ROOTS FOR RADICALS

Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice

Edward T. Chambers

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Introduction

The Industrial Areas Foundation: Social Knowledge, Power, and Politicalness

This book is about roots—roots for radicals. The late Monsignor Jack Egan of Chicago, an old friend and comrade in the struggle, suggested the title, and it fits. But "radical" is a misunderstood word for many folks today, so I need to make it clear from the start. The people you'll meet in these pages don't dress in black, wear masks, or kick in shop windows. "Radical" is from a Latin word that means "root." Radical means going to the roots of the matter, and the roots of the spirit. A radical is a person who searches for meaning and affirms community. For me, that has meant half a century of organizing for power on behalf of justice and democracy. People's public lives are fueled by a tension that won't go away, and the most radical thing they do out of that tension starts with what I call the relational meeting. More on that tension and those meetings later.

Don't expect a quick read here. These pages require that you bend back and reflect on your own life. Readers who hunger for meaning, for making sense of daily reality, should be fed here. People looking for a quick fix for what ails America, the faint of heart, and those without passion should stop now. So let's whet our appetite and go on a journey.

A little historical perspective never hurts. Nearly fifty years have passed since poverty and urban decay became matters of major attention and contention in America (eliminating slums, LBJ's war on poverty, etc.). But after decades of ideological argument and top-down bureaucratic experimentation, our cities are still drowning in poor people, violence, and desperation. During that same period, our public life has been eroded by the isolation and anxiety of consumerism, unfettered capitalism, and social divisions. The capacity of everyday ordinary people to make room at the table of public life for folk
from other cultures is strained. The problems of the cities, the economic pressures of the market, and the increasing diversity of cultures aren’t going away. We have senators for oil and gas, and senators for farmers, but none for cities or families. Democratic self-governance—public conversation and collaborative action by organized citizens—remains our best hope for dealing with these challenges. That’s the radical message of this book.

In the world as it should be, democracy means participation in public decisions in which all are included because of the dignity of being “created equal.” In the real world, democracy is dominated by the interests of a few wealthy and powerful institutions. A truly democratic public life requires the organization, education, and development of leaders who regard themselves as equal, sovereign citizens with the know-how to stand for the whole. We’re not born with these civic skills and virtues, and today’s instant gratification culture constantly undermines them. The radical question of this book is, why should things be this way, rather than another?

Since its founding by Saul Alinsky in 1940, the Industrial Areas Foundation (hereafter, IAF), meaning “Urban Areas Foundation,” has worked with citizens, both people of faith and seculars, to build broad organizations that don’t rely on liberal belief in the welfare state or conservative faith in the invisible hand of the market. Instead, the IAF has invested in the power of organized families and congregations acting together to refound democratic public life. By staying on this course, the IAF has been instrumental in the creation of more than sixty independent, nonpartisan, dues-based citizens organizations throughout the United States and has encouraged the development of such organizations in the United Kingdom, Germany, and South Africa. By winning on issues in places where both state and market have failed, our broad-based citizens organizations lead the way in showing how civil-society institutions can be a source of powerful citizen participation and a creative way to achieve social change. The radical question of this book is, why not a different world?

In the Back of the Yards and TWO organizations in Chicago and the FIGHT organization in Rochester, New York, foundational and universal insights about organizing people were discovered and crafted. In San Antonio, a city where people of one culture formerly functioned as menial laborers for those of another, a vibrant, bicultural political community has been achieved. In East London, civic participation has emerged within a mix of cultures and religions that those radical predecessors of ours who founded the mother of parliaments could never have imagined on English soil. In New York, large communities of new working-class homeowners reside where politicians and experts said they never would. In Baltimore, a comprehensive scholarship and jobs incentive program for public high school graduates and a co-op of temporary workers have been created. In the cities and suburbs of Chicago and Boston, the foundation has been laid for metropolitan-wide, culturally diverse, broad-based citizens organizations on a size and scale never before attempted, one appropriate to the complexities of the twenty-first century.

Two defining characteristics of IAF organizations are their plurality and inclusiveness. Within our organizations, citizens whose ancestors were born in the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and North America collaborate as equal partners in the pursuit of justice and opportunity for all faiths, cultures, and classes. Within our organizations, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists join together to seek the well-being of their cities. (Rumor has it that a few New Age types have been spotted recently.) Within our organizations, women and men share leadership, authority, and public roles. Within our organizations, city dwellers, suburbanites, and rural residents come together to face issues that none can address alone. Within our organizations, people who believe in God, democracy, or both pursue matters of mutual interest. Within our organizations, some political conservatives, lots of moderates, and some liberals seek common ground, refusing to allow ideological differences to perpetuate social divisions. Members of IAF organizations understand that while the “silent-majority” goes along with the status quo, it only takes a well-organized 2 to 3 percent of the body politic to initiate social change. That’s the radical message of this book.

Readers familiar with the reputation of our organizations for dramatic, imaginative and effective public action may be surprised to find that the first—and most critical—chapter waiting for you here is an extended reflection on the tension between concrete realities and cherished ideals. Such a response, however, betrays a simplistic grasp of organizing in the IAF tradition. The liturgy of public life developed by our professional organizers and citizen leaders over the course of sixty years of organizing, teaching, and mentoring ordinary people in the practice of citizenship is “research, action, evaluation.” Action is the middle term in a three-part formula, sandwiched between moments of hard reflection. The intentional discipline of IAF organizing requires that public actions begin and end in reflection. While no one develops a public life without action, we only learn how to build the power to act for justice in the real world when public actions are preceded and followed by disciplined reflection.

The time has come for me to put into words something of the formidable practical know-how about doing nonpartisan politics that has been gleaned from thousands of public actions, hours of disciplined reflection, and a two-
generation effort in education for grassroots public leadership by the IAF. That body of social knowledge is the root of this book.

Social Knowledge and Politics

The Greek word for knowledge most familiar to us is theoría, or theory. That’s the knowledge that comes from the reasoning and research of academics. You get it by pulling away from the realities of everyday life into a university or laboratory, a specialized place of research, ideas, and academic jargon. Those of us on the outside usually call it the ivory tower. But there is another Greek word for knowledge, phronésis, which means “practical wisdom.” That’s the kind of know-how based on the harsh lessons of life experience that guide a good parent, boss, or leader. It’s what I call social knowledge. People gain social knowledge by dealing with others around life’s everyday demands. It comes from the actual experience of raising children, running businesses, and dealing with conflicts. It’s learned on the street, in private relationships, and in public places. You earn it only by digesting your own life experiences and those of others. All social knowledge is experiential: You don’t get it in school; you get it at work, on the streets, and at home.

Andres Sarabia is one of the most experienced leaders in the IAF network. He has been with San Antonio’s Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) organization since 1974, serving as its first president from 1974 to 1976.

He recalls a critical meeting from the early days of COPS, when hundreds of members of the new organization gathered in the auditorium of a local school to confront public officials and force them to solve the severe flooding problems that resulted from the lack of proper drainage and sewers in poor neighborhoods. As film of submerged cars, houses, and entire streets was shown to the audience, people became more and more angry. Emotions were running so high that there was potential for trouble.

But Sarabia and the other leaders of COPS had been trained. They had been briefed on every potential problem, and they had determined in advance what response they would have. “Much to the surprise of the city officials, we had total control of the assembly, and we were able to direct the anger of the people into a positive and productive meeting,” says Sarabia.

He is convinced that this kind of training and discipline is what has positioned COPS among the most powerful broad-based organizations in the country. It has also given him the confidence and ability to handle difficult situations in all areas of his life. His years as a leader in COPS have taught him how to channel and focus his own anger regarding injustice, so that instead of useless or even dangerous action, he could actually alter the way the system works in San Antonio and effect changes in the way people are treated.

He also uses his leadership skills at work, where he is a computer specialist in the civil service. He uses what he has learned about reflection and planning, confrontation, and negotiation to effect an increase in the number of Hispanics who are promoted in his section. His training and experience as an organizational leader have also had an impact in his personal life.

He once wrote to his son, who was a U.S. Marine preparing to be shipped overseas for combat. Sarabia explained to him the difference between channeled and uncontrolled anger, and the importance of reflection before confrontation and action, about making sure that he had his fellow soldiers with him before he made any moves.

“Survival skills,” Sarabia calls them.

People with this kind of practical know-how earned it in moments of challenge and struggle, on the street—not in the ivory tower. They are the shrewd women and men of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount who build their houses on rock, so that they remain standing through life’s inevitable storms. Others naturally recognize this real-life wisdom grounded in experience and turn to those who demonstrate it for guidance and leadership in facing the urgent questions of everyday life.

This book is in the genre of social, not theoretical, knowledge. Its roots are in the body of social knowledge about politics that has been acquired and refined collectively by the organizers and leaders of the IAF over more than fifty years, men and women like Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount who build their houses on rock, so that they remain standing through life’s inevitable storms. Others naturally recognize this real-life wisdom grounded in experience and turn to those who demonstrate it for guidance and leadership in facing the urgent questions of everyday life.

Politics is not a game. It exists to resolve the largest questions of the society—the agreed-upon terms by which everyone can live peaceably with one another. At its best politics creates and sustains social relation-
ships—the human conversation and engagement that draw people together and allow them to discover their mutuality.2

In the collective social knowledge and shared vision of the professional organizers and citizen leaders of the IAF network, there resides a precious storehouse of practical know how about public life. These men and women understand what it means in practice to make common cause with people of other races, religions, and neighborhoods in seeking the good of larger civic communities. They have experienced victories and endured defeats in the public arena, and they have done both in the company of former strangers now become fellow citizens. That’s the root message of this book.

Because electoral politics has been so degraded since World War II, I will often use the clarifying word “politicalness” in these pages, to reclaim Aristotle’s definition of politics as the capacity to gather with others as fellow citizens to converse, plan, act, and reflect for the well-being of people as a whole.3 Radically speaking, our politicalness is an inheritance bestowed by the Creator through our parents. It’s our birthright. We receive the gifts “to be able” (called power) coupled with “to be related in a bond of affinity with others” (called love). Like our sexuality, politicalness is given to us at birth. Sexuality and politicalness relate us to one another in reciprocal bonds of affinity and accountability. That neither of these powers can be realized in isolation makes it plain that humans are interdependent, relational beings. Because sexuality (our passions, all of them) and politicalness (drives, self-interest, élan) are primary sources of the vitality that animates human life, failing to develop these dimensions of personhood means severe limitations on the meaning, joy, and creativity we can experience in life. Developing the birthrights the Creator gave us of politicalness and sexuality requires and nurtures deep forms of social knowledge. The concept of “citizen” is based in the nation; the concept of “person” is universal, because it is based on our birthright of sexuality and politicalness. They can take away your citizenship, but not your personhood. That’s the radical message of this book.

During the last sixty years of IAF training and mentoring, our leaders and organizers have developed their politicalness by researching, acting, and reflecting for themselves and for the common good in cities, suburbs, and rural areas across the United States and on other continents. Prior to the writing of this book, this evolving social knowledge drawn from real-life IAF organizing has been taught in local and national training sessions by experienced organizers and leaders who gained their social knowledge of political action by engagement and reflection in local organizations. The purpose of this book is to distill the basic elements of the IAF’s hard-won practical wis-