Book Review/Compte rendu

Heidi J. Swarts, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-based Progressive Movements*. Social Movements, Protest, and Contention Series, volume 28. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 336 pp. $US 25.00 paper (978-0-8166-4839-9), $US 75.00 hardcover (978-0-8166-4838-2)

With the election of a former community organizer as President of the United States, the time is ripe for scholarly attention to local community organizing. *Organizing Urban America* is important for two reasons. First, it focuses on the local, whereas much social movement research has been at larger geographic scales. Second, Swarts highlights culture, with an expansive conception that shows how central it is to understanding movements' dynamics, effectiveness, and links with political opportunities and the mobilization of resources.

Culture matters to social movement operations, Swarts argues. To show this, she studied four organized groups of local antipoverty activists in two US cities, comparing both organizational types and their operations in two diverse social settings. Two groups each represented two of the leading models of community organizing — the Alinsky-like Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), and religious networks, which she calls congregation-based community organizing (CBCO). ACORN is a national network of local chapters. The national body provides training and other resources to primarily short-term staff, who go door-to-door recruiting participants to campaigns pressuring municipal governments on housing, transportation, social assistance, neighbourhood safety, and other issues important for the quality of life of America's poorest. The two CBCOs are also part of national networks. In each city they consist of churches and faith-based organizations who advocate and organize on the same types of issues. The two cities also vary in certain key characteristics. St. Louis, Missouri is a declining, rustbelt city; San José, California is a rapidly growing high-technology urban centre. Via ethnographic participation and interviews, Swarts explicates norms, practices, and meaning systems — organizational culture — as an integral part of how various movement organizations operate.

Swarts shows that local mobilization is not just "structural," that is, based on reaction to existing conditions such as opportunities or avail-

able resources. Faced with the same social dynamics in each city, unique organizational cultures shaped the strategies of the two types of organizations. This is "mobilizing culture," by which Swarts means "tacit norms and values that are nonstrategic and underlie more conscious strategic framing of group identity and issues" (p. xviii). A simple example shows the significance of organizational culture. ACORN meetings fitted Francesca Polletta's description of American democracy as *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, but out of deference to family values, CBCO meetings were intentionally kept short. The two mobilizing cultures shaped strategies: more racially, economically and politically diverse CBCOs avoided contentious but secondary issues (such as abortion) to maintain coherence, and chose less provocative and more conciliatory tactics than ACORN's more dramatic and confrontational repertoire.

Thus, Swarts's first contribution to social movement studies is to highlight that culture is more than collective identity, framing, or even a toolkit employed by actors. Her complex and nuanced picture of social movements is applicable across a spectrum wider than the cases examined in this book. For example, differences between the Christian Labour Association of Canada and the secular labour movement may be cultural, including variations in worldview (inherent conflict versus merely functional role differences between management and workers), norms of civility and conciliation, and practices based in the cultural expectations of secular labour and faith-based labour. Similarly, the analysis could be deployed to the very different strategies of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and the Toronto Social Planning Council.

Swarts also argues consistently for social movement scholars to pay more attention to local organizing. Local organizations tend to remain all but invisible, but their efforts are crucial to the health of American democracy, she argues. With a wealth of detail, Swarts demonstrates the value of community organizing in building social capital and engaging citizens across social divides. Local groups have huge roles to play, especially in the provision of charitable services. They also educate participants, in which case, CBCOs have a built-in constituency, albeit one that is diverse and does not automatically share particular movement values, either conservative or progressive. While this research cannot prove it, there may be more room at the municipal level for grassroots organizations to influence policy, making community organizing a compelling area for social movement scholarship.

There is a lot of detail on the specific socio-political contexts and operations of the four groups in this book, making it more difficult for Canadian readers to glean what is relevant for our different political and social environments. For instance, terms like "liberal" and "progressive"

occupy different niches in Canadian politics, and Canadian cities are not as segregated as American ones. Plus, religion has a different place in Canada. Canadian governments willingly partner with religious organizations on social programs while in the United States the faith-based initiatives of the federal government have been highly contentious. And while Christianity still dominates in Canada (only 7% of Canadians self-identified in the 2006 census as part of a non-Christian religion; another 16% claimed no affiliation, leaving 76% to still list a Christian denomination as their religious affiliation) Canadian public awareness of the role of religion in contemporary society and Canadian social research on religion is much more limited than in the United States. Studies of Canadian religious involvement in social movements are also rarer. This has sometimes led to fears of American-style conservative Christianity, although Margie Patrick demonstrates, in "Political neoconservatism: A conundrum for Canadian evangelicals" (*Studies in Religion*, 38: 3–4, 481–506), that Canadian evangelicalism holds a diverse set of political perspectives. Swarts also demonstrates the significant role religious groups may play in progressive social policy.

A weakness of Swarts's analysis (and of much research that includes religious groups in social movement studies) is that religious SMOs are treated primarily for the instrumental resources that they mobilize, neglecting their specifically religious dimensions. For example, Swarts makes only offhand mention of the worship, prayer, or theological elements of the congregation-based organizations she studied and says next to nothing of the Social Gospel movement.

Ultimately, the book is an American one. It will be of some benefit to scholars of social movements and sociologists of religion, as well as scholars in such areas as social inequality, voluntary associations, community development, and American studies. The book is a well-written, detailed ethnographic study with extensive appendices and a list of acronyms vital for readers to keep details straight. Best would be a similar study in Canada, for which this book would be a superb resource for comparison. A central question in contemporary society is how to create new strategies of engagement for the populace and overcome what seems to be increasing apathy. In Swarts's analysis, movement organizations are trying to answer that question by creating different cultures of engagement.

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