Keywords in Radical Geographical Thought: Antipode at 50

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Published 2019, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford

Chapter 37, Organising

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There is no aspect of life that is untouched by the processes and practices of organising. It underpins the development of human cultures and the associated institutions through which ever greater numbers of human beings have found ways of living together. Organising the means to get something done is vital to securing a successful economy, supporting an effective political regime and nurturing a meaningful cultural life. If our leading businesses, political parties or community organisations fail to organise themselves successfully, keeping up with changes in the wider political-economy and culture, they will wither and die.

Yet while organising underpins the established order of things, it is even more essential if we are to challenge the way things are done. Mounting a campaign that has sufficient strength to take on established ideas, vested interests and socio-cultural inertia, requires great strategic and sustained effort. It is also made doubly difficult because the established order is already so embedded or 'normalised' in our social organisations and ways of thinking. Any sort of radical challenge to established ways of thinking and doing things requires some sort of organising activity to build momentum for an alternative. Such organising activity might begin modestly by publishing or promoting some new ideas and then finding kindred spirits with a similar view. It may involve a lot of time talking to people, building relationships, raising money and holding events. If successful, it can generate significant changes in individuals and human relationships, stimulating new ways of thinking, feeling and living. It is impossible to think about the profound changes caused by movements such as those to promote dissenting forms of Christianity, women's equality or the abolition of whaling, without respect for the power of organising in making change happen. Organising underpins all radical change, be it from the Left with the plethora of organisations set up to promote socialist, anarchist and communist ideas, or from the Right, as evident in the organised horrors of fascism. Moreover, although organising activity clearly underpins powerful movements that are driven by ideology and that can have very wide geographical and historical reach, it is also important in explaining change on a much smaller scale. It is evident in the way that some communities have a richer density of organisations, social relationships and collective identity than others. Some places are more organised than others, and this matters to local experience but is also important in relation to subsequent change.

Given their focus on changing the world, radical geographers have paid particular attention to the processes and practices of organising. This work has focused on **social movements**, taking a geographical perspective to consider the inter-relationships between place, space and organising in a variety of campaigns (Miller, 2000; Nicholls, 2007, 2009). There is also a smaller body of geographical scholarship looking at other forms of organising. This includes a strand of research focused on the organising activity associated with **political parties**, considering the geography of efforts to secure electoral success, uniting people around their shared ambitions for political

representation (Scott and Wills, 2018). There is also an interest in **community organising**, and the extent to which place provides a platform for institutionally-oriented organising around the common good (de Filippis et al, 2010; Harney et al, 2016; Wills, 2012; 2016). This form of organising uses local institutions, and the relationships between them, as the foundation from which to identify shared interests, mobilise people and foster solidarity for political change. Such work has to focus on the particularities of place but it is often reflective of wider concerns and interests while also being connected to trans-local networks of organising alliances. In the United States there are a number of different networks and models of community organising and these have sparked similar developments in other parts of the world (Orr, 2007; Walls, 2014).

In summary, scholars have developed a two-pronged approach to understanding the intersection of geography and organising, looking at the importance of: (1) geographical inheritance; and (2) geographical strategy. Both reflect the extent to which geography plays a foundational role in the formulation and prosecution of organising activity; geography shapes what is possible and it also plays a key role in organising success.

Understanding **the role of geographical inheritance** involves paying attention the ways that existing social organisation and associated culture shapes the development and prosecution of new ideas. In his book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency,* Doug MacAdam (1982) explored the civil rights movement in the American south, highlighting three aspects of this 'geo-inheritance' which will shape the way that any movement can grow. The first concerns what he called 'readiness' or the willingness and ability of the population to act when opportunities allow. Without existing relationships and networks, it is very difficult to transmit a message, to sustain organising and promote mobilisation. Thus, Oberschall (1973) argues that the degree of existing organisation in any community is key to movement development, sustained activity and success. In his research, McAdam highlighted the particular role of the churches in the American south in acting as anchors for the civil rights movement. The churches were already organised, they had respected and talented local leaders and their own social networks through which to spread the word and facilitate mobilisation. Successful action then further reinforced existing social relationships and mutual support. As Oberschall puts it: "mobilization does not occur through recruitment of large numbers of isolated and solitary individuals. It occurs as a result of recruiting blocs of people who are already highly organized and participants" (in Buechler and Cylke, 1997, 180). The established social infrastructure provided by the church helped to support the organising campaigns, building on existing social relations.

In a similar vein, Walter Nicholls (2008) has highlighted the ways in which some urban communities have become 'incubators' for social movement ideas and talent; as the number of local organisations grows, relationships develop, and experience shapes expectations, there is cross-fertilisation and it becomes easier to generate more organising activity. There is something of a virtuous circle as more organising begets more organising.

The existing social infrastructure also plays a role in the development of an 'insurgent consciousness' that is also key to organising success. If they are to turn out to support a campaign, people need to feel it is worth their while, and they have some chance of success (Piven and Coward, 1979). This again is much more likely in instances when people already have strong personal and institutional relationships. As Doug MacAdam suggests: *"*in the absence of strong interpersonal links to others, people are likely to feel powerless to change conditions even if they perceive present conditions as favourable to such efforts" (in Buechler and Cylke, 1997, 183). As the wider society changes, and particular events help to shift the opportunity structure in favour of political change, this can ignite a passion for organising that is more likely to find nourishment in some places than others. People are

unlikely to turn out to support organising efforts if they feel there is little chance of success, that there is no audience or receptivity for their cause, and they have weak incentives to reinforce their engagement. As such, it is clear that the existing institutions and repositories of social relationships, shared experiences and culture, and a feeling for shifting political opportunities, underpin organising activity. This geo-inheritance varies greatly across space and between different places. If some places have fragile forms of social capital, and/or a weaker 'fit' with a particular campaign, they will prove less able to engage. As an example, spatial differentiation proved important in the 1984-5 miners' strike in Britain, and a number of geographers sought to understand why some areas did or didn't support the strike (Sunley, 1986, 1990; Rees, 1985, 1986).

In addition to the question of inheritance, geography can play an important part in relation to more strategic questions in organising campaigns. **Geographical strategy** relates to the geographical depth and/or reach of organising campaigns and their use of particular geographical tools such as community building or fostering networks, and the extent to which this increases the likelihood of winning campaigns (Leitner et al, 2008). Such strategy will be at least partly shaped by the origin and goals of any campaign. Labour organising necessarily has to start from the particular workplaces where workers have sought to win better terms and conditions of work, so too, the early women's movement organised in people's homes, fostering solidarity that then underpinned a broader campaign. We have also seen how the civil rights movement used religious spaces for similar purposes. However, in order to secure significant change, it has often proved necessary to 'upscale' the reach of a campaign to widen networks of solidarity and to 'target' the people who are able to act to resolve a demand. This can involve making topological connections across space, linking the experiences of people in the provinces to those in the capital, or those in a peripheral branch plant to the corporate headquarters. It can also involve connecting different worlds within any space. The rise of the living wage movement has provided a powerful demonstration of both aspects of geographical strategy. Organisers have connected the experiences and demands of workers in manufacturing supply chains in the global south to consumers in the global north, highlighting the issue of labour standards and the need for ethical production and consumption (Hale and Wills, 2005). By educating and mobilising consumers, organisers are putting political pressure on the companies at the 'top' of supply chains to take responsibility for those at the 'bottom' (Merk, 2009). The same approach has also been used to connect managers and in-house workers with those employed on-site by sub-contractors in jobs like cleaning, catering and security, to ensure the payment of a living wage (Wills and Linneker, 2014).

Geographical strategy will be shaped by the particular dynamics of any campaign but it is often necessary (and perhaps increasingly necessary) to 'move' the demands of one group from one part of the world, to ensure they are heard by those with the power to act, who often sit elsewhere (Herod and Wright, 2008). This has been powerfully demonstrated by labour organising campaigns, past and present, and the way they have imaginatively developed solidarity across different scales, including the workplace, city, region, nation and international scales (Herod, 1998; Herod, 2010; Waterman and Wills, 2001). Such organising is also mediated by the political opportunities that are provided by political institutions that also have their own geography such as local, city and national government, as well as international bodies like the European Commission and Parliament, and the United Nations (Wills, 2018). There are related opportunities provided via the social clauses attached to free trade agreements and competition rules established by bodies like the World Trade Organisation. As such, the uneven geography of political institutions creates a patchwork of political opportunities that will shape the geo-strategic decisions made in organising campaigns. There is no 'best' scale or geo-strategy that can guarantee success in a campaign in advance, and decisions necessarily evolve during the lifetime of any campaign, however, it is clear that geography plays a

critical role in underpinning organising activity and outcomes (Leitner et al, 2008). The twin issues of geographical inheritance and geographical strategy will always be important in understanding and prosecuting organising campaigns for radical change.

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