Community Organizing and Direct Activism

*793 COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND DIRECT ACTIVISM

Robin Morris Collin [FNa1]

THE three selections in this Community Organizing and Direct Activism Cluster move the thinking and practice of antisubordination to a new level, recognizing the dangers of internalizing insidious, invidious values, and envisioning and describing new organizational models, principles and processes without them.

The LatCrit movement has long recognized antisubordination as a constantly evolving core. [FN1] As a first principle, this requires awareness of *794 the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries of colonial domination, centuries in which indigenaity, Africanity, sexuality and the female were all demonized, targeted for all manners of oppression, coercion and domination. [FN2] The shared mental model or paradigm [FN3] created by three centuries of this message, delivered in public policy through and including the most intimate of private forums, cannot be easily confronted or undone without recognizing how deeply it is entwined in our contemporary consciousness, even those consciousnesses which reject this paradigm consciously. These articles carefully expose the seeds of subordination inculcated into contemporary thinking and the practice of coalition and community organizing as they critique the principles of self-interestedness, and models of organizing inherited from white radicals such as Saul Alinsky. [FN4] Beyond this, they articulate and describe a theory and practice built on other foundations, out of other cultural realities. In the tradition of LatCrit practice, these articles move us through a state of awareness of the dangers of unexamined privileging and the corrosive effects of unconscious racism, [FN5] a state sometimes referred to as 'conscious (cultural) incompetence' reflecting recognition and acceptance of one's own limited, partial, imperfect state of knowledge about the complexity and nuanced nature of racism. Beyond simple criticism, they offer positive visions and prescriptive guidance about how to consciously reweave our network of relationships without the strands of colonial domination, a state of conscious competence reflecting studied, intentional efforts at transformation. Once internalized as a paradigm, it becomes *795 possible to see the outlines of a different shared mental model based upon mutuality, respect and inclusion that might yet have the power to self organize even as the current model does, a state of unconscious competence. These are the steps in consciousness from which liberating and liberated choices about acts of coalition and community building may be made.

The struggle not to internalize values that have oppressed us is deeply reflected in the histories and challenges of coalitions between peoples of color, and other subordinated/demonized groups including Jewish people, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Transsexual (LGBTT) people, and others. Victor Romero asserts:

> Self-sacrifice, stewardship and the commitment to anti-subordination provide a visionary center and alternative to the self-interested, individualist and capitalist viewpoint that governs most decision making surrounding whether or not to coalesce and join forces with others. [FN6]

His proposal rejects self-interest, individualism and capitalism as a model guiding coalition building, and urges allies united by the principles of antisubordination to consider how these alternative values might come to form the basis of new coalitions. He challenges us to reject the tenet of self-interestedness as a principle of coalition work. He movingly recounts how self-interestedness inevitably has led to the disintegration of effective coalitions, and the loss of anti-subordination gains when power concedes limited (and in the larger sense trivial) gains to some members of an effective coalition while denying it to others. Then, the previous ally is too often willing to assume the accouterments of power vis-à-vis former allies. This is the mechanism by which invidious privilege recreates itself even among those formerly disadvantaged by it, for internalized self-interestedness will inevitably replicate privilege and lead to reassertion of subordination as an organizing principle. Internalized self-interestedness can subordinate without the need for intentional expressions of self-hatred or hatred of others, and without the need for an explicit plan. That is the power of a shared mental model or paradigm to self-organize.

The manipulation of self-interest to defeat effective coalitions among subordinated groups is, of course, well known and documented by scholars from Machiavelli to Sun Tzu. [FN7] What remains elusive about this phenomenon is its ability to effectively divide even those who intellectually recognize the dangers of divisiveness. Victor Romero's work attempts to *796 sever this phenomenon from its source of strength by rejecting the validity of self-interestedness. In its place he argues the ideals of self-sacrifice and stewardship in the conscious pursuit of anti-subordination.

While acknowledging that the world we live in is organized on the basis of power, he cautions coalitions about the pursuit of access to power as a goal, and its corrosive influence when that goal is conflated with the goal of anti-subordination. These two goals are not the same, he warns. Coalitions in pursuit of power end when power is gained without questioning whether the power will be used to care for those who are worse off, whether they are in the newly empowered group or outside it. This is the corrupting force that limited and ended powerful cooperation between ethnic groups and others in the past. Care for those who are worse off may be based upon the recognition of sacrifice for the gains achieved, as in the case of 'elders' who led the struggle but have not benefited from its tangible victories. Care may be based upon the recognition of others who are suffering or are oppressed by the same demonization that victimized the now victorious allies. Regardless of the beneficiaries, care for those who are worse off keeps a coalition based upon anti-subordination functioning together even when some members of the coalition gain while others do not. Professor Romero provides a contemporary example of such a caring-based coalition in the case of the University of Michigan's affirmative action programs challenged in Gratz v. Bollinger [FN8] and Grutter v. Bollinger [FN9] in which Asian Pacific Islander groups joined in the amicus briefs in support of an affirmative action program which did not benefit them by its terms.

He bravely asks how we might get 'there' from 'here.' He posits three steps on the path, in an occasionally lyrical account of how to implement his vision. First, he discusses the importance of faith, not in a limited religious sense but as a transcendent structure bridging reason and epistemological uncertainty. He urges that we cultivate 'faith in faith.' [FN10] Next, he returns to the importance of individual responsibility, the obligation to examine our gains, our compromises, our achievements and those we have left behind in the pursuit. Last, he counsels us to celebrate our victories, all of them. There is pragmatic wisdom here, although it may sound like preaching to the choir. Sometimes the choir needs encouragement, especially in times of vicious re-entrenchment of the privileges and powers of the colonial era.

*797 The final contribution documents struggles against internalized and external forms

of subordination of women and GLBTT communities. Anita Tijerina Revilla, in Raza Womyn Mujerstoria, tells a complex story of the struggles within el Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana y Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and outside of that group which led to the founding of a separate group of women adopting the name 'Raza Womyn.' The story of women and lesbian womyn's efforts to take action against subordination led over time to a complex dance of inclusion and exclusion in solidarity with the Raza movement. This story, intimately told, compares to a family story of alternately close and distant embraces within the fold. It prompted me to reflect on Professor Romero's guidelines, and how they might have influenced the leadership of these different organizations at different times in the account.

This account also demonstrates how organizations built around women's leadership and the experiences of previously marginalized groups have rejected hierarchical styles and methods which replicate subordination in favor of different rules of organizing. For example, in discussing whether to try to increase membership or not, one of the founding organizers of Raza Womyn observed:

> And I remember at one point I was like 'We need to get more people involved.' Because I felt that it was a bad reflection on us. And then I had to go through my own process and be like, "You know, we have to deal with a lot more of these issues, taboos that all these other organizations don't. They don't have the deep connections or the spaces and conversations that we do. Because half of our meetings would be check-ins with everyone's drama and supporting each other. And other organizations just did business, like 'This is what's going on. Thank you. Bye."' So we learned about all of our issues. We talked about our fears in a candid manner. And that's what I think is the beauty of Raza Womyn, but it was also why it was so small because all of people are afraid of that. [FN11]

These works share a common thread in their unblinking look at the forces which unite and divide us in struggles against a colonial past. They name these forces and follow their iterations into intimate realms, and into our own organizing assumptions. In looking backwards, these authors help us to embrace a far richer account of our struggles and achievements, when it includes women, GLBTT people and other allies. In looking forward, they provide a vision of relationships, in the process of liberation, and perhaps free at last from the internalized demons of a colonial, imperial past.

Footnotes:

[FNa1]. Professor of Law, Willamette University College of Law. J.D., 1980, Arizona State University; B.A., 1976, The Colorado College; graduate studies in African Languages and Literature at University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1977. The author would like to thank Professors Gil Carrasco, Carmen Gonzalez and Eileen Gauna, and Robert W. Collin, Senior Scholar at the Willamette University Public Policy Research Center for for their comments on this work.

[FN1]. '[W]hile our anti-subordination 'bottom line' has often turned out to be similar, those similarities may tend to obscure marked differences in our interpretive processes.' Elizabeth M. Iglesias & Francisco Valdes, Religion, Gender, Sexuality, Race and Class in Coalitional Theory: A Critical and Self-Critical Analysis of LatCrit Social Justice Agendas, 19 Chicano-Latino L. Rev. 503, 506 (1998).

The four functions of LatCrit theory (and similar efforts) posited early on are: (1) the production of knowledge; (2) the advancement of social transformation; (3) the expansion and connection of antisubordination struggles; and (4) the cultivation of community and coalition, both within and beyond the confines of legal academia in the

United States. For further discussion of these four functions and their relationship to LatCrit theory, see Francisco Valdes, Foreword, Under Construction: LatCrit Consciousness, Community and Theory, 85 Cal. L. Rev. 1087, 1093-94 (1997) (noting relationship between listed functions and LaCrit theory).

The seven guideposts accompanying these four functions are: (1) Recognize and Accept the Political Nature of Legal 'scholarship' Despite Contrary Pressures; (2) Conceive Ourselves as Activist Scholars Committed to Praxis to Maximize Social Relevance; (3) Build Intra-Latina/o Communities and Inter-Group Coalitions to Promote Justice Struggles; (4) Find Commonalities While Respecting Differences to Chart Social Transformation; (5) Learn from Outsider Jurisprudence to Orient and Develop LatCrit Theory and Praxis; (6) Ensure a Continual Engagement of Self-Critique to Stay Principled and Grounded; (7) Balance Specificity and Generality in LatCritical Analysis to Ensure Multidimensionality. For an early assessment of LatCrit 'guideposts' as reflected in the proceedings of the First Annual LatCrit Conference, see id. at 52-59.

These guideposts (and the functions described earlier) of course are interrelated and, in their operation, interactive. Ideally, they yield synergistic effects. They represent, as a set, the general sense of this project as reflected in the collective writings of the symposium based on the First Annual LatCrit Conference. In addition to the seven guideposts noted above, an eighth was originally presented as a 'final observation' based on the preceding seven: 'acknowledging the relationship of LatCrit to Critical Race theory' and, in particular, the 'intellectual and political debt that LatCrit theorizing owes to Critical Race theorists.' Id. at 56-59. As this symposium illustrates, these four functions and seven guideposts have helped LatCrit theorists to mine substantive insights and benefits that deepen, broaden and texture existing understandings of law and policy. See Francisco Valdes, Theorizing 'Outcrit' Theories: Coalitional Method and Comparative Jurisprudential Experience--RaceCrits, QueerCrits, and LatCrits, 53 U. Miami L. Rev. 1265, 1266-68 (1999) (describing inroads made by LatCrit theorists to expand understanding of existing law and policy).

[FN2]. See Biderman's Chart on Penal Coercion (Amnesty International Report on Torture, 1983), at http://www.ta-tutor.com/webpdf/cntrlplp.pdf (last visited Mar. 2, 2005) (noting various means of coercion used--and continuing to be used--to dominate subordinated peoples).

[FN3]. A paradigm is a model, a lens and a grid through which our perception of reality is achieved; a set of assumptions, concepts, values and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them. Paradigms are multi-dimensional, that is, they make use of all available senses (all 'cultural antennas'). They enlist all of our ways of knowing, seeing, hearing and feeling without the requirement of conscious agreement.

[FN4]. See David A. Super, Offering an Invisible Hand: The Rise of the Personal Choice Model for Rationing Public Benefits, 113 Yale L.J. 815, 890 (2004) (describing basic style with which Alinsky organized).

[FN5]. See Charles R. Lawrence, III, The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism, 39 Stan. L. Rev. 317, 323 (1987) (illustrating awareness created by LatCrit concerning dangers of unexamined privileging and unconscious racism).

[FN6]. See Victor Romero, Rethinking Minority Coalition Building: Valuing Self-Sacrifice, Stewardship and Anti-Subordination, 50 Vill. L. Rev. 823 (2005).

[FN7]. See generally Niccolo Machiavelli, Art of War (Ellis Farneworth trans., Bobbs-

Merrill rev. ed.) (1965) (noting manner in which to keep down organizing attempts); Sun Tzo, Art of War (Samuel Griffith trans., Oxford University Press 2d ed.) (1971) (noting manner in which organization of underlings can be defeated).

[FN8]. 539 U.S. 244 (2003) (holding that university admission policy which granted significantly extra 'points' for race was not narrowly tailored to achieve respondents' asserted compelling interest in diversity, thus, violating Equal Protection Clause).

[FN9]. 539 U.S. 306 (2003) (holding that flexible assessment of applicants' talents, experiences and potential to contribute to learning of those around them that considered diverse race to be 'a plus' did not violate Equal Protection Clause because it was narrowly tailored and met law school's compelling interest in diverse student body).

[FN10]. Romero, supra note 6, at 18.

[FN11]. Anita Tijerina Revilla, Raza Womyn Mujerstoria, 50 Vill. L. Rev. 799 (2005) (quoting Interview with Cristina, Member, Raza Womyn, in Los Angeles, Cal. (June 2002)).