev. Wright preach a sermon on “the audacity of hope”:

And in that single note – hope! – I hear something else: at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lions’ den, Ezekiel’s fields of dry bones. Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – become our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world ... And if a part of me continued to feel that this Sunday communion sometimes simplified our condition, that it could sometimes disguise or suppress the very real conflicts among us and would fulfil its promise only through action, I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried within it – nascent, incomplete – the possibility of moving beyond our own narrow dreams.¹²

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¹ Ryan Lizza, ‘The Agitator: Barack Obama’s unlikely political education’, *The New Republic* (19 March 2007) at <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=a74fca23-f6ac-4736-9c78-f4163d4f25c7&p=8>

² B Obama, ‘Why organize? Problems and promise in the inner city’ in *After Alinsky: Community organizing in Illinois* (1990) at

<http://illinoisissues.uis.edu/archives/2008/09/whyorg.html>

³ B Obama, *Dreams from my father* (New York 2004) p. 190

⁴ Michael Gecan, *Going Public* (Boston 2002) p. 5

⁵ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals. A pragmatic primer for realistic Radicals* (New York, 1971).

⁶ Barack Obama, ‘Why organize? Problems and promise in the inner city’ in *After Alinsky: Community organizing in Illinois* (1990) at

<http://illinoisissues.uis.edu/archives/2008/09/whyorg.html>

⁷ Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let them call me rebel: Saul Alinsky, his life and legacy* (New York 1992) p. 369.

⁸ Lawrence J Engel, ‘The influence of Saul Alinsky on the Campaign for Human Development’, *Theological Studies* (Dec 1998) at

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6404/is_4_59/ai_n28718506/print?tag=artBody:col1

⁹ Michael Gecan, *Effective organising for congregational renewal* (Metro-IAF 2008)

¹⁰ See my blog post: ‘The genius of US politics’, http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&id=72C55A16-5056-8960-32ABAACDBE2E0B29

¹¹ See Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York 2007)

¹² B. Obama, *Dreams From My Father* (New York 2004) p. 294