

Introduction

These are hard times for democracy. Private corporations, international financial oligarchies, and neoliberal agents are today inhabiting public spaces of political and civic engagement. Such politics is representative of powerful interests and consequently neglects democracy, if by democracy “we mean a politics that engages manifold people in the difficult reciprocities of active critical judgment, organizing, action towards common goods, more egalitarian distributions and deepening acknowledgments of plural modes of being” (Coles, 2006, p.547).

The first period to reinvigorate democracy in the global north was between the 1960s and 1970s when grassroots informal participation gradually intensified reflecting on a democratic crisis already begun. During this time social movements grew on the same path of a right-wing backlash. Since the 1980s, the rising of right conservatism contributed to the decline of most grassroots democratizing efforts, but the Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) based on Saul Alinsky’s legacy staged “one of the more impressive efforts in terms of organizing grassroots democratic practices across a wide cross-section of people and effecting modest but significant redistributions of power in cities across the United States” (Coles, 2006). Compared with other grassroots movements, the countercultural characteristics of IAF organizers were taking distance from ideological concerns and party-side formations. IAF organizers, indeed, started from grassroots associational tissue and local civil society institutions to lead the making of “organization of organizations” (O of O)¹ (Miller, Schutz, 2015 p.32). They became convinced that an organization of organization could democratize culture and empower citizens to take their role in organizing their communities. To do that IAF organizers have been able to cross differences and connect people despite their race, culture, faith, and gender. They took advantage of organizing practices elaborated by Alinsky, especially “political jujitsu”, which aims at using “the power of the opposition against itself” to change things (Alinsky, 1971 p.148). Their attitude was to support local leaders to research, act, and negotiate with anti-democratic powers to promote a daily exercise of democracy that projects into a long-run democratic renewal. Such countercultural character made IAF effective in the short run by winning campaigns on affordable housing, education, and salary, but the long-rung Alinsky’s legacy mostly neglected the achievement of renewed democracies.

Community organizations frequently perished or deviated from the democratic path while organizers often burned out (Coles, 2006, 2004). Given that, following Alinsky’s death in 1972, Chambers (2018) introduced important renovations in community organizing. Firstly, the IAF democratic philosophy of organizing was intertwined with religious principles and teachings from several global faith including Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Islam (Coles, 2006, Bretherton, 2015). Moreover, IAF organizers started to be trained for ten days to get familiar with the IAF tradition. The educational framework in which organizers started to be trained gave them space to interact, debate, and share common experiences. In addition, the latter was based on the purpose of maintaining IAF’s flourishing in the long run as a broad-based network of democratic power. Chambers (2018) began to organize communities to reawaken the tension between “the world as it is and as it should be” by considering this condition as the root to generate democratic renewal. To be clearer, this tension emerges at the origins of feelings such as anger, fear, and powerlessness to achieve social change, and it gives birth to radical questions like “why should things be this way, rather than another? ... why

not a different world?" (Chambers, 2018 p.2). From such questions, citizens start a process of reflection that can encourage them to achieve better forms of political engagement and communal living. This, according to Chambers, coincides with the innate capacity of human beings "to know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life" (Chambers, 2018 p.65). To exercise this politicalness, people need to reawaken the tension between the two worlds, which, is meant as "the tension between interpretations. The world as it is and the world as it should be not raw facts or simple objective realities. People from different histories see the two worlds differently What you and I can create for our respective groups ... and the larger community depends on bringing our respective interpretations together in a better reading of our common situation and obligations than we could do alone, one that enables us to act together with power" (Chambers, 2018 p.12). Therefore, following the tension between "being and becoming", at the core of IAF tradition there is a "self-interest" that Chambers (2018) borrows from the famous political philosopher Anna Arendt's "inter-esse" which locates "our interest in the tensional space "in-between, with our relationships" (Arendt 1963; Coles, 2006 p.551).

Understanding our self-interest is a process of personal awareness that implies respect and self-recognition, a process also reflected in public relationships when common interests among people are collectively defined in a space of proximity. Relating with others is indeed the base upon which IAF tradition has been empowered after Alinsky. And according to this, the most radical tool that nowadays IAF teaches is the relational meeting, "an art" able to reawaken our commitment to politics by relating with others, and listening to each other's stories, issues, and anger (Coles, 2006, 2004; Chambers, 2018, 2009).

Despite IAF's success and improvements, in the last decades, some critics have been raised against its methods. If it is true, as Boyte (2004) affirmed, that IAF is based on everyday politics to extend to larger "transformations that might, in turn, be more conducive commonwealth politics of macro experimentation across institutions of civil society, state, and market" (Coles 2006 p.554), such connections between everyday politics and broader democratic frameworks remain still inexperienced. Since the first attempt at organizing designed by Alinsky in 1939 in Back of the Yards, Chicago, the methodology has been working to connect citizens' empowerment to broader democratic renewals. However, community organizing is a long-term process that cannot be organized in compliance with predefined time schedules. Moreover, what has been achieved so far has followed people's interest and engagement in producing social change. Therefore, if organizing for social change means reawakening human capacities in gathering and participating in a better communal life, community organizing remains the most desirable example for exercising democracy, even though broader democratic changes are still far to be achieved.

Since the 1990s, community organizing has gone overseas and adapted to the most different local contexts in the world. This is possible, according to Coles (2006 p.550), considering that "IAF is inflected by the visions and practices of the traditions with which it engages" but at the same time "it inflects these traditions in light of a radical democratic ethos that accents inclusion, dialogue, receptivity, equality, difference, a taste for ambiguity, patient discernment, and an affirmation that political relationships centrally involve ongoing tension, some compromise, and humility in the face of disagreement (including a hesitancy to push for organizational action on issues where widespread agreement has yet to be forged)". Such democratic reinvigoration exercised by community organizing

shed light on what has been defined as the universals of the methodology. The interesting thing about universals is to consider people as human beings even before democratic citizens. In this regard, Alinsky (1946) was the first of the IAF tradition believing that “once people get to know each other as human beings rather than as impersonal symbols representing diverse philosophies and organizations, then a new set of relationships composed of a genuine understanding and real sympathy will arise” (p.107). Universals, therefore, recall the innate human capacity of gathering and participating in communal life that then is reflected in everyday democratic practices. More on close attention to places and people” (Bretherton, 2015 p.180). IAF tradition, indeed, is exercising “rubrics for common action, not a prescription for how or what to think” (Bretherton, 2015, p.180), and such rubrics can be translated into different local contexts in compliance with their local traditions.

In the 1990s, community organizing developed in Europe through faith-based and civic organizing networks. Among them, are IAF, ACORN international, and ECON (European Community Organizing Network). Namely, the IAF network in Europe includes multiple affiliations such as Citizens UK in Great Britain, the German Institute for Community Organizing (DICO) in Germany, De Noort in the Netherlands, and Associazione Community Organizing Onlus in Italy. As regards the Italian case, community organizing developed first in 2017 in Rome and then in Turin in 2018. According to Coppola and Diletti (2020), community organizing can be interpreted as a grassroots response to the research of new innovative forms of political participation. Namely, in the twenty-first century, due to the official decline of massive political parties, the 2001 counter-summit in Genova, the financial crisis, and the latest corporate oligarchies, the gap between politics and society expanded so much that citizens looked for overseas democratic and participative methods to influence formal politics. Nonetheless, it may be premature to jump to conclusions considering the embryonic phase in which the organizing projects in Rome and Turin are still.

In the 1990s, community organizing also developed in South Africa, Mexico, India, and the Philippines (Chambers, 2018; Tattersall, 2015, Bretherton, 2015). Some of them showed the limits that the methodology has in contexts where democracy is not strong enough. Some others instead demonstrated that community organizing can be the ground upon which more democratic regimes can originate in compliance with local traditions.

Bearing this in mind, the present dissertation wants to investigate the translation of community organizing both in Italy and South Africa, a context not particularly investigated by the state of the art in the matter. Namely, the research has been carried out on two main case studies. The first regards the Community Organizing Pilot Project in the northern periphery of Turin based in district six, particularly in Barriera di Milano and started in 2018 on the initiative of prof. Luca Ozzano at Turin University. The second case study, on the contrary, regards Cissie Gool House settled in Woodstock, Cape Town. Since 2016, Cissie Gool House is one of the occupations that the social movement Reclaim the City is organizing and leading in collaboration with other civic and religious local organizations. Universals are worldwide shared practices of organizing that “are developed through Each one of the two case studies answers specific research questions about community organizing and its translation into the local context. Namely, considering the second case study, I principally engaged with community organizing universals to consciously avoid possible colonial attitudes regarding the exportation of the methodology to the “darkest” south of the world.

What I carry out from this research has been included in the present dissertation as follows:

The first chapter deals with community organizing traditions both during and post-Alinsky years. Particularly, this first chapter frames community organizing in a world context and presents its development in different cultural backgrounds both in the north and south of the world. The second chapter introduces the methodology that I adopted to research and examine the two case studies. In these pages, I briefly present the notion of qualitative research and then how I designed and developed the fieldwork according to each context and their reciprocal ethical concerns. In this second chapter, I also introduced some of the limitations that I met in carrying out the research. The third chapter deals with the first case study about “the Community Organizing Pilot project in the northern periphery of Turin”, how is developing, and the great obstacles it has faced since the beginning. In the fourth chapter, I analyze the second case study about “Organizing Cissie Gool House (CGH)”, and the community organizing universals in supporting the occupier community to self-govern the common good of CGH. Finally, in the fifth chapter, I briefly reflect on what the two case studies have in common according to their reciprocal examinations in chapters free and four.