



Local Organizing Runs into a National Campaign in Detroit

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I worked as a community and political organizer in Wayne County, Michigan, during the 2016 election. Frustrated by the ignorance and outright dismissal of grassroots strategies by various interest groups and individuals with stakes in the election, I decided to focus my emergent doctoral research on the implications of grassroots organizing in conflict and coordination with other modes of political action. One moment crystallized the project's direction. As I prepared for week-long Get Out the Vote program operating in an historically Black church, I found myself restricted by the explicit hierarchy of a national campaign:

We struggled throughout October to recruit volunteers. The old model of “come for the candidate, stay for the organizer” built during the Obama era was only partially effective in 2016. As voting day drew nearer, Cliff, the Pastor of the Church I worked in, suggested we organize the volunteers we had recruited for a massive, day-long canvass: “We should do a community-wide lawn sign day. Ask anyone we can if they will put a sign. If people know their neighbor is voting, they will too.” By all accounts, this sounded effective: reminding people that their neighbors vote is not only part of a bigger Get Out The Vote strategy, it also seemed like it would foster community support in an election that had become so divisive that fear of voter intimidation was a common conversation. I was told by my supervisor, however, that “lawn signs don’t vote” and “THEIR strategies are proven to work.” Thus, Cliff’s ideas, formed through years of local insight, were thrown aside in favor a supposedly empirical, national model.



Campaign stickers. Greg Sollish

In an election where the Left was characterized by lack of enthusiasm and a disconnect between candidate and community, the campaign seemed happy to just compound those divisions, as far as I could tell. As the campaign neared its ill-fated end, I became particularly interested in how a focus on “bottom-up” activism might change how we conceptualize the stakes and tactics of political campaigns, and, perhaps more broadly, how we think about questions of scale-making and the boundaries of community, region, and commonality in leftist political thought.

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With a project formulated in the wake of the Trump election, I am particularly drawn to the possibilities that North American anthropology can have in our discipline, across the academy, and in our ideas of engaged scholarship. I focus in particular on two issues that Flood and Raschig (2018) raise in their introductory contribution to this section: (1) a close analysis of the changing political landscape in North America following the Trump election without overstating presidential agency or simply reducing our arguments to those of resistance; and (2) our desire for heightened presence in public discourse while remaining cognizant of the ethics and politics of representation.

Theories of resistance are frequently applied to explain both the actions and inactions of subaltern communities with whom we work. While an integral framework for understanding responses to marginalization, it also appears that resistance theories risk over-extension if they come to explain

all subaltern action. By framing political activity solely in the terms of resistance/oppression, we also risk flattening the radical possibility that comes from local knowledges. Seeing “resistance” everywhere risks a reductive account of people’s actions and veils our attention to the real complexities involved in political organizing and its subversive possibilities; we also run the risk of tacitly reifying the notion of an unchanging and monolithic hegemony as the object of resistance by solely focusing on oppression/resistance. Furthermore, in the case above, it is clear that Cliff’s strategies do not fit neatly into a resistance/oppression framework. Was he resisting the racism of the Republicans? Or was he resisting the ignorance of the Democrats? Can resistance extend in multiple political directions at once?



Detroit skyline. Greg Sollish

Stuart Hall’s (1980) articulation theory can help us approach political action in a more nuanced way. In his formulation, elements of race, class, and other identities are communicated in unity to form specific subjectivities under hegemonic forms of marginalization. Operationalizing intersectionality and economics, Hall helps us first to see how specific identities are composed in relation to forms of dominance that are not universal, and further to understand how these relational identities are articulated for political ends. In Cliff’s case, his role as a community leader emerged in conversation with various marginalizing forces, and he didn’t view his ideas for political maneuvering as simply “resisting oppression.” Rather, he was responding to the complex multiplicity of intersecting forces in an attempt to address and change them directly. It was these forces that demanded action in the

first place. Much as Patricia Hill Collins (2015) argues, marginal grassroots groups tend to draw on intersectional frameworks to enact a “critical praxis” of organizing.

This framework can be scaled up to foster understanding across North American sites and their specific configurations of capitalism and power. In Detroit, capitalism articulates with racism in particular ways to create racialized manufacturing neighborhoods. Moreover, through processes of deindustrialization, unequal distributions of precarious employment follow racialized lines. This *regionally specific* form of hegemony then demands political action that manifests in the form of neighborhood housing support networks, education advocacy to create stable employment, and community food drives to combat food scarcity, all couched within a larger dialogue of racial justice. While these economic concerns may be pertinent elsewhere, there are also diverse, extraneous marginalizations that intersect and demand different political action. What might seem like a similar project of community support in coalfield West Virginia may demand more attention to environmental or economic justice than racial justice.

Cliff's ideas, then, were not simply resistance to oppression, but rather a situated response to complex and regionally specific forms of marginalization: his suggestions emerged from his historic local knowledge, as an attempt to build a community network of support in ways that took account of local social relationships. Understanding this set of actions ethnographically, however, calls on us to move beyond monolithic ideas of resistance/oppression and towards more locally specific understandings of hegemonic power (see [Tania Li 2000](#)).

In doing so, we move towards an answer to the second question raised by Flood and Raschig: namely, engaged scholarship.

By understanding the complexity of intersecting marginalization, we also move beyond the notion of a universal, monolithic oppression—a move that, paradoxically, can build solidarity across different activist movements and seemingly diverse interest groups. Moving beyond simplistic notions, such as “American Capitalism” or “American Racism,” and instead ethnographically displaying the complex articulations of intersecting marginalization, we can show what forms of activism work in specific contexts and privilege the knowledge of those activists.

Ultimately, by situating political actions within their necessarily complex demands, we reduce the risk of subsuming everything under the banner of oppression and resistance. As a result, we open up new spaces for inquiry in North American anthropology while demonstrating that North America is not a monolith. In fact, by paying close attention to the complexity of cross-site marginalization

and political action, we can continue to contribute the both the epistemological and activist projects that are so important to anthropology.

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