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Community Organizing Work as Contradictory Professional Work

Clément Petitjean, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne

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Abstract

Although the professional dimension of community organizing in the United States has been one of its well-established, distinctive features for several decades now, it has remained surprisingly understudied. Drawing from ethnographic data collected in Chicago, this paper takes the professional dimension of organizing work as a genuine object of study in order to shift the focus of analysis from the cause of building people power to its conditions of possibility. Borrowing from theoretical insights developed by social scientists, political theorists, and labor organizers, it develops an understanding of professional work that doesn't conflate professionalization dynamics with commodification on nonprofitization. Its main arguments are that community organizing work can be analyzed as a contradictory form of professional work performed by an intermediate, semi-autonomous layer of professional organizers, that it produces specific, complex power dynamics over community residents, and that a critical yet balanced perspective on the professional dimension of organizing can yield fruitful conversations about how to sustain organizing practices in the future.

Keywords: community organizing, professionalization, activism, professional work

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Introduction

In March 2017, I met with Tom in Chicago. Now in his late sixties, the long-time community organizer was working for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH), one of the city's larger community-based organizations. As a white student living in the Midwest on his way to becoming a priest, he had participated to interracial civil rights movement activity in the mid-1960s before being drawn towards the community organizing tradition established by Saul Alinsky. At the time I was conducting ethnographic research for a PhD on community organizers in Chicago. As a French sociologist, I was curious to unpack the meanings and practices behind the "community organizing" and "community organizer" labels, whose aura was all the more intriguing since they have no real equivalent in the French language and context. As I was telling Tom about my research, he used an intriguing distinction to explain how community organizing differed from other forms of collective action. While community organizing was like a "professional electrician," activism was similar to "a handyman doing electrical". To illustrate the metaphor, he took the example of a march organized in Chicago the night after Donald Trump's election. "People just were saying 'fuck you,' which is ok. But eventually, if you want to change the world… That's why I was so frustrated. It was a march, but what did the march do? Was there a purpose behind it?"[1]

To quite a few community organizers working in the US, the distinction between organizing and activism will feel obvious and justified. But for people who haven't internalized the rules and norms of US organizing and/or who speak other languages, it is actually quite confusing. In French for instance, both words translate into "*militantisme*." As a Spanish-speaking US community organizer recently suggested in a podcast, Latin American Spanish speakers might very well be bemused by the distinction too[2].

This article contends that, to reimagine the scholarship and practice of community organizing, it is important to take what feels obvious and justified to critical scrutiny and to take Tom's "professional electrician" metaphor seriously. That's where critical social science comes in: to question and look beyond what people take for granted in order to uncover underlying logics and structures, conflicting sets of actors and interests at play, visible and less visible forms of power—in the hope that doing so will provide not just further knowledge about the social order, but also conceptual tools for emancipation.

In this regard, professionalization is a word that must be dealt with carefully because it carries normative, morally charged connotations. If the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines professionalization as the fact of giving a professional character to something, where "professional" is understood as "participating for gain or livelihood in an activity or field of endeavor often engaged in by amateurs" or "having a particular profession as a permanent career," then the professionalizing of commitment writ large will immediately raise concerns. Because of strong cultural and historical associations between voluntarism, disinterestedness, and the nobility of a given cause, the introduction of money inevitably conjures up the specter of interest and moral and political corruption (Bourdieu 2003; Fisher 2006). On the other hand, those who don't take issue with the professionalization of politics and commitment will argue

1 Interview with author, March 15th, 2017. For purposes of anonymity, some of the organizers' names below are pseudonyms. I also want to thank Rob Kleidman, Margaret Post, and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful insights and suggestions.

2 The organizer is Vera Parra, speaking with William Lawrence and Jasson Perez on the Hegemonicon podcast, Convergence Magazine: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-state-of-the-community-organizing-model-what/id1707254228?i=1000636793591. There might be non-US national contexts where a similar distinction exists, but its history could arguably be traced back to a circulation of ideas and people originally trained in the United States or by US organizers, as is the case in France.

that the drive to professionalize—to create more stable paid positions, raise wages or provide access to health care, for instance—can be seen as a positive way to retain people's commitments and avoid movement burnout, as well as help them find ways to balance their personal and work lives. It can also be seen as an effective way to develop self-sustaining organizations pooling together skills and expertise.

Looking at the professional dynamics at play in community organizing practice from a paid-versus-volunteer-work perspective is too restrictive, however. Instead, I argue that analyzing community organizing work as a contradictory form of professional work performed by an intermediate, semi-autonomous layer of professional organizers that produces specific power dynamics over community residents can yield more fruitful conversations about how to sustain organizing practices in the future. In what ways do these asymmetries of power bolster empowerment in poor communities? What dynamics of professionalization allow that to happen more widely than if organizers were absent? In what ways do these asymmetries (re)produce domination? What dynamics of professionalization encourage that? After laying out the five core components of professional work, I apply this conceptual framework to community organizing practices to identify the forms of empowerment that organizers produce and the tensions shaping them. I conclude by suggesting ways in which such a framework and the comparison with recent labor upsurges can help community organizers and leaders envision the future of the work.

To make my case, I rely on the ethnographic data collected in Chicago between 2015 and 2018 and in 2023. I conducted more than eighty interviews with active professional organizers, community leaders, social movement activists, labor organizers, program officers in philanthropic foundations, academics, journalists, and people who had worked as full-time organizers before moving on to other jobs. As a participant observer, I attended rallies, public meetings, hearings, as well as grassroots lobbying efforts in Springfield, Illinois, and a national five-day organizing training at the Midwest Academy. To give historical depth to my study, I went through the archives of several national institutions (Industrial Areas Foundation, National Organizers Alliance) in Chicago, Texas, and Maryland. To better situate Chicago within the multifaceted universe of community organizing, I also conducted complementary fieldwork in Detroit in 2016. Although Chicago has undoubtedly occupied a unique place in the history of community organizing (and it still does), I believe that the analysis below can resonate beyond Chicago, as it the product a constant back-and-forth between my empirical data, social science theoretical frameworks, and comparisons with other case studies and testimonies from organizers themselves from all over the United States.

As a final introductory word, I should also clarify that I'm working with a definition of community organizing that sees it as a US-specific form of collective action. I characterize community organizing as exhibiting the following core features: first, it enables individuals and/or pre-existing institutions (neighborhood groups, faith communities, schools) to come together to defend their collective interests and the common good through organized participation to public affairs; second, it fosters forms of volunteer, "lay" community representation (in opposition with professional political actors like elected officials) often referred to as "leadership development"; third, it is grounded in an explicit division of labor between the person who embodies that form of representation (the leader) and the person who makes it possible (the organizer), who works in a full-time, paid capacity.

Defining Professional Work and Professionalism

While social scientists have looked at how professionalization have shaped activism and participatory politics for decades (Kleidman 1994; Fisher 2006), the concept of professionalization is too often taken as a synonym for institutionalization, whereby loose, informal networks of actors cohere into formalized organizational vehicles. Despite their merits, these vehicles can then lead to cooptation by the elites, loss of dynamic contact with innovative collective action, and consolidation of social divides between organizational leaders and rank-and-file membership. A contemporary reformulation of this line of analysis is called "NGOization" or "nonprofitization"—the increasingly central place that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, by extension, nonprofit organizations, occupy in struggles for social justice. Laden with strongly negative connotations, the term refers to the intertwined processes of overspecialization of issues, rationalization of activist work and submission to managerial norms, neutralization of social criticism in favor of compromise and negotiation, and betrayal and dispossession of the voice of dominated groups by expert staffers who lack meaningful ties with the proverbial grassroots. Calling out the nonprofit industrial complex (Incite! 2007) has been incorporated into US activist common sense in general and into community organizing lingo in particular. It's become common to hear or read organizers borrow from this critical toolkit to reflect on their work practices and the structural constraints that weigh down on them (Luo 2023).

The main problem with this focus is that it fails to balance the assessment of real institutional constraints with an analysis of organizers' agency and the work that they perform. It is also unable to fully account for Tom's metaphor of the professional electrician and the handyman. More useful for this analysis is the work on contradictory dynamics of professionalization by social scientists like Magali Sarfatti Larson and Andrew Abbott, who argue that professionalization is about groups of people using various resources to establish an exclusive form of control over a particular chunk of work and fending off other actors who are also interested in performing that same chunk of work, or bits of it (Sarfatti Larson 1977; Abbott 1988). In industrialized societies, professional work is endowed with positive qualities under the banner of "professionalism," connoting competence and trustworthiness, which makes it particularly appealing to groups of workers who are looking for occupational control of their work (Evetts 2003). Although the fact that "modern professions organize to exchange their services for *a price*" is a determining factor in their genealogies, it is important to note that these analyses do not fold professional dynamics back onto the logic of commodification, "the extension of capitalist exchange relations to all areas of human activity." (Sarfatti Larson 1977, 209)

For the purposes of this article, five core elements will be used to assess community organizing work. First, looking at professional dynamics means starting with the work people actually perform. Broadly speaking, professional work can be broken down into three basic phases: identifying and classifying a given problem (diagnosis), reasoning about it and considering possible solutions (inference), and taking action to solve the problem (treatment). Professional work, therefore, is founded on a commitment to and belief in science, reason, and rationalization as ways toward solving concrete problems and advancing social progress. Second, these operations require certain manual or cognitive skills that are "tied directly to a system of knowledge that formalizes the skills on which this work proceeds." (Abbott 1988, 52) Such body of knowledge can't be entirely abstract given the practical problem-solving perspective of professional work, but it must be abstract enough so that it can be applied to various individual cases. As a result, professionals must learn such body of knowledge, norms,

and know-how through specialized training that happens outside of the job itself in specialized institutions, creating a common basis of training and a common language. Third, as professionals perform their work, they come to take on a certain posture, whose common denominator is a form of detachment: they have no personal interest in the case at hand yet they have an interest in solving it through the application of the body of applied knowledge that they master (Hughes 1963). Such detachment is undergirded by a fundamental distinction between professionals and amateurs (in both senses of unpaid and unskilled), which in turn creates a sense of "cognitive superiority" separating them from "the laity." (Sarfatti Larson 1977, 45).

These three elements, which Abbott calls a profession's culture, combine with two others that characterize its social structure: its social location—who is the profession's clientele, what audiences it directs its claims to, and who it is competing with to establish control; and the profession's internal structure— the physical places where the professionals develop interpersonal ties with their colleagues; the occupational groups and associations that bind all professionals together; the academic degrees and certifications, schools, licenses, and ethics codes that formalize the body of knowledge and know-how.

Having set this conceptual framework, I now apply each component to community organizing practices to assess the success of organizers' professional claims and unpack the power dynamics they produce.

Community Organizing Work as Professional Work

The work that organizers perform can be broken down into two broad sets of tasks: fostering the active civic participation of groups whose voices and interests are not represented in public affairs through carefully planned campaigns; identifying, training, and legitimating volunteer spokespeople, called "leaders," who come from that group. These two sets of tasks are undergirded by a common professional logic that corresponds to Abbott's definition above: organizers diagnose a problem or series of problems; they infer that these problems can be solved through concerted, rationalized collective action and the creation of indigenous leadership; and they "treat" these problems through the organizations that they help create, following specific steps and routines.

These two sets of tasks combined under the "community organizing" category in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the hitherto distinct practices developed by Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), on the one hand, and Ella Baker, the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee and other organizations involved in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, on the other, came together under a common umbrella (Petitjean 2023b). Despite heterogeneous approaches to class, race, gender, and ideology, two core principles bind these tasks together, giving the professional logic its specific characteristics: the first is a form of practical reason that is "deliberately pragmatic, anti-utopian, and antitheoretical" (Bretherton 2014, 180); the second is a shared belief that ordinary people can and should find collective solutions to their everyday problems through active engagement with existing institutions but that, for various reasons, they don't have the resources to kickstart that ability by themselves. The organizer's role is that of a democratizer, a politicizer: to provide such a push without the organizer substituting themselves for the newly activated citizens. Indeed, community organizers claim that they know how to identify people's immediate concerns (how to meet them where they are at, as the expression goes), turn these problems into broader issues without speaking in their names and becoming these groups' self-proclaimed spokespeople and representatives, and wage campaigns aiming at providing solutions to these problems.

These claims have translated into tangible results over the past several decades. During my fieldwork in Chicago, for instance, the community groups I focused on won the opening of a trauma center by the University of Chicago Medical Center and prevented the closure of a public neighborhood high school on the city's South Side, and pushed for state legislation that protects workers with criminal records. Organizers also worked to inspire community residents acknowledge and develop their abilities and live up to their aspirations. One example among many: empowering Deborah, a retired, permanently disabled African American and a public housing tenant from Chicago who sat on the board of Southside Together Organizing for Power (STOP) into standing up to and conducting negotiations with federal officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development over the code of federal regulations and the recognition of a tenant association as a legitimate interlocutor. Against the backdrop of rising socioeconomic inequalities and enduring disparities in access to political voice (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2018), community organizers play a crucial role in combatting mechanisms of political exclusion and marginalization. Without the painstaking, invisible, and emotionally challenging work performed by thousands of organizers, US democracy would arguably be even more broken.

Abstracting Knowledge and Norms from Practice

Second, claiming that community organizing is professional work requires some form of abstract knowledge. While this provides powerful practical and symbolic grounding and allows for a democratization of organizing skills, it also consolidates unacknowledged power dynamics.

The formalization of a series of organization skills and principles that would guide organizers through the mess of people's divergent interests and motivations and help them produce new legitimate community representation and "build power" is a characteristic feature of community organizing as it has developed in the US over the 20th century. From the books written by Saul Alinsky (*Reveille for Radicals* in 1946 and *Rules for Radicals* in 1971) to the Midwest Academy's manual published in the 1980s to Stephanie Luce and Deepak Bhargava's recent *Practical Radicals: Seven Strategies to Change the World* (2023), a wide range of titles have sought to formalize sets of rules and norms that have contributed to a shared culture of pragmatic radicalism.

This literature can be seen as the editorial tip of the iceberg of training programs. Indeed, since the late 1960s, when Saul Alinsky launched the Industrial Areas Foundation Institute to develop "trained competent, politically literate, professional organizers,"[3] training institutions for organizers have proliferated. Some developed out of preexisting national networks (IAF, Gamaliel Foundation) while others existed as independent institutions (Midwest Academy, Center for Third World Organizing). Some have been local in scope while others have operated at the regional or national level. Some have elaborated their own course material and advertised their own "methods," an illustration of the belief that there are sets of steps and procedures that can apply to a wide variety of concrete situations.

Despite their diversity, these training programs all have one thing in common. They turn the training of organizers, which had hitherto happened on the job, into a relatively autonomous activity, with its own specialized agents, locations, pedagogical techniques, and curricula—which means a common language (words like "leader," "power," "relationship" or "storytelling"), common ways of doing things (conducting a one-on-one interview or a power analysis), and common ways of looking at the social world. Even if these institutions disagree over the

3 Grant application to the Rockefeller Foundation, ca. 1968, 13, box 54, folder 730, University of Illinois at Chicago, Special Collections and University Archives, Industrial Areas Foundation records.

meaning of those words and categories and the right ways to do things, they all work towards producing and reproducing a group of competent agents across causes and organizational boundaries.

This formalization process has had far-reaching impacts in terms of the possibility to democratize the access to organizing skills and break with the assumption—very prevalent in a country like France, for instance—that being good at organizing is natural and unteachable. This is something that Anne, a consumers' rights activist who went on to become the director of the Midwest Academy, spelled out very clearly when she talked about her initial training experience there: "The main thing that I got there was you can learn and teach people to be strategic. At that point, meeting with the Alinsky folks, it was like... These guys had an organizing gene that I didn't have, a strategy gene! And then I have to go over to the Midwest Academy, for a two-week session. And every day, it was mind-blowing. But especially the session on strategy, it was like: 'Oh, this is not rocket science. You can figure this out, you can teach it to people[4].' "

The democratization contained within training programs and institutes does not mechanically entail the disappearance of social costs and boundaries. Indeed, organizing trainings rest on a number of conditions, such as having the possibility to dedicate time to them, feeling legitimate to participate, or not feeling daunted by a format that can sometimes be reminiscent of school settings, the meeting of which is not equally distributed in society; instead, it depends very much on people's class background and cultural capital (Mischi 2018). As a result, additional legitimation work is needed to overcome these obstacles and facilitate identification with the organizer identity. During the Midwest Academy training that I participated to, for instance, Wayne, a formerly incarcerated white man from Minnesota in his late twenties who experienced homelessness and didn't finish high school, complained to other trainees during a break about the fact that one of the sessions "felt like a social studies class," before adding that he didn't feel up to the task and that "you guys are more able[5]." Without any prior concertation, several actors performed emotional work during informal moments to convince Wayne that he indeed belonged: other staff members from Wayne's organization keeping a close eye on him during the five days, feedback from trainers in-between workshops and plenary sessions, other trainees reassuring him or confirming his impressions during breaks or at lunch.

The Organizer's Ambiguous Posture

Third, the diagnosis-inference-treatment logic and the use of a specific body of knowledge and know-how combine to produce a specific social relation that binds organizers and leaders together. To each component of that relation, a certain posture is attached, with certain attitudes that are expected. In organizers' case, they are torn between the profession's mission of democratic empowerment and the realities of the practice. Indeed, the organizer-leader relation is an asymmetrical relation: the organizers are the ones who are trying to have leaders do certain things, not the other way around; they're the ones who delineate all the work that's necessary for a given campaign and then distribute what is to be done to the members, keep tabs on the various timelines, and gently push leaders to always try to think about their next steps—in other words, they wield organizational power.

More specifically, the organizer's posture within the organizing relation is undergirded by two main contradictions. The first one is a tension between discretion and visibility. On the one hand, organizers embody a professional ethos mandating that they don't speak on behalf of the groups and individuals they organize in public contexts but let them design their own solutions

4 Interview with author, March 16th, 2017.
5 Field notes, March 8th, 2016.

to the issues that impact them and be their own spokespeople (Petitjean 2023a). On the other hand, because they monopolize organizational tasks, they have access to more information than the community spokespeople and internalize the element of "cognitive superiority" that is so central to professional work, which can make the so-called golden rule not to do for people what they can do for themselves sound paternalistic. The ghost of paternalism is kept up by a deeper drive: the longing for social recognition of the importance and value of their work to advance effective social change, which appears repeatedly in archival documents, ethnographic interviews and reported conversations with friends and relatives. The argument of occupational value, which has been so central to claims of professionalism (Evetts 2003), has the unintended effect of focusing the attention of public opinion in general and funders in particular on organizers as a group rather than on the communities they organize (with).

The second tension is between proximity with the community members and a form of detachment, inherited from Saul Alinsky's experience as a sociologist and a social worker, that's always haunted by the ghost of cynical manipulation. In organizers' culture, the organization's legitimacy is built through developing and maintaining interpersonal interactions with community residents. Komozi, an African American organizer who at the time of my fieldwork was the executive director of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, the oldest African American community organization in Chicago, emphasizes the cardinal importance of relationship-building when he says that "If I'm trying to get you to do something, and the only thing I talk about, having no relationship with you whatsoever, is what I want you to do, at some point you're going to get tired of me. You're not going to return my phone-calls, you're not going to show up for meetings. […] And so the key is to build a relationship. Nothing gets done, nothing, without relationships."[6] In other words, since the organizing relation is based on winning people's consent and not on coercion, it can't operate with people who refuse to engage with organizers. Organizers can perform their professional work successfully only when community members consent to that relation and the power it contains.

Building relationships with people comes with its own lot of emotional work, which adds to the difficulty of the job (but also its beauty and worth) (for similar reflections on union organizing, see Pitkin 2023). But getting to know a resident in order to "get them to do something" that they otherwise wouldn't have done is always a balancing act, as is illustrated by the practice of agitation. Originating in the Alinsky tradition, this component of the very codified technique of the one-on-one conversation is seen by many as a cornerstone of organizing practice in general (Riccio 2021). According to Sara, a biracial housing organizer working at CCH and a colleague of Tom's, agitation is "the most important concept in community organizing. When you want someone to take action, you don't do it *for* them, right? Organizers don't believe that you have to baby someone and be like 'Oh, poor thing, I know it's hard'. Organizers say: 'Do you want things to stay the same? Are you ok with how things are?' It's a different thing, right? It's questioning, it's pushing someone. It's challenging them to rise and be the person that they can be, the leader can they can be[7]." In my interview with her, Sara went on to talk about how she herself, as she was interning with the Midwest Academy, was agitated by her supervisor around her racial identity. Although it made her angry at first that he would ask her how afraid she was of being white and "really pushing [her] to deal with that," she eventually told him that "after this internship [she was] less afraid of being white," which allowed her to be more reflexive of the racial dynamics at play in organizing work.

6 Interview with author, February 20th, 2015.
7 Interview with author, February 23rd, 2016.

There is, however, an in-built tension between inspiring someone to realize their potential and aligning their aspirations with the organization's goals without them being aware of this, as is expressed by Nina, the white executive director of a housing coalition in Chicago: "If you are agitating someone to operate in your self-interest, that is actually exploitation, not agitation. If you are agitating them to help them move in the direction *they* have chosen for their life, and achieve their goals, as *they* define them, not as *you* define them, that is agitation. And I feel like it's done wrong a lot. […] And I also think that agitation relies on a lot of unstated power hierarchies that are often race- and class-inflected. Who's the expert in the organizing training? It's the white, twenty-year-old organizer, who's going to agitate a sixty-year-old black man who's been homeless about how he's not doing enough to end homelessness? Fuck you! […] Because the people we work with are exploited every day, by everyone, right? Everyone! And if organizers are going to come in, and turn them into an army for a whole other… [*lowering her voice again*] It's sickening. […] You can't agitate outside of a deep relationship. You can't do it right, right? Because unless you really understand someone and where they're trying to go with their life, or you understand the community and where it's trying to go with, you can't agitate them. You can only try to redirect in ways that are pragmatic and useful for your organization."[8]

Nina highlights the structural tension between potentially conflicting loyalties that organizers have to navigate, as her emphasis on the "they" and "you" pronouns suggest: advancing the organization's interests and agenda (even if it means reproducing pre-existing oppression and exploitation) or siding with the person they're trying to agitate (even if it means going against the organization's interests). As she points out, however, the manipulation that agitation can produce should not be understood outside of other relations of power and hierarchies. Since the 1990s, as a result of challenges of the IAF's race and gender biases coming from antiracist and feminist voices, there have been intentional pushes on the part of local community organizations and national networks to hire more women and people of color in organizer positions (Sen 2003; Warren and Wood 2001). This signaled a change in how the organizer's role was defined: the IAF norm that the organizer should always be an expert outsider, a core standard of the IAF's professional project, was now challenged by the competing norm that sharing identities and lived experiences with the community members would make it easier to win people's trust and bolster the organization's legitimacy. Such intentional recruitment has led to a situation where, in Chicago for instance, a majority of community organizers are people of color, and women of color in particular (Petitjean and Talpin 2022).

The "Contradictory Field" of Community Organizing

The contradictions between the drive towards effectiveness and the commitment to democratic empowerment which undergird the profession's culture wouldn't necessarily weaken community organizers' professional claims if they were contained by the profession's social structure. But at that level too, community organizing work is shaped by contradictory forces.

First, it is important to assess the social location that professional organizers occupy. A good place to start is the recent conceptualization by Walter Julio Nicholls and Ashley Camille Hernandez of a "contradictory field" (Nicholls and Hernandez 2023). As intermediaries between underrepresented and local (or regional) ruling classes whose place in urban governance regimes has been legitimized by the rise of a powerful industry of public participation, community organizations are torn between two forces that can provide them with the resources they need but pull them in opposite directions. On the one hand, they need money to pay their staff and keep the organization afloat, which usually comes from philanthropic grants (and, to a

8 Interview with author, April 13th, 2016.

lesser extent, public-private partnerships). Philanthropic foundations, which have emerged as the main source of funding for nonprofit organizations in general, also provide technical assistance, social capital, as well as social recognition (Levine 2021). On the other hand, the dependence on (and subordination to) the philanthropic field is counterbalanced by another competing force: community-based organizations need to be considered legitimate by the community so that community members will delegate their voice to them. "Without legitimacy, organizations have greater difficulty winning the trust of residents and presenting themselves as voices of the community to their patrons." (Nicholls and Hernandez 2023, 12) And at the same time as they navigate these contradictory, vertical pulls, community organizations compete with one another, horizontally, for both types of resources. As a result, these structural factors produce a "contradictory field," which then shapes the strategies, tactics, and practices that community organizations put into practice.

The very existence of a field, albeit contradictory, therefore means that its actors enjoy a certain level of autonomy from external factors and pressures (Bourdieu 2003), a crucial departure from some of the more mechanical aspects of the nonprofit industrial complex thesis. But while Nicholls and Hernandez's framework allows for a dynamic articulation of top-down and bottom-up approaches to community organizations, it reduces systems of relations to three players only: philanthropic and government patrons, community residents, and community organizations. This obfuscates other significant relations that community organizations (and organizers) can have with other collective actors who also have a stake in trying to represent collective entities and interests, who might have divergent visions of social change and how to achieve it, and who, therefore, directly compete with community organizers' professional claims. If organizers want to wage a successful campaign, they will need community support and funding, but they might also have to cooperate with labor unions, advocacy organizations, or issue-based nonprofits. And because these coalitions are often shaped by a division of labor where the community groups perform the more tedious and less valued work of building community support, sometimes at the expense of their own organizational goals (Doussard and Fulton 2020), it means that the recognition of organizers' effectiveness and professionalism happens mostly in a minor mode.

Equally absent from Nicholls and Hernandez's framework are social movement actors, which is all the more striking given how central the organizing-activism distinction has been in the discourse around organizing's effectiveness (Petitjean 2023b). Indeed, on many occasions during my fieldwork, community organizers defined activists as college-educated idealists who don't know how to reach out to people who are not already convinced by a given issue; who don't come from the groups on whose behalf they claim they're speaking and who don't have genuine relations with those groups; and whose protest tactics lack effectiveness because they don't translate into concrete policy change. Conversely, as Tom's metaphor of the professional electrician makes clear, organizers see themselves as professionals who know how to reach out to people and turn them out; who develop organizations anchored in community life; and whose pragmatic sense can deliver tangible victories. Hence the skepticism towards protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter or disruptive protests supporting immigrants' rights. While Louise, a white senior organizer with Action Now told me after a day's canvassing to get out the vote for a state's attorney's race that "Occupy pissed off a lot of us career organizers[9]" and that she wished Black Lives Matter activists door-knocked and phone-

9 Interview with author, February 20th, 2016.

banked more, Sara, the organizer from CCH, lamented Occupy's lack of clear demands, contrasting it with organizing as "a model that really works[10]."

Of course, such conflicts between community organizers and social movement activists don't necessarily preclude successful cooperation between community-based groups and social movement organizations, but as one paper on the relationships between community organizations and Black Lives Matter groups in Chicago and Los Angeles has argued, the forms of competition and mutual distrust linking these actors together make such cooperation both unlikely and temporary (Petitjean and Talpin 2022). More fundamentally, perhaps, it is arguable that professional organizers are so intent on drawing clear-cut symbolic boundaries that separate them from amateur activists precisely because there are far more continuities and circulations in the actual practices that are used than organizers pretend. First, moments of movement activity can produce results that professionally-powered organizing cannot. As labor organizer Chris Brooks acknowledges about the recent unionization upsurge at Starbucks and Amazon, the workers "clearly relied on tried-and-true organizing practices" but they also "took shortcuts that defied the orthodoxy of union organizers like myself" (Brooks 2022). Brooks' assessment that "organizing rules" were "upended" by these sudden bursts of worker self-activity applies beyond union organizing. And conversely, many participants to the mass protest movements of the 2010s that culminated in the George Floyd uprisings of Summer 2020—seemingly spontaneous, leaderless, digitally coordinated and horizontally organized—came to the conclusion that the setbacks and rapid demise they experienced were due to a lack of formal organization and embraced the promises of the craft of organizing (Bevins 2023).

The Profession's Internal Structure

A similar story of contradictions challenging organizers' professional claims can be found at the level of the profession's internal structure, which relies on two main elements: the quantity and quality of ties that bind organizers to one another in a number of places; the mechanisms that allow professional organizers to regulate access to the group.

While many community organizations operate out of office buildings (whose location and architecture are a good indicator of the organization's status and standing), organizers usually work in a wide variety of settings outside of the office, which hampers the development of solid social ties with their colleagues and a sense of collective belonging. Even when more established organizations employ a sizable number of staff, organizers often work alone with the community members, during long hours. Combined with the low pay and the fact that the emotional commitment to the members and the causes can pile up on the mental load associated with keeping the organization running, the nature of organizers' scattered worksites makes it difficult to stay in the job "for the long haul," as the commonly used phrase goes, contributing instead to high burnout and turnover rates. In this regard, the local or regional dimension of the "contradictory field"—how many community organizations and philanthropic funders there are in a given place—seems to be an important factor not just in the practices that organizers use and the strategic dilemmas they face (Kleidman 2004), but also in sustaining a self-conscious community of organizers whose life is sustained in both formal and informal settings. Whereas this self-conscious community was a defining feature of the organizing scene in Chicago, it was arguably less so in Detroit, where, as a result of the city's organizing history, organizational makeup, and scarcer philanthropic presence, the pool of self-identified organizers was much smaller.

10 Interview with author, February 23rd, 2016.

In order to counter these isolating forces, many initiatives have been set up at all levels for the past several decades to bring professional organizers together so that they can build networks of support and share best practices, contributing to the internalization of the organizer professional identity. The most obvious example is that of national organizing federations which, according to Rosanne, the African American executive director of Action Now, one of Chicago's most prominent community organizing groups, can provide important resources, such as helping the members of your organization "connect with other members across the country," "help with skill building and troubleshooting" (how to run a campaign or understand the legislative terrain), and connect with national funders. Since Rosanne had only been executive director for three years when we spoke, she explained that "without [the national federation] I probably wouldn't have access to those funders. And I wouldn't have been able to raise the money that I raised[11]."

From the perspective of professional work, the flipside is that national networks have little incentives in building structures that can sustain the group of practitioners and push for social recognition beyond organizational lines. This is one of the reasons why the National Organizers Alliance (NOA) was founded in the early 1990s: to develop "a network of resources and colleagues that teach, carry on tradition, and celebrate organizing as a calling and a profession[12]." To do so, NOA supervised an unprecedented retirement pension program and insurance fund from 1997 until it disbanded in the early 2010s, which were crucial elements in allowing people to "make both a life—and a living[13]" as professional organizers. As the first occupational association of its kind, NOA cast a wide net: not only did it want to speak to all community organizers beyond factional disputes between organizations and networks, but it also intended to represent organizers working in labor unions, faith-based institutions and other nonprofit organizations. Although it claimed "a dues-paying membership of more than 1,000 wildly diverse organizers and a large mailing community of 5,000 social change practitioners in more than 2,000 organizations"[14] at the end of the 1990s, its target constituency was probably too diverse in terms of organizational environments, work and employment conditions, job titles, professional background and future prospects, for people to massively support the project.

NOA's demise signaled the failure of the professionalization-from-within strategy that had been so central to the formation of the professional group of community organizers in the 1980s. Since then, other projects have attempted to create spaces where organizers could meet across organizational divides but none has had similar ambitions to unify the group of organizers as a whole, focusing instead on certain subsets of organizers, defined through racial or gender identities or a political commitment to build broader alliances. As a result, there are no collective entities of national scope that could, by successfully claiming that they speak on behalf of all the members of the profession, institutionalize further that collective entity.

The absence of such representative entities, which have played such a central role in processes of professionalization, does not in itself prevent a profession from successfully establishing control over the work it is claiming as its own. But in the case of professional community organizing, this representative weakness has articulated with weak mechanisms regulating entry into the profession. For reasons that are both practical and political, seeking licensure,

11 Interview with author, February 15th, 2016.
12 "Join us," invitation letter to the first national organizers gathering held on August 25-28, 1994 in Olympia, Washington, undated, National Organizers Alliance archives, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, box 9, folder 13.
13 Ibid.
14 "NOA Justice Pension Plan Coordinator/Organizer," undated (ca. 1999), National Organizers Alliance archives, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, box 1, folder "Women's Gr. IV."

government-sanctioned certifications, or legal protections has never been on organizers' agenda. Attempts were made by certain national networks or by NOA to establish ethics codes mimicking prestigious professions like medicine or law, but they haven't held the same sway, in part because they lacked enforcement mechanisms. In terms of academic degrees, community organizing has been incorporated into higher education institutions since the 1980s, in particular within schools of social work and urban studies or planning departments, but as course material rather than as a specific degree.

The most recent initiative in that direction is something called Community Learning Partnership (CLP), which according to Ken Rolling, its former executive director, aims at developing "a pathway that brings people of color, especially low-income people of color, from communities into this world of organizing, being leaders, taking charge of the change that they seek.[15]" To do so, CLP has focused on building partnerships between community colleges, public universities, and local community organizations. In 2013, CLP developed a comprehensive community organizer job profile document in order "to gain a detailed and cohesive profile of this core change-agent role" (Community Learning Partnership 2013). Such developments are a clear step towards further standardization of community organizer positions, as well as a consolidation of the profession's commitment to diversify its recruitment patterns. However, even if Ken explained that CLP trains future community organizers when I spoke with him, its official label, "community change careers," confirms the fuzzy quality of the "community organizer" category, which prevents the process of accumulating social recognition under a common, universally shared category.

While the lack of occupational groups and the limited academic institutionalization could be interpreted as important limitations in a professional strategy aiming at establishing full control over certain work tasks, they can also be interpreted as guarantees against further homogenization and an exacerbation of corporatist tendencies. Even if an overwhelming majority of community organizers seem to be college graduates, the absence of licensure requirements has actually allowed people without academic credentials, such as formerly incarcerated people like Wayne or low-wage migrant workers, to apply to organizer positions and turn their prior life experiences into an organizing asset[16].

Conclusion

This paper has argued that analyzing community organizing practices through the lens of professional work and its five core components—the three phases of diagnosis, inference, and treatment; the formalization of knowledge and training; professional posture; social location; and internal structure—provides a critical perspective that can help pinpoint the contradictions underlying the work while recognizing organizers' agency.

To put it in a nutshell, community organizers act as professional deprofessionalizers, who produce nonprofessional, volunteer civic participation and representation in public affairs through professional means. While they work to empower underrepresented communities they exert, as the members of a professional group with its own cultural and structural logics, a monopoly over organizational levers of power that falls outside of democratic control. In the current circumstances, indeed, it is not so much the volunteer boards as a combination of the organizers and their funders who determine what the organization's interests are, in a broader context where community-based organizations themselves operate as nonelected

15 Interview with author, May 5th, 2023.

16 I want to thank Jasson Perez and Inhe Choi for bringing this up during a discussion in Chicago in 2023.

neighborhood representatives whom community residents can barely hold accountable (Levine 2021).

Looking at these power dynamics is a necessary step to try and find new ways to mitigate the negative aspects of such power. Because social justice organizations are the terrain of fierce struggles between the forces that reproduce the social order and the attempts at building a more just and equitable world, it is of crucial strategic importance not to overlook what happens within them. Of course, the asymmetrical relation of power that is organizing is not the only source of power that community residents experience in their daily lives—and arguably not the most harmful one. But recognizing this should not mean that, because other social relations are more immediately threatening, this one shouldn't be considered as a legitimate issue.

Like any other form of organizing, community organizing can produce solidarity, understood as "a form of closeness, maybe even intimacy, a network of connection that rewires a splintered collective." (Pitkin 2023, 21) This can only work, however, if organizing functions as "a mechanism of political education, a way of being transformed, for everyone involved" where the most effective posture might not be to decide who's a professional electrician but to be "open to the possibility that we might be wrong about important things and, in many ways, ill-equipped to be good comrades because of our own past experiences." (Inouye 2023, 23–24)

Some key questions that follow from this assessment, therefore. How to build organizational mechanisms that can hold organizers democratically accountable to the organizations they work for, accelerate the devolution of their power to the community leaders and beyond, and make those organizations more accountable to the constituencies they represent? And how to disentangle the processes of formalizing knowledge and know-how and democratizing the access to organizing skills, which appear as crucial areas to expand in the future, from the logics of professional closure and cognitive superiority, which hamper coalition work and produce a form of political paternalism that stands at odds with organizing's values of dignity and democracy?

In this regard, one of the innovations that community organizers could turn to is the recent upsurge in unionization and strike activity that has led to the development of a worker-to-worker organizing model that is distinct from staff-intensive unionism (Blanc 2024). Reflecting on the model that was developed during the unionization campaign at Starbucks that she supervised, where the staff organizers' job was to "democratize the skills of organizing as quickly as possible, get them in the hands and the brains of worker organizers who organize their store and then turn around and organize the store next door," Daisy Pitkin explained that "in order to really capacitate and empower worker organizers, workers who are not just leaders in their stores but are organizers on the campaign, the campaign has to belong to them in a real way. They have to be in the room for every single kind of decision that gets made on the campaign. And they have to be making those decisions[17]."

How could such a model be adapted to community organizing practices? It will be up to organizers and leaders to find the answers to this question.

17 Interview with author, July 11th, 2024.

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