Community Organizing and Regionalism

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In 1996, the Gamaliel Foundation, a national network of more than 40 congregation-based community organizing projects, adopted a regional approach to community organizing, consolidating local projects into metropolitan organizations and addressing regional dynamics of sprawl and socioeconomic polarization. Through participant observation and interviews at metropolitan and national levels, I examine the effects of regionalism on community organizing. I find that a regional approach may help organizers manage longstanding dilemmas of ideology—how to balance broad appeal with sharp analysis—and scale—how to maintain democratic participation while organizing beyond the local level. I look briefly at the effects of grassroots organizing on regionalism, and find that it may give it a more radical and populist thrust.

When Saul Alinsky died in 1972, his associate Ed Chambers took over leadership of the struggling Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a loose network of local community organizing projects. Chambers wanted to retain the grassroots militance of IAF groups while creating more enduring structures, free from dependence on a single organizer. Chambers recruited mainstream religious congregations to be the foundation of the new local groups, and incorporated liberal Judeo-Christian theology into the ideology and rhetoric of organizing.

Using this model, by 1999 the IAF and three newer congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) networks were providing training and coordination to 133 local and regional organizing projects in 33 states.¹ This represented both rapid growth of new projects—an increase of almost 50 percent in six years (Hart, 2001)—and the survival of many older projects.² These groups have a combined base of 4,000 member organizations, comprising between 1 and 3 million people (Warren and Wood, 2001).

CBCO groups have fought successfully for traditional issues such as better city services to poor and working-class neighborhoods. Increasingly, they are taking on larger-scale issues. In the 1990s, IAF groups pressured Texas into creating a statewide network of community-based public schools. Affiliates of two other networks, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) and the Gamaliel Foundation, won increased state funding for healthcare in California and Missouri.³ Some scholars (Hart, 2001; Warren, 2001; Wilson, 1999; Wood, 2002) and journalists (Greider, 1992) now see CBCO as an important interfaith, interracial, grassroots movement for democracy and equality, with the potential to affect national politics.⁴

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Contemporary CBCO, however, continues to struggle with two major dilemmas—ideology and scale (Posner, 1990). An ideology is a set of ideas and values that provides a vision of the future, analysis of the present, and strategy for change (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Palmer, 1990). For community organizing, the dilemma of ideology is whether and how to use explicit political ideology in recruiting and educating people and in developing strategy. Despite the introduction of liberal theology, CBCO groups retain Alinsky’s claim of being nonideological. In practice they rely on populism, less an ideology than “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (Kazin, 1995, p. 1).

Populists emphasize participatory democracy, trusting “the people” to find the right solutions. They see ideologies as alien and manipulative. Critics of this position argue that without an explicit analysis, vision, and strategy, populist movements are easily coopted, marginalized, or turned in a reactionary direction. For them, the dilemma is how to combine populism’s democratic spirit and immediate appeal with ideology’s analytic rigor and long-term vision and strategy.

The second dilemma is that of scale. Organizers recognize the growing importance of larger-scale work, having seen urban sprawl drain people and money from core cities, while the growth of the federal government and increased corporate concentration and mobility move decision making away from the city. Their dilemma is how to organize at regional, state, and national levels, while retaining local organizing’s participatory democracy.

For CBCO, failure to manage the dilemmas of ideology and scale can mean political marginalization or incorporation, while success can mean becoming part of a transformative movement. In this study, I look at how regionalism has affected organizing’s ability to deal with these dilemmas by examining the work of the Gamaliel Foundation, a Chicago-based CBCO network with affiliates in the midwest, both coasts, and South Africa. In 1996, the Gamaliel Foundation adopted regionalism and regional equity organizing as guiding orientations. Regionalism emphasizes metropolitan dynamics, especially sprawl and socioeconomic polarization, as root causes of urban and neighborhood problems (Orfield, 1997, 2002; Rusk, 1995, 1999). Regional equity organizing (REO) seeks to build a “metropolitan majority” in the declining and at-risk communities, to promote policies that slow or stop sprawl, create reinvestment in the core, and provide transportation to and housing in affluent suburbs for some poor people. These policies typically require action at regional and state levels. REO’s vision is an environmentally sustainable region, preserving its natural and architectural heritage in a compact urban core, with increasing economic and racial integration and equality.

**METHODS AND DATA**

Since 1995, I have done participant observation research with the Gamaliel Foundation, a national network of more than 40 regional community organizing affiliates. Most of my participant observation has been with the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope (NOAH) and its predecessor Gamaliel affiliates in and around Cleveland. I have attended local and national meetings and training, including Gamaliel’s national weeklong leadership training and two-day advanced leadership training. I have worked with organizers (paid staff) and leaders (volunteer activists) to create several projects, including a conference.
and report on regional dynamics in northeast Ohio. For the past two years I have served as a leader in NOAH, after my congregation joined this organization.

Being both an observer and a participant challenges my ability to do either one well. As an observer, participation can compromise my critical distance. I have worked hard to maintain this distance through writing, reading, and conversations with other scholars and participants. On the other hand, greater participation has improved my understanding of the culture and work of CBCO, and has given me greater access to events and people. As a participant, seeing myself as primarily an observer can make my organizing work halfhearted or insincere. Organizers and leaders have challenged me around this tension, and have helped me find ways to participate authentically while doing engaged scholarship with an intended audience of both activists and scholars.6

Along these lines, in 1996 I helped organize a national conference of CBCO organizers and leaders, scholars, and funders, to discuss collaborative work. In 2000, I served as a Participating Scholar in Interfaith Funder’s national study of CBCO (reported in Warren and Wood, 2001), helping to analyze surveys and in-depth interviews.

For this project, I conducted about two dozen interviews with local and national staff and leaders in the Gamaliel network. To identify the underlying ideologies of organizing, I examined official statements, language used at public events, and the language and practices of internal events, including training sessions and meetings.7

CONTEMPORARY CONGREGATION-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Saul Alinsky developed his style of organizing in the 1930s, influenced by the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the Unemployed Councils of the Communist Party. He saw himself as a nonideological radical, taking guidance from popular sentiments rather than fixed external systems. After building a successful organization in Chicago’s Back of the Yards Neighborhood, in 1940 he established the IAF to raise funds and help create new organizing projects. From the 1940s through the 1960s, he started projects in several cities, bringing together poor and working-class people around issues of immediate concern such as inadequate city services and lack of jobs. Alinsky trained community leaders to turn concern over problems into action on specific remedies (“issues”), to identify and confront relevant government or business figures, and to escalate pressure on these targets as far as necessary to win the issue. Alinsky groups became known for militant, often creative tactics that succeeded in winning better public services or concessions on jobs and other issues from businesses. However, many groups collapsed after a few years, and others became stagnant or reactionary (Reitzes and Reitzes, 1987).

Determined to prevent these outcomes, Ed Chambers and his top leaders modified Alinsky’s model, putting religion at the center organizationally and culturally. Although Alinsky had recruited all types of community groups into his local organizations, religious congregations now make up almost 90 percent of the membership of CBCO affiliates (Warren and Wood, 2001). These congregations, along with a sprinkling of unions, churches, and other member groups, pay dues to the affiliate, which uses these and other funds to hire one or more professional organizers and to pay for a consulting contract with the national network. In addition to strategic consultation, the network provides extensive training for leaders, opportunities for mutual support and collaboration among affiliates, and a pool of experienced organizers. Although still highly demanding, organizing
is treated as a profession with reasonable pay and benefits, rather than the sacrificial
calling that burned out many of Alinsky’s organizers. Organizers move horizontally and
vertically within the network; a common career move is from interning at a large affiliate
to becoming lead organizer at a smaller one.

Networks create new affiliates by sending one or more organizers to a community where
they spend substantial time developing a “sponsoring committee” of clergy, lay leaders,
and funders. Only when a certain level of membership and funding is reached does the
organization declare itself established and begin working on issues. Organizers and lead-
ers continue to recruit new congregations, train leaders, and create issue campaigns.
Affiliates are encouraged to establish a stable financial base with three equal funding
sources: dues from member organizations, foundation and other major donor contribu-
tions, and “grassroots fundraisers” such as banquets and ad books. Formal governing
structures usually consist of clergy and lay leaders, who may be elected or appointed by
member congregations and by other bodies such as affiliate-level clergy and lay leader
assemblies. Affiliates create ad hoc taskforces and other committees or working groups as
needed.

With a solid base of established congregations, a professional organizing staff, and
a formal but flexible structure, CBCO groups have endured and proliferated. From
1994 to 1999, the four networks grew 48 percent in affiliates, to 133, and 95 percent in
member organizations, to 4,000, with a combined individual membership of between 1
and 3 million people (Hart, 2001). Although most congregations in the United States are
racially homogenous, affiliates achieve diversity by recruiting a range of congregations.
In 1999, 36 percent of member congregations were mainly white, 35 percent mainly
African American, and 21 percent mainly Hispanic. About one-third are Catholic, with
Protestant denominations (except white evangelicals), Jewish, and Unitarian Universalist
congregations making up most of the balance, about in proportion to their numbers in the
general population. There is a sprinkling of other groups, including Islamic congregations.
There are affiliates in 33 states and the District of Columbia, but half are clustered in six

Ernesto Cortes, an IAF organizer who had worked closely with Catholic parishes in Texas,
convinced Chambers to look to the content of religion as well as its structure as a basis for
organizing. They transformed the organizational culture of the IAF by drawing on several
strands of liberal Christian theology, developing a language that blends Judeo-Christian
moral concepts with Alinsky’s emphasis on pragmatic self-interest. Training features Bible
stories, in which Moses, Christ, and others are held up as leaders who insisted on living
out their values by changing the world, not retreating from it. In the Gamaliel network,
organizing is said to be a way of “giving your faith feet.” Although faith values such as
justice and equality inform public statements, however, CBCO groups are careful to avoid
claiming divine inspiration or mandate for their issues.

CBCO culture blends this moral language with an emphasis on efficient and effective
action. Meetings may begin and end with prayer, but they also begin and end on time.
They include substantial time for evaluations of leaders’ and participants’ performances.
Honesty is stressed; evaluations can be quite frank and criticisms sharp. More generally,
the internal culture of CBCO stresses the development of interpersonal relationships
that allow leaders to hold one another accountable without damaging their ability to
work together. Leaders are explicitly trained in “agitation”—how to confront one another,
respectfully but forcefully, with unfulfilled obligations and unrealized potential, and to demand specific commitments and deadlines.

Chambers modified the strategy as well as the organization and culture of community organizing. Alinsky had positioned his groups as outsiders, pressuring decisionmakers and holding them accountable. CBCO groups want also to be insiders, gaining seats at the decision-making tables in the community. They seek to become large “power organizations” that win by thoroughly researching issues, building alliances, developing strong relationships with leaders in the public and private sectors, and staging large, dramatic public meetings to demonstrate grassroots support to targeted decisionmakers. They use confrontation more sparingly than did Alinsky, although organizers still see direct action as central to winning issues and developing leaders.

CBCO groups continue to avoid partisan participation in electoral politics and membership in long-term coalitions—organizers echo Alinsky’s motto of “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies.” The four networks rarely collaborate with each other, although they follow very similar models of organizing. Typically, they compete for funding, prestige, and territory, only rarely starting affiliates in cities that already have affiliates from another network.

Organizers see leadership training as the basic building block of strategy and as the core practice of community organizing. Each network provides extensive training at the local level and an intensive, several-day leadership training course offered one or more times a year at a central location. Training includes sessions on specific skills such as how to cut issues, conduct meetings, do community power analyses, run issue campaigns, and raise funds. Other sessions introduce the philosophy of organizing, emphasizing the need for ordinary people to seek and use power in pursuit of “self-interest.” This key concept is counterposed to narrow selfishness, on the one hand, and meek self-denial on the other. From Alinsky on, organizers have believed that the personal growth encouraged by organizers leads people to recognize that self-interest is relational—that the best way to advance one’s long-term interests is to build relationships with others in like situations and to advance together through systemic change (Rogers, 1990; Warren, 2001). Organizers train people to use “one-on-one” in-depth interviews to build relationships of mutual understanding and trust.

The most dramatic and tense training sessions focus on personal development. Organizers challenge leaders to identify and confront those things that keep them from recognizing and acting on self-interest and from seeking the power necessary to realize this self-interest. These obstacles might be personal traumas, social “oppressions” of race, class, or gender, belief in passive versions of the Judeo-Christian teachings, or habits of overintellectualizing. “Empowerment narratives,” in which experienced leaders describe how they overcame these obstacles, are an important part of CBCO’s rich culture (Hart, 2001).

The emphasis on personal development and relationship building highlights a basic difference between this model, which is sometimes called relational organizing, and issue- or ideology-based organizing. In relational organizing, issues are seen primarily as tools to create action campaigns that will develop leaders, deepen relationships, and build organizations, and only secondarily as goals with inherent social justice and social change value. Organizers typically describe their main goal as developing leaders, not as changing society. Embodying the organizer’s creed of “let the people decide,” relational organizing
 rests on the populist premise that a democratic process will produce a positive outcome. In issue-based organizing, specific issues are the starting point around which organizations and campaigns are built, while ideology-based organizing starts with a vision and analysis from which specific issues are derived. In both these forms, issues are valued more as ends than as means.

REGIONALISM AND CONGREGATION-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing traditionally has operated at the neighborhood and city levels and has targeted city government or local business. Since the 1970s, the fiscal crisis of cities, suburbanization, and increased capital mobility have diminished the capacity of most cities to solve their own problems and to meet the demands of organizing groups. Organizers have responded by creating larger-scale affiliates and coalitions to create metropolitan-wide issues that require action from regional bodies and state government. In 1996, the Gamaliel Foundation announced regional equity organizing as its fundamental strategy.

In the United States, regional planning ideas date back to the early 20th century. Some versions had roots in populist and socialist movements and reflected radical critiques of industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism, but regionalism was eventually incorporated into post-World War II growth coalition politics (Clavel, 2001). A “new regionalism” emerged in the 1990s among planners, architects, and urban scholars (Krumholz, 1996; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom, 2001). New regionalists see the metropolitan region as the key unit in the emerging global economy, and frame intra-regional cooperation as a strategy to enhance a region’s economic competitiveness. Progressive new regionalists identify growing disparities within regions as a major social problem. They argue that public policies and powerful private interests have created a snowballing process of sprawl and socioeconomic polarization in which, within each region, a few favored outer suburbs prosper at the expense of the core city and inner suburbs, which face declining resources and increased social needs. Progressive regionalists support “smart growth” land-use policies to limit or stop sprawl, and regional equity policies to reduce disparities in social needs and fiscal capacity among communities. They stress values of socioeconomic equity and environmental sustainability, echoing aspects of the older radical regionalist tradition.

The Gamaliel Foundation embraced progressive regionalism after ISAIAH, its Minneapolis affiliate, started working with Minnesota State Representative Myron Orfield. In 1991, Orfield began documenting the economic decline of the Twin Cities, including his district, and their inner suburbs, and the concentration of new growth in a “favored quarter” of outer suburbs. He led a legislative coalition to strengthen Minnesota’s innovative policies for tax-base sharing, in which wealthy suburbs contribute some portion of their revenue to less-affluent communities, and to promote other regional equity and smart growth measures. In 1993 he spoke to a meeting of ISAIAH leaders concerned about neighborhood deterioration. Convinced by Orfield’s metropolitan analysis, ISAIAH leaders interviewed community residents and decisionmakers in search of a winnable regional equity issue. They found that the prevalence of contaminated “brownfield” sites in the Twin Cities had been deterring economic growth. Potential investors feared the safety and liability problems of building on sites that had housed factories, gas stations, and other
sources of toxic pollution. Demanding equity with outer suburbs, whose development had been aided by substantial highway funding from state and federal sources, ISAIAH won $68 million in state funds to clean up brownfield sites.

Encouraged by this success, an ISAIAH organizer arranged for Orfield to speak to a meeting of Gamaliel’s senior staff—the most experienced organizers—in December 1995. The timing was propitious. Greg Galluzo, Gamaliel’s founder and executive director, had already suggested to the senior staff that local affiliates consolidate into regional bodies as an efficiency measure. Orfield used color-coded maps of a few key regions to demonstrate the growth and impact of sprawl and socioeconomic polarization and to make the argument that only regional equity organizing could stabilize and rebuild neighborhoods and cities in metropolitan cores. The senior staff were impressed and soon adopted REO as the guiding strategy for the network.\textsuperscript{15} They created a formal “strategic partnership” with Orfield and two other leading policy experts, David Rusk, former mayor of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and John Powell, founder/director of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty.\textsuperscript{16} The strategic partners work with national staff and leaders to develop networkwide strategy, and with affiliates to create regional strategies. They serve as keynote speakers at outreach and education events. Orfield has worked with many affiliates to produce studies and maps of their regions. These studies have become important organizing tools, making visible the underlying processes of sprawl and polarization, and showing their effects in terms of growing poverty, crime, and racial and economic segregation in cities and school districts, loss of public services, and rising tax rates.

Gamaliel’s “Statement on Regional Organizing” (2001) conveys the importance of regional equity organizing to the network.

When [community organizing] was first developed, many political and economic decisions were made in or near the community in which people lived and worked . . . Now, most important decisions are being made at a regional, national and global level. The power and significance of a neighborhood group has diminished. The Gamaliel Foundation encourages and assists in the creation of large metropolitan organizations that bridge divisions of race, class and political boundaries.

Reflecting the values underlying this, Gamaliel’s “Jubilee Statement” of 1999 says:

The third millennium offers us the opportunity to proclaim a new vision of the jubilee year that speaks to metropolitan America, afflicted as it is by racial and class division, by the socioeconomic wreckage of urban sprawl, by income inequalities, by the excesses of modern gated communities, by the disinvestment of our central cities and of our working class, older suburbs . . . . We proclaim that jubilee in our context is a time for metropolitan equities and the Common Good . . . . The Common Good in metropolitan areas across the United States advances when regional equity replaces inequity in tax-base, school funding, jobs, and transit access to jobs.

Organizationally, regional consolidation is proceeding throughout the network, with variations in pace and form. Strategically, guided by REO, Gamaliel affiliates have won fights to strengthen tax-base sharing in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, to create a regional mass transit system in the Detroit area, and for state support of local infrastructure and redevelopment in St. Louis and Buffalo. Other affiliates are pursuing greater public transit funding, comprehensive countywide planning, state funding for
brownfields cleanup, controls on urban sprawl, reducing municipal or school district funding disparities, and other smart growth and regional equity issues.

ORGANIZING, REGIONALISM, AND THE DILEMMA OF IDEOLOGY

Community organizers face a basic tension between populist and ideological approaches. Populism’s general sentiments and immediate appeal help in recruiting and retaining participants and in maintaining a moderate, respectable image. Populism, however, provides only a vague vision, analysis, and strategy. Political ideologies provide a clearer vision, more complex and consistent analysis, and longer-term strategy, but they often lack broad and immediate appeal.

Populism in the United States is rooted in early American ideals of participatory democracy and freedom from tyranny. It seeks to decentralize power and to identify and oppose forces that destroy community (Brinkley, 1982). Contemporary populists such as Evans and Boyte (1986) argue that political ideologies are too rigid and too remote from people’s experiences to appeal to more than a narrow range of people. They also claim that ideologies often become tools of organizers to dominate those whom they organize. In their view, the left-right dimension of political ideology is not as important as what they see as an independent, vertical dimension of populism versus elitism. They believe that populism’s core value of participatory democracy will guide populist movements in a progressive direction (Fisher and Kling, 1990).

Ideologically-oriented progressive organizers do not share this faith. They argue that because populism’s vision and analysis are vague or ambiguous, it often becomes conservative or reactionary, identifying government, minorities, and progressive movements as the enemy of the people and of community, instead of targeting concentrated wealth, big business, or capitalism. Kazin (1995) argues that starting in the 1940s, conservative populism has eclipsed progressive populism, as shown and fueled by presidential campaigns from George Wallace to Ronald Reagan. Some progressives offer a deeper critique, arguing that populism is inherently conservative because its language of “the people” and “community” diverts attention from the central realities of class and capitalism.

Others believe the tension between populism and ideology can be managed, if not eliminated, by combining the two approaches. Fisher and Kling (1990) cite Rudé’s (1980) analysis of the ideas guiding European and American protest movements and revolutions of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Rudé distinguished between inherent and derived “ideologies of protest.” The former are popular ideas and sentiments grounded in traditional rights. Although Rudé calls them ideologies, they are incomplete and often inconsistent. Fisher and Kling (1990) suggest that populism is the fundamental inherent ideology in American protest movements. According to Rudé, protests based solely in inherent ideologies can restore lost rights but rarely create forward-looking reforms. Derived ideologies, created by intellectuals and elites, are more complete and consistent, but they need a mass base to become effective in creating forward-looking social change. Political ideologies, as I have used the term, are more derived than inherent. According to Rudé, some protests create a two-way dialogue between elites and masses and derived and inherent ideologies, creating transformative movements.

This framework suggests that the success of CBCO depends partly on its ability to construct a consistently progressive populism by bringing into sustained and democratic
dialogue the inherent sentiments of populism and the derived frameworks of progressive ideologies. If this dialogue managed to broaden the appeal of CBCO’s rich, morally grounded discourse (Hart, 2001) beyond the traditional religious community, it might also help heal a longstanding split between progressive religious and secular populists that, since the 1920s, has contributed to the decline of progressive populism and the rise of the Christian right (Kazin, 1995).17

Chambers and his associates changed important aspects of Alinsky’s organizing model, but they perpetuated his avoidance of political ideology.18 Critics of Alinsky argue that this avoidance, along with the failure to engage in any deeper political education, contributed to Alinsky’s original Back of the Yards project evolving into an enclave-oriented, segregationist group after he left for other projects (Fisher and Kling, 1990). In their view, the exclusive reliance on populist language creates political volatility.

CBCO’s incorporation of liberal theology and Gamaliel’s turn to regionalism have tempered this populist approach with elements of a more ideologically-driven practice. In the rest of this section, I will examine how these influences shape the Gamaliel Foundation’s approach to the dilemma of ideology.

VISION

A comprehensive ideology provides a vision of the good society that specifies desirable social arrangements including key issues of economic ownership and control, markets, and the role of the state. For social change movements and organizations, such visions can mobilize activists and provide guidance in choosing short-term, winnable issues that would lead in the direction of more long-term changes. On the other hand, emphasizing fundamental alternatives can be divisive and may divert energy from action to talk. In the United States, groups emphasizing progressive alternatives are readily marginalized and repressed.

These concerns contribute to CBCO’s tendency to avoid all but the most noncontroversial statements about broad social visions (Hart, 2001). Instead, CBCO groups emphasize core values, suggesting implicitly that the right values will lead to the right social arrangements. Organizers often exhort leaders to gain power so they can “live out their values.” However, there is little discussion of which values are worth living out. Core values are rarely named. Hart (2001) says that CBCO groups treat the realm of values as a black box with unspecified content. This may overstate the case. Explicitly or implicitly, CBCO stresses equality and justice, for example. But Hart is right that given the stated emphasis on values, there is relatively little effort to identify and define key values, or to contrast them with competing values.

Rather than stressing values, some groups that also choose to minimize debate and discussion over long-term alternatives develop programs of middle-term reforms that taken together point toward more fundamental changes. Drawing on Rudé’s analysis, Kling and Posner (1990) argue that progressive groups can use a program to create a dialogue between inherent and derived ideologies. They can frame demands in ways that connect local issues, even “defensive” ones, to larger questions of the distribution of wealth and power and the role of the state. For example, an organization can fight a toxic waste site using populist calls for community control, or it can frame its demands in terms of a progressive call for stronger and more democratically formulated government regulation of
business. The latter strategy contributes to the political education of activists and others, paving the way for increasing specificity of long-term vision.

CBCO groups have been reluctant to go even this far in specifying goals beyond those that are immediately winnable. Regionalism, however, is encouraging and helping Gamaliel groups to do so. Statements such as the new regionalist Charter for the Congress on New Urbanism advocate compact, sustainable, racially and economically integrated regions, with mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods and other specific features. These statements influence CBCO indirectly, mediated by policy experts like Rusk, Orfield, and Powell, and incorporated into explicit goals of racial and economic integration, and policies such as urban growth boundaries, tax-base sharing, more mass transit, and reinvestment in core communities. Individually, these policies are closer to strategies, but collectively they approach the level of vision, at least at the regional level. Regional smart growth and equity policies also point toward a national platform of federal regulations and funding. Gamaliel has not adopted such a platform, preferring to address issues that can be won with “strategic campaigns” of two years or less, but there is increasing discussion of the need for national policy reform.

Beyond challenging CBCO to be more specific, regionalism also reinforces its progressive direction. Most regionalist policies require active government intervention in the market, a basic premise of progressive policies. Some go beyond conventional liberal solutions. For example, Rusk (1999) criticizes liberal anti-poverty programs that give money to poor people and neighborhoods without addressing basic dynamics of regional polarization. He advocates “fair housing” policies that place low- and moderate-income housing in affluent suburbs, challenging dominant values of meritocracy and local autonomy (a major populist tenet).

Regionalism encourages and helps Gamaliel to be more specific in its discussion of values. Gamaliel’s 1999 “Jubilee Statement” reflects environmental as well as social justice values.

We affirm that [in] a world where resources are often concentrated in the hands of a few, we are called to work for equity, justice and dignity on behalf of the poor and oppressed. As part of God’s creation, we are called to be wise stewards of the earth in the face of forces that exploit, consume, or pollute the environment.

Progressive regionalism’s core values of equity and sustainability are quite compatible with the culture of CBCO. Developing a more extensive, interrelated, and specific set of values reinforces and is reinforced by the process of developing a clearer program for realizing these values.

ANALYSIS

In terms of analysis, the dilemma of ideology is how to recognize and take seriously people’s common-sense accounts of problems, while working with them to develop more complex and consistent explanations of underlying causes. CBCO follows the populist tendency to claim that power is too concentrated, without specifying in whose hands. This analysis is broadly appealing, but by encompassing both conservative and progressive populism, points to contradictory solutions.

I saw this problem illustrated in 1998 at Gamaliel’s National Leadership Assembly (NLA), the annual gathering of organizers and leaders. At one major plenary, keynote
speaker Jim Hightower, a progressive populist, denounced the growing concentration of wealth and corporate power, and called for greater federal regulation of the economy and redistribution of wealth and income. The next evening, neoconservative Rev. Floyd Flake, former congressman from New York, criticized people’s overdependence on government. He demanded a smaller role for government and more economic entrepreneurship from his fellow African Americans. Leaders gave both speakers prolonged standing ovations. For the rest of the meeting I heard no public or private discussion of the incompatibility of these two views.19

As this episode suggests, CBCO’s incorporation of liberal theology had not substantially raised the salience and consistency of analysis in CBCO beyond that found in Alinsky’s populist-style organizing. Regionalism, however, is starting to do so. According to Mike Kruglik, Gamaliel’s Director of Regional Organizing, regionalism

has produced an analysis that explains the felt effects in poor neighborhoods, such as crime, drugs, poor schools, crumbling streets, lack of youth recreation; regional organizing gives people an analysis of why these problems are increasing and spreading; an analysis that does not blame the people who live in those communities.20

Sometimes, this analysis simply helps explain problems while organizing around traditional neighborhood issues. Increasingly, it is used to cut regional issues, as I will discuss in more detail below. Regional analysis has become part of the everyday language of Gamaliel leaders and organizers, embodied in the routine use of concepts such as sprawl, polarization, smart growth, and equity. At a recent NOAH meeting, a member of Gamaliel’s senior staff chastised a leader for not knowing the meaning of the acronym MPO (metropolitan planning organization). Leadership skills now include understanding and being able to explain both the abstract process of metropolitan dynamics and the specific circumstances of one’s own region.

This insistence on developing a comprehensive analysis of key forces, however, does not extend to the national political economy. At a week-long training session in 2002, for example, a senior staff member did tell leaders that they must develop a larger political analysis.21 He argued that good analysis had been critical in the success of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela as leaders. Despite this, during the week there were no sessions or sustained discussions on either the process of developing an analysis or its possible content. Trainers did not provide reading lists or other resources. Nor was a deeper political analysis incorporated into other sessions. During that same week, for example, another senior staff member discussed how individualism undermines community. She identified the easy availability of television, drugs, and email as root causes of individualism, without touching on deeper socioeconomic or cultural causes.

At a more modest level, regionalism has encouraged organizers and leaders to look at national policy as it affects metropolitan development patterns. Whether this will encourage analysis of more fundamental issues underlying specific policies is still an open question.

Regionalism affects the content as well as the perceived importance of analysis. It is encouraging organizers and leaders to develop a more consistent analysis of who has power, one that is more likely to sound like Hightower’s brand of progressive populism than like Flake’s neoconservative version. Regional analysis focuses attention on long-term processes of polarization that create a basic conflict of interests between a small group of increasingly affluent communities and a large group of declining or at-risk communities.
It also points to the role of powerful business interests and government policy, and the influence of the former on the latter in contributing to sprawl and polarization.

Regionalism connects these processes to class and race. Regional polarization means that many communities become more internally homogenous—some seeing growth in concentrated poverty, others in concentrated wealth. As community and class begin to coincide, analysis of community-level conflicts includes more class content. Instead of just discussing “inner-ring suburbs,” for example, organizers and leaders often speak of “working-class suburbs,” sometimes adding racial categories reflecting persistent racial segregation as well. The more regionalism winds up analyzing relations among cities that are segregated economically, racially, or both, the more regional equity organizing moves toward consistent consideration of class and race relations in the United States. The more this analysis focuses attention on growing disparities, the more it sharpens the question of basic conflicts of interest and systemic sources of exploitation. Gamaliel’s 2002 “Statement on Metropolitan Organizing” says:

The poor, working class and middle class citizens in cities and older suburbs subsidize the development of these wealthy, exclusive, mainly white suburbs sprawling at the edges of the region . . . . These metropolitan patterns account for much of the growing gap between rich and poor in America and contribute to racial isolation and segregation. We have created a Robin Hood in reverse syndrome in the country; we take from the poor and give to the rich.

STRATEGY

Strategy connects an analysis of what is with a vision of what should be. Populist community organizing, resting on a relatively broad vision and loose analysis, seeks to empower people, believing that they will find an effective path toward good goals. Progressive ideological community organizing seeks to guide people toward creating the kind of society embodied in its more specific and sweeping vision, basing strategies on its more in-depth analysis of the existing political economy. The dilemma of ideology, in terms of strategy, is how to be both democratic and directive. This dilemma plays out in at least three aspects of strategy: cutting issues, political education of leaders, and working in coalition with other groups.

Populist organizing sees issues more as tools than as ends in themselves, rarely emphasizes political education, and views coalitions as tactical, short-term relationships to advance specific issues. Ideologically-based organizing tends to focus on the inherent value of issues, especially those that can create “structural reforms” that shift the balance of power and lead to deeper changes. Ideologically-based organizing stresses political education and looks to create long-term coalitions around fundamental issues.

Alinsky’s approach to strategy was close to the populist end of the spectrum. Contemporary CBCO strategy has been moving slowly toward more ideologically-based organizing. As many communities have become worse off in spite of wins on traditional issues dealing with city government and local business, organizers have started to emphasize key policy issues at higher levels of government or corporate decision making. The growth and persistence of affiliates and their pattern of clustering in specific states has encouraged this increase in scope and scale of issues. This, in turn, has created a greater need for political education, at least at a pragmatic, policy-oriented level, and longer-term coalition building.
Regionalism has accelerated this movement away from purely populist strategy. I will briefly discuss issues, education, and coalitions, and then I will describe how regional equity organizing has begun to change the process of creating strategy.

In regional equity organizing, organizers still see issues as tools for developing leaders and organizations, and only choose issues that will interest and mobilize their leadership base. But they place more weight than before on the inherent value of issues, specifically on their capacity to affect sprawl, polarization, and the public policies and private practices creating these trends. I have already mentioned several regional equity issues being pursued by Gamaliel affiliates. Throughout the network, organizers and leaders are investing substantial time in researching and identifying winnable regional equity issues. In northeast Ohio, for example, NOAH created “equity teams” of leaders to consult with local experts on land use, education, banking policies, and other potential issue areas. These teams spent six months conducting interviews and reading reports before meeting together to select an action issue.22

Regional equity issues tend to be complex. Mike Kruglik notes: “It’s harder for folks to immediately understand tax sharing, state health care, [or] tax credits than it is to say ‘Let’s get rid of the drug house on the corner, [or] get a grocery store [for the neighborhood].’ This is the biggest challenge of regional organizing.”23 To meet this challenge, Gamaliel affiliates spend more time than before in training, seminars, and other venues, teaching leaders about regional dynamics, policies, and politics. They stop short of what ideologically-oriented organizers might call for, only rarely expanding the discussion to look at national and global matters. Nevertheless, I think it is reasonable to call this work political education, as it asks people to learn about long-term social processes, the structures and beliefs that create them, and the policy alternatives that might change them.

Regional affiliates also try to frame campaigns in ways that illuminate regional dynamics, even when the campaigns center on issues that appear purely local. For example, NOAH recently did take on an issue Kruglik mentioned as typical of local organizing—getting a grocery store for a neighborhood. A major grocery chain had closed the last full-service store serving a central city neighborhood. NOAH succeeded in pressuring the chain, through boycotts and other means, to allow another chain to take over the lease. Throughout the campaign, NOAH showed how this problem was part of a pattern of disinvestment from central-city neighborhoods. The campaign expanded to include allies from throughout the region and Gamaliel affiliates from other parts of Ohio and from nearby states, where this chain had acted in the same fashion. Even though the campaign did not create a more profound, long-term issue, it did serve to educate leaders and others on patterns of investment and disinvestment, and helped build a regional coalition.

Regionalism encourages affiliates to form more diverse, longer-term coalitions. As organizations of organizations, CBCO affiliates are coalitions of a sort. Regional organizing requires affiliates to diversify this coalition by expanding beyond their traditional base in the core city to the inner suburbs and perhaps some fiscally-stressed outer suburbs. This typically means creating a cross-class, multiracial coalition of member congregations. Regional affiliates also seek more enduring external alliances and coalitions. For example, NOAH has worked to develop a strong relationship with the First Suburbs Consortium, a coalition of elected officials from inner-ring suburbs, even though they have yet to find a common issue.

Taken together, these changes in approach to issues, education, and allies make for a longer-term, more-focused strategy. However, there is still relatively little discussion in
the network about how to link this metropolitan strategy to any larger social change efforts. Many organizers distance CBCO not just from older forms of organizing, but also from social movements, which are dismissed as ephemeral and contrasted with the stability of CBCO (Rogers, 1990; Wood, 2002). This tendency has been tempered by a more positive view of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and even by efforts to frame CBCO as the next civil rights movement. However, there is little consideration given to how organizing might relate at the national level to other forms of progressive politics. Although Orfield (1997) suggests that the metropolitan majority can become a model and a basis for a national electoral coalition, this possibility is not yet being explored.

The process of creating strategy has also changed under the influence of regional equity organizing. At affiliate and national levels, there is a more sustained dialogue among policy experts, organizers, and leaders. Horizontal links among affiliates are also growing. Despite differences in specific conditions, they are dealing with a common set of problems and a common analytic framework. They discuss these and work together on developing strategies at formal workshops and informal conversations at the National Leadership Assembly and other venues. As attendance at the NLA has grown substantially—from fewer than 100 at the first NLA in 1997 to more than 600 in 2002—more leaders have participated in these conversations and have built relationships with people from other affiliates. Many affiliates fund travel for organizers and leaders to attend meetings and public events in nearby regions, to learn and to lend support.

Together, these vertical and horizontal links are creating a network with more interconnections and greater opportunity for dialogue between regional experts and grassroots leaders.

Even though regionalism is not a comprehensive derived ideology, as it focuses on metropolitan issues without consistently linking them to larger-scale structures and processes, this dialogue continues to move CBCO away from a purely populist model toward developing a clearer vision, deeper analysis, and long-term strategy. Whether this process can continue without sacrificing the strengths of populist, relational organizing is an important question. Part of the answer depends on how Gamaliel groups manage the dilemma of scale.

ORGANIZING, REGIONALISM, AND THE DILEMMA OF SCALE

As organizing moves from local to regional and perhaps beyond, the dilemma of scale manifests itself sharply in terms of organization and identity. Organizational problems include how to retain participatory democracy while creating larger groups that encompass more people and a wider geographic area, and how to administer larger units. The identity problem is how to extend people’s sense of community beyond the neighborhood or city to at least the region.

As affiliates become regional, leaders travel longer distances to meetings and organizers have greater administrative burdens. Some problems can be solved by creating or retaining smaller units. Many regional affiliates continue to do local training and meetings and to cut neighborhood and city issues. But as more key decisions are made at the regional level, more effort is required to encourage widespread participation in meetings, training, and public events. In metropolitan regions around major cities like Chicago, this means some
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Leaders must drive for up to two hours each way to attend regional meetings. This places a disproportionate burden on low-income people.

Larger affiliates also place a greater administrative burden on organizers. Much of their work involves one-on-one meetings with clergy and lay leaders, so covering a larger geographic area is very time consuming. This problem is greatest for affiliates that have had problems raising sufficient money to hire more than one or two organizers. Affiliates that have been more financially successful have been able to divide their region among different organizers, each of whom is responsible for a relatively compact area with a reasonable number of member congregations.

Not all organizational problems have organizational solutions. Additional travel time for key leaders, for example, cannot be eliminated, although car pooling and other measures can help. Leaders must be convinced that the benefits of regional organizing outweigh the costs; they must come to identify their fate with that of their region.

As Mike Kruglik has found, however, it is “hard to get people to think in a way that is not parochial; really believing in their heart, their gut, that what happens elsewhere in the region affects their community.”

Northeast Ohio illustrates this problem. NOAH was created out of two countywide affiliates, one in Cuyahoga, which includes Cleveland and its surrounding suburbs, and one in less-densely-populated Lorain County. At first, leaders in Cuyahoga did not see Lorain as integral to their work and tended to ignore the concerns of people in Lorain. Leaders in Lorain, while understanding the central role of Cleveland in the region, felt slighted by this lack of consideration. People from Lorain and Cuyahoga worked together for a year to develop a regional analysis. They fought together on the “regionalized” grocery store issue in Lorain. After these experiences, NOAH leaders tend to identify their community as northeast Ohio rather than one of its subunits.

How well Gamaliel affiliates manage the organizational and identity dimensions of scale will greatly influence the network’s ability to move toward statewide and national-scale organizing. Although it is too early to measure outcomes, I believe that regionalism increases Gamaliel’s capacity to manage the dilemmas of scale. Regionalism provides organizers and leaders with a common intellectual and strategic framework and encourages an expanded sense of identity and community.

DILEMMAS OF REGIONAL ORGANIZING

Regional organizing creates two new sets of tensions, one involving targets and one involving resistance to regional equity policies. A major strength of local organizing has been the availability and immediacy of legitimate targets—municipal governments, local businesses, and so forth. Depending on the issue, metropolitan organizing may have fewer, less-powerful targets because most regions lack strong metropolitan governing or planning bodies. To win metropolitan issues, organizers may target county-level or state-level agencies or the federally mandated metropolitan planning organizations that manage transportation and transit spending. They may campaign to create, strengthen, or democratize metropolitan planning bodies. These strategies require more creativity and sustained organizing than does going after city hall. The challenge for organizers is to retain the immediacy of local organizing while seeking targets at the metropolitan level.
Second, regional equity organizing can create new forms of resistance, including enclave organizing in affluent suburbs. Wealthy suburbs mounted a sustained legal challenge against the Twin Cities tax-base sharing plan, for example. This challenge ended when the U.S. Supreme Court declared the plan constitutional (Orfield, 1997). Many communities around Chicago and elsewhere are fiercely resisting fair housing plans that require them to accept some amount of low- and moderate-income housing. Goetz (2000) argues that organizers have stiffened this resistance by how they make the case for fair housing. In stressing the dangers to a community of concentrated poverty, he believes, fair housing advocates have increased stereotyping and fear of poor people among residents of more affluent communities. Proponents of fair housing would no doubt argue that these suburbs would resist economic integration regardless of the rhetoric used by organizers.

Regionalists expect opposition from more affluent suburbs. Regional equity organizing aims to create a metropolitan majority to defeat this resistance politically, not to argue it away. More threatening to regional organizing are issues that can divide its base. Goetz (2000) says that the Chicago fair housing campaign did just this. Although some poor people did want to move to more affluent areas, others, particularly members of recent immigrant communities, preferred to stay in the central city rather than be scattered among different suburbs. This led to sharp political disputes over whether efforts should focus on fair housing in the suburbs or on directing resources to poor people in the central city. It is not clear that this kind of conflict is inherent in fair housing campaigns; this one may have been poorly managed.

Creating mechanisms for regional cooperation or regional governance can divide regionalism’s potential base. People and organizations with power in individual cities can fear loss of autonomy. In particular, members of racial and ethnic groups who had been excluded from power until they achieved majority status in core cities can see regionalism as another attempt by the majority to disenfranchise them. Orfield, Rusk, Powell, and others argue that regional organizers must take these concerns seriously while making the case for regionalism with these groups and their elected representatives, and while building a coalition based on mutual self-interest and respect.

Regional equity organizing does create some new dilemmas and conflicts. Advocates believe that skillful organizing can manage them.

THE EFFECTS OF ORGANIZING ON REGIONALISM

In regions where CBCO has won major equity campaigns, organizing has helped make regionalism more effective, more radical in the sense of making stronger demands, and more populist.

Orfield says, “Gamaliel is one of the only organizations in the nation with broad multiracial leadership focused on a regional reform agenda” (Orfield, 2002, p. 180). He credits congregation-based organizing with playing a key role in implementing smart growth and regional equity policies in Minnesota and elsewhere. Rusk (1999) describes how Gamaliel’s northwest Indiana affiliate helped build a coalition that has won important land-use issues. I have already discussed the work of other affiliates in gaining funding for brownfields cleanup, regional transportation, and state support of local infrastructure and redevelopment.

CBCOs clearest contribution to these successes has been the mobilization of grassroots pressure on elected officials and others. Another, less obvious, contribution has been the
ability to use rich moral language to create more radical demands. According to Orfield, congregation-based community organizing allows you to raise issues that no one else can in the political debate, particularly when it’s a rabbi, a Baptist minister, a Catholic priest, a Muslim all together at once asking the same question... one of the things that happens when the religious community gets involved in it is they up the ante—they say this isn’t a big enough step you’re taking... because [the problem is] just so unjust, and they look at the incrementalism of a public policy approach and it isn’t fast enough.25

Organizing also gives regionalism a more populist character. Regionalism has been dominated by planners and policy experts, most of whom are white middle-class professionals. CBCO’s base and leadership are diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. Although regionalists have challenged organizers and leaders to think about and act on longer-term, more fundamental reforms, organizers have challenged regionalists to deepen their commitments to grassroots politics and genuinely participatory planning.

This coalition also revives some of regionalism’s early populist themes. Clavel (2001) notes that Patrick Geddes, a leader of the early 20th-century regionalist movement, promoted a community-based process of “regional surveys” to create a common vision. Regional equity organizing encourages grassroots participation in researching and creating issues that reflect and contribute to a progressive vision of the good region.

CONCLUSIONS

The dilemmas of ideology and scale cannot be solved, but the tensions they generate can be managed. The integration of regionalism into congregation-based community organizing is a fairly new development that may help organizing do so. It has already helped Gamaliel and its affiliates to develop more specific, complex, and consistent visions, analyses, and strategies, and to use these to create a more effective practice at a larger scale. How much further it will do so depends on the extent to which organizers and leaders consciously use regionalism to continue on this path, and attempt to connect regionalism to more fully developed political ideologies addressing national and global issues.

Visions of the good region can be extended, not just in a simple additive fashion, but also by asking questions about the kinds of national and global structures needed to support equitable and sustainable regions. Analyses of the causes of sprawl and polarization can be linked to analyses of corporate power, the role of the state, and trends, including the polarization of wealth and income at national and global levels. The strategy of building metropolitan majorities can be more systematically connected to national strategies.

Similarly, congregation-based community organizing has moved progressive regionalism in a more radical, populist direction. The future of this process depends in part on how strongly regionalists embrace grassroots organizing as integral to the development of an effective, transformative practice.

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Notes

1 This practice is also called faith-based, broad-based, or institutional-based organizing.
2 Of the 133 organizations in existence in 1999, 21 had been founded between 1972 and 1984 (Warren and Wood, 2001).
3 I am less familiar with the work of the fourth network, Direct Action and Research Training (DART), about which less has been written.
4 Following Hart (2001), I use the term progressive to mean left of center, liberal to socialist politics.
5 Posner separates what I call the dilemma of ideology into two sets of tensions: inherent versus derived ideology, and class versus community. For my purposes they can be combined.
7 Many official statements can be found on the Gamaliel website, <www.gamaliel.org>.
8 See note 2.
9 Hart (2001) argues that this more modest approach distinguishes CBCO from many other religiously-based groups, including most evangelical conservative groups.
10 More than 100,000 people attended at least one CBCO public meeting in an 18-month period in 1998 and 1999 (Warren and Wood, 2001).
11 Part of the reason for this similarity is that the heads of the other three networks were trained as organizers by the IAF.
12 Gamaliel, for example, conducts three or four week-long training sessions at a conference center or college campus, each attended by more than 100 new leaders and organizers who live together in what becomes a very intense and challenging experience.
14 Orfield later was elected to the Minnesota State Senate, which he left in 2002 to become Director of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty.
15 Formally, they presented REO to an annual gathering of organizers and staff, called the National Leadership Assembly, which then adopted the strategy.
16 Powell is now Professor of Law and Director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University and, as mentioned, was replaced by Orfield as head of the Institute on Race and Poverty. Gamaliel has also added George Ranney, President of Chicago Metropolis 2020, a business-based regionalist organization, as a fourth strategic partner.
17 There is a tension between broadening this appeal and watering it down so far that it weakens the base within the religious community. To some extent CBCO groups already face this tension in working with different faith traditions. Also worth noting is Hart’s (2001) contention that CBCO’s rich discourse gives it an almost unique position on the left as a counter to the appeal of the Christian right.
18 Fisher and Kling (1990) claim that Alinsky’s early organizing efforts did incorporate a loose “anti-fascism,” but that after 1945, he rejected even this minimal ideology.
19 It is hard to generalize too far from this one episode; leaders may have been carried away by Flake’s oratory, his message of racial equality, or his presence as a powerful African American. His appearance was an exception—in previous and subsequent years, NLA speakers have all been progressive. But the response to this exception suggests that political education was not a priority in the network.
20 Author’s interview with Michael Kruglik, by telephone, May 2, 2002.
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This training was held in a nearby city. I was allowed to attend as an observer and evaluator. Staff take turns serving as trainers and evaluators. During every long break in the training, they gather for what are often very frank oral evaluations and discussions.

NOAH is currently working to stop predatory lending in the region, framing the issue as one where central-city and inner-city residents are targeted, and that results in disinvestment as well as victimization based on class and race.

Author’s interview with Michael Kruglik, by telephone, May 2, 2002.

Author’s interview with Michael Kruglik, by telephone, May 2, 2002.

Author’s interview with Myron Orfield, by telephone, October 3, 2002.

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