

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Aaron Schutz and **Marie G. Sandy**, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2011, 310 pp., \$29.00 US paper (978-0230111257), \$95.00 hardcover (978-0230105379)

Average citizens often seek ways and means to express dissatisfaction with the dominant social, political and/or economic order and the role of the community organizer is to transform interest and anger into some form of collective action. The practice of community organizing is certainly complex and multifaceted; it has contributed to significant efforts resulting in social change, such as social policy reform and electoral outcomes. While many people claim to be involved in community organizing, finding texts and other resources that challenge assumptions of community organizing while offering a strong case for its efficacy is a challenge for both practitioners and academics. We often develop strategies or plans using “how-to” guides that reflect a very specific context, or rely on people’s experiences described in case studies or through anecdotes. *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing* by Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy is a welcome contribution to the increasing literature focusing on community organizing. I am encouraged by this text because it can be used both by academics and practitioners interested in diverse areas within sociology, including: social movement research, political sociology, labour studies and cultural studies.

The book is grounded in a predominantly American approach to community organizing, and, as the authors describe, is a response to the 2008 US presidential elections where media and candidates belittled community organizing. The writing maintains a strong connection to the broader political discourses condemning oppression and oppressive structures. Clearly, the authors are advocates for community organizing as a strategy for social change. While this is a strength of the text, such advocacy can also limit wider readership. I shall return to this point below.

There are six sections in the book, with a total of 15 chapters. The authors selected topics that reflect the broad landscape of community organizing. One of the many merits of the book is its accessible writing style, and the inclusion of helpful and relevant examples scattered

throughout the chapters. In these examples the authors provide relevant descriptions of different organizing efforts, as well as parables that are noteworthy for organizers. The authors state in the introduction that their approach is intended to demonstrate the diverse approaches and lessons associated with community organizing.

The first section is an overview of both the topic and structure of the book. Here the authors establish the book's conceptual frame. In this section the authors explicitly provide a perspective to understanding the practice of community organizing. Schulz and Sandy attend to this by providing a description of what it is and what it isn't. By not offering a definition, the authors appropriately imply that the field is contested. Fortunately the authors do provide the reader with a frame that considers practice of community organizing as relying on principles that are democratic and inclusive rather than following a set of prescriptive guidelines.

In the second section the authors provide two background chapters that give the reader the historical context of the field. The first chapter includes a description of organizing by focusing on Saul Alinsky; Alinsky is commonly held as the founder of the form of community organizing that challenges the dominant hegemony through direct action and civil disobedience. While typically attributed to Alinsky, the authors recognize the important role of other notable figures (for example, Rinku Sen) as key developers of community organization as a field of study and practice.

The third section comprises four case studies that describe collective action in practice. I was particularly pleased with the case studies because the information is grounded in actual experiences where many key principles are explained using concrete examples. Each of the cases provides the reader with a rich narrative that portrays different ways that community organizing has shaped recent events in the United States (for example, the election of Barack Obama). The cases also introduce a variety of methodologies associated with community organizing, for example story telling and "door knocking" as mobilizing strategies. There is something for everyone in the case studies and a welcome contribution to an evolving field of practice and scholarship.

In the fourth section, the authors provide a focused effort to conceptualize the field and practice by further exploring issues and strategies, including the distinction between private/civic/public. While this distinction may seem quite abstract, the discussion stresses that a person involved in community organizing must identify with the focus or target of any action at some level. In each of the chapters they focus on key ideas that regularly arise in any community organizing activity. Finally, the fifth section is named as the conclusion; it comprises a single chapter.

The idea that hope is possible is a recurrent theme in the book and in the field more broadly. The sixth and final section of the book is an appendix with an appropriate listing of readings that builds on and extends much of the work described in the text.

While I did enjoy reading this book, and certainly appreciated the organization of its contents, I felt there was one fundamental shortcoming that is common across many such texts. There is often an assumption associated with community organizing that this work is specific to marginalized and disadvantaged populations. While it is true that much of this work has its origins in addressing challenging societal circumstances and oppression, community organizing and development more generally can now be applied to broader contexts. Perhaps this is why the authors seemed compelled to provide a rationale in the introduction on why a conservative should read the book. To the authors' credit they welcome responses from "conservatives" to the content of the book, implying of course that organizing is a "left-wing" or strictly liberal activity, as understood in the American context. This dichotomous thinking is a limitation of organizing that implicitly reinforces the notion that those organizing efforts are only undertaken by those people and groups in the margins of society or oppressed by pervasive power structures that permeate modern society. This is a limited view that often obfuscates the detrimental impacts of decisions made by those in positions of social and/or political power. I am not reducing the importance that organizing has had and continues to have on improving the lives of the disenfranchised; I would like to see the broadening of the scope of the practice, an idea that was supported by Alinsky in his follow-up writings to *Rules for Radicals*.

Another challenge associated with community organizing, as described in this book, is that we often do not spend time reflecting on the challenges and consequences faced by people involved in organizing activities. I am not suggesting that something is missing from this text because a single book cannot cover all possible angles. However, there is a strong undertone that organizing does not involve personal and professional risks. Individuals engaged in these activities do make choices, and the outcomes are not always inconsequential. This is the other side to organizing that opponents tend to spend more time describing, and proponents do not spend enough time exploring. The outcomes of community organizing can be very different across groups, and the assumption in this book is that social change is the desirable result. But as many familiar with the field will attest, change is found and recognized in different ways across different groups.

The authors clearly stated that this is not a recipe book, but one is left to wonder: what is it? In my opinion, it is a book of organizing principles grounded in practice. Since this book is grounded in an American experience of collective action, one should not try to prescriptively apply many of the strategies to different contexts (including in Canada) because their impact will be different. However, as organizers we try not to be prescriptive in our work. We focus on planning for social action and we experiment with different approaches, which makes this book an excellent resource. In closing, the authors make a strong and convincing case for moving away from rules based organizing to activities grounded in principled stances that react and act to oppression and inequity.

University of Alberta

Jorge Sousa

Jorge Sousa is an Associate Professor and coordinator of the Adult Education Specialization in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. His research and writing explores the intersection of community organizing and community development as the means to strengthen the social economy. His current research is focused on the impact that community-based initiatives and businesses has on understanding Canada's social economy.

sousa@ualberta.ca