

# Reframing Community Practice for the 21st Century

## *Multiple Traditions, Multiple Challenges*

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“Community” in the 21st century seems to be everywhere and nowhere. The importance of renewing a search for meaningful definitions of community, and of initiating a broader conceptual remapping of community as a field of practice, becomes apparent when we consider the intellectual and practical costs of the current state of confusion. Recent theoretical critiques suggest that notions of local community retain little more than ideological utility within a social context marked by corporate globalization and social welfare retrenchment (e.g., Amin, 2005). Intellectual currents associated with postmodernism have spurred critiques of community as socially essentializing and politically conformist (e.g., Young, 2000). For community-level practitioners, a lack of conceptual clarity about the underlying structure of the field as well as an uncertain grasp of its history makes it difficult to navigate and communicate across different kinds of practice traditions and to relate efforts within different traditions to broader projects of social change.

Such a daunting picture suggests the need for re-articulation of intellectual signposts and strategic practices in relation to contemporary opportunities and challenges. This chapter undertakes such a task, attempting to make sense of the disparate tendencies and internal tensions among approaches to community practice in relation to the shifting political-economic and intellectual currents of our time. We begin by summarizing the broad outlines of the history of community practice or “community organization” in the United States, emphasizing both its multiple traditions and

the enduring nature of its strategic dilemmas. Our effort to trace the evolution of these traditions is guided in general terms by regulation theory (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), which directs attention to how each of the community practice traditions responded to the successive challenges posed by Fordist and post-Fordist restructurings within the U.S. context. This historical retrospective builds toward an analytical discussion of the key intellectual and social challenges facing the field. We conclude by pointing to four “barrier-crossing” sites of activity that seem to cut across traditions and may represent emerging sources of innovation for community-based action.

### **HISTORY AND STRATEGY: REASSESSING “COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION”**

“Community organization” has occupied an important position within the urban professions, social work, and urban planning in particular. Tracing its social-scientific research orientation and social-change impulses to the Progressive Era, community organization became a distinctive social-work practice area as early as the 1920s and 1930s (Fisher, 1994; Rothman, 1974). While initial conceptions of social organization were drawn from Chicago School sociological theories, post-World War II scholars and activists established core theoretical foundations and graduate-school specialization in community organization. The field’s self-definition underwent further expansion following the 1960s, when

strategies of comprehensive planning, grass-roots organizing, political mobilization, and local development became major touchstones in an increasingly heterogeneous field (Rothman, 1999).

Community organization is commonly seen as a multiple-paradigm field in which practitioners rely on a number of different competencies. Although it is possible to typologize these paradigms in a number of ways, Rothman's (1974) conception of three major approaches to community intervention has the advantage of clearly highlighting ideal-typical differences in theory and practice while also offering a certain historical applicability. These three approaches or modes—which we name here as *social planning*, *community organizing*, and *community development*—encapsulate

in rough terms the major 20th-century traditions of community intervention (see Table 4.1).

*Social planning* approaches see community intervention primarily as a technical process of problem-solving focused on a substantive social challenge (e.g., delinquency, housing, mental health) that can be defined and addressed. Planning approaches were predicated on notions of communities as functional (ecological) subunits of an urban industrial society that was dynamic, assimilative, and progressive. Social planning efforts emphasize objective research and the functional integration of citizens through efficient access to services, and require professional experts who gather and analyze data, administer large-scale organizations efficiently, and enforce predictability

**Table 4.1 Changing paradigms of community intervention**

Traditional map of the community field (e.g., Rothman, 1974)

<b>Social planning</b>	<b>Community organizing</b>	<b>Community development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communities as functional/ecological sub-units</li> <li>• Community intervention as technical/organizational, research-based process to solve social problems</li> <li>• Key challenge: tensions between controlled conditions conducive to knowledge production and implementation vs. unstable conditions typical of community-level social life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communities as political actors</li> <li>• Community intervention as the building of conflict-initiating democratic-action organizations to redistribute power and resources</li> <li>• Key challenge: constructing durable organizations that also continue to initiate and pursue conflict (i.e., avoiding the problems of co-optation vs. disintegration)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communities as participatory self-governing arenas</li> <li>• Community intervention as a process in which community members create accountable development and service activity</li> <li>• Key challenge: achieving sufficient capacity to make meaningful change while also retaining community-level accountability in the process</li> </ul>

Late 20th-century Economic, Political, and Cultural Changes to:

Shift from Fordist/New Deal Order (national mass-production industries, unionized labor, Keynesian economic policies, welfare-state expansion, liberal mass culture)

to:

Post-Fordism/Neoliberal Order (global production/services, flexible labor, neoliberal economic policies, welfare-state dismantlement, postmodern culture)

<b>Flexible services</b>	<b>Interest-group advocacy and coalition-building</b>	<b>Economic development and community-building</b>
Retrenchment and privatization encourage community-based providers to compete for resources and target services to operate more effectively and responsively; non-profits and private funders grow more influential; horizons become shorter term and many research agendas become narrower; new emphasis on collaboration and multicultural practice	Economic and political pressures push many organizations toward community development and pursuit of interest-group advocacy strategies to secure support; others seek to build new coalitions and movements (predatory lending, living wage, environmental justice) to promote new forms of social regulation	Drawing on complex arrangements from public and private sectors, certain groups focus on housing and economic development; others on building community assets or social-capital-centered development; still others embrace comprehensive initiatives or network-building to bring these together

of service delivery, while also understanding the complex conditions and requirements of community-level implementation (Warren, 1963). Many Fordist-era government and private social-service organizations (from settlement houses and health departments to child-welfare agencies) were based on social planning models of service design and delivery. Innovative practitioners in this tradition also contributed to what would eventually become rival traditions; thus certain seeds not only of community development but even social action community organizing (as Mobilization for Youth activism in the 1960s) often emerged, if indirectly, out of social planning type work (Selmi, 1998).

A central tension within this model was between, on the one hand, the kinds of conditions conducive to effective social-scientific knowledge production, bureaucratic organization, and service-delivery economies of scale (stability, predictability, etc.) and on the other, the actual conditions (often involving unpredictability, chronic instability, inefficiency, etc.) typical of community-level social and organizational life, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Hence, even under the historical conditions that were relatively conducive to the pursuit of this model in the United States (e.g., the New Deal or Great Society periods), contradictions between centralized planning and local implementation presented a host of challenges that were understood within this approach to be primarily technical or organizational but that were, of course, also political and social.

*Community organizing* approaches understand community intervention primarily as a process of organizing aggrieved or disadvantaged groups to make demands on the larger community for resources, recognition, or broader social change. Rooted conceptually in critical or radical theories of power and inequality, these approaches emerged from community organizing initiatives that were inspired by (and to some extent contributed to) 20th-century social movements in labor and civil rights. Defining “community” as a political (insurgent or transformative) actor, this tradition emphasizes strategies of mobilization linked in the short term to redistrib-

uting power or resources and in the long term to full democratic citizenship, movement building, and social transformation (Fisher, 1994). As codified in its best-known variant, the neo-Alinskyite model, these endeavors require professional community organizers who understand how to build democratic action organizations, train indigenous leaders, define and analyze political issues, mount organizing campaigns, mobilize participants, and expand the terrain of conflict (Alinsky, 1971). Historic successes within this broader tradition might be said to include major civil rights legislation and labor law, anti-displacement actions against urban renewal, and the community reinvestment mandates (Sugrue, 2004; Gotham, 1999; Squires, 1992).

A core tension of this approach has been the challenge of constructing durable community-based organizations that continue to initiate and pursue conflict (Piven and Cloward, 1999). Furthermore, while building such organizations was laboriously difficult work, success could be just as problematic as failure. In effect, the problem of co-optation—and, conversely, the marginalization of groups that turn their back on opportunities for co-optation—emerged as a perennial challenge for social action groups even under conditions in which conflict strategies were not outright suppressed. By the same token, this kind of community organizing at times has transcended its neighborhood-based origins, contributing to mobilization efforts as diverse as environmental justice actions, labor campaigns, and anti-globalization movements (Pellow, 2002; Simmons, 1994; DeFilippis, 2004).

*Community development*, finally, understands community intervention as a locally based process of self-directed regeneration. Its emergence as a distinct urban-community strategy gained momentum from 1960s demands by urban social movements for “community control” articulated first within visions of radical democracy (Breines, 1989) but more recently within communitarian conceptions of civil society (Sites, 1998). Regardless, notions of community development tend to define “community” as a participatory, self-governing arena in which

residents and stakeholders create services or development activities that remain accountable to this community. More than other approaches, this model contends that key internal assets (people, relationships, associations, etc.) need to remain at the center of strategies of revitalization if development is to be directed by, and benefit, members. Emphasis in this approach is on process goals—encouraging participation, enhancing community competency, promoting collaboration and partnership, developing leadership—within a strategy of incremental, consensual, and self-directed change (Blakely, 1979). The key tension recognized by the tradition itself has been that between achieving sufficient community capacity to make meaningful change and retaining community accountability in the process (Ferguson and Stoutland, 1999). This tension has led to criticism of community development organizations for their dependence on external resources, their tendency to substitute organizational goals for constituent interests, the struggle to “scale up” successful initiatives, and the slow pace of incrementalism (Stoecker, this volume).

Despite the differences between the models, all three took shape in tandem with—or in response to problems with—similar nation-centered social structures linked to the New Deal Order specific to U.S. Fordism (Fraser and Gerstle, 1989; O’Connor, this volume; Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Indeed, the community organizing and community development paradigms, in spite of their critiques of the undemocratic and top-down nature of the social planning paradigm typically supported by New Deal and Great Society liberalism, tended to assume that such liberalism would remain an established structural component of American society. Following the 1960s, however, changes in economic and political conditions posed further challenges to the three paradigms of community organization.

## “POST-FORDIST” RESTRUCTURING AND THE SHIFTING TERRAIN FOR COMMUNITY

The final quarter of the 20th century significantly reshaped the economic and political landscape and, along with it, the prospects for effective community action. Beginning in the 1970s, an international economic crisis accompanied the crumbling of key domestic pillars of 20th-century Fordist capitalism, such as mass production industries, unionized labor, middle-class consumption, Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies, and welfare state expansion. These pillars, which had supported relatively stable economic growth and rising standards of living for most citizens, gave way to new strategies of corporate-led growth based on greater capital mobility, service sector expansion, flexible non-unionized labor, niche consumption, and neoliberal state policies (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). Growing social diversity emerged alongside these shifts, as the post-1965 wave of immigration, largely comprising non-European immigrants-of-color, transformed urban communities. These changing conditions created significant challenges and opportunities for community approaches, as residents looked to community organizations and strategies either to resist the dominant socio-political changes or to fill in for downsized state institutions.

## FROM SOCIAL PLANNING TO FLEXIBLE SERVICES?

Social planning was not easily made congruent with late 20th-century conditions of privatization, flexible services, and recurrent fiscal stress. One prominent response, centering on market solutions to social problems, redefined community from a functional/ecological unit to a market/demographic category or service niche. Likewise, models of organizational practice shifted from large-scale bureaucracies to principal/agent contracting relations in which entrepreneurial agents compete for markets (Smith and Lipsky, 1993). If proponents

pointed to better-targeted, more cost-efficient delivery, the challenges nevertheless included endemic financing gaps, overspecialization, growing numbers “falling through the cracks,” and an overwhelming emphasis on short-term-oriented services. Overall “planning strategies,” meanwhile, were still guided by government policies even when demands for flexibility came from local communities (Smith, 2000; Marwell, 2004). The core practice dilemma of this tradition—the tension between research-based knowledge and institution-based practice—has been significantly exacerbated, as “market” demands of short-term entrepreneurialism often run directly counter to the careful knowledge-building, institutional predictability, and comprehensive approach required for effective implementation. In certain respects the enterprise of social-scientific research itself has actively facilitated these tendencies (O’Connor, 2001).

#### **FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZING TO INTEREST GROUP PRESSURE?**

Post-1970s globalization, political realignments, and state-supported neoliberalism all served to undermine social action type community organizing. The enhanced capital mobility of the post-Fordist economy and the detachment of Democratic Party politics from institutional bases in unions and communities reduced federal urban/community assistance, weakened labor law and consumer safety, reformed welfare, and privatized public housing. Even locally, “progressive city” regimes failed to institutionalize community-oriented policies or sustain broad action coalitions over time (Sites, 2003).

Certain community organizing groups, seeking to take advantage of market and state-sponsored opportunities, pursued community development projects that, over time, replaced older action strategies. Others, confronted by less “concessionary” elites and by their own organizational instability, became more careful in their use of confrontation. Interest-group advocacy

strategies (lobbying, ad hoc coalition-building, sporadic grassroots mobilizations) became the norm, whereas groups committed to movement-building found themselves financially strapped or increasingly dependent on churches and foundations (Fisher, 1994).

In this sense, the old social action challenge—how to avoid both co-optation and marginality—intensified, and groups sometimes struggled to develop a new identity. Both “community” and “organizing” now were being redefined—the former to speak for a variety of overlapping constituencies, the latter to focus on leadership-centered, institution-based (rather than grassroots) kinds of organizing. As neo-Alinskyite efforts relied increasingly on established institutions for funding, normative bearings, and organizing structures, their strategic moderation and partnerships led to concerns about leadership and accountability in an interest-group arena (Warren, 2001). Despite these challenges, community organizing did survive, and even took on new issues, such as environmental racism, predatory lending, transportation equity, immigrant rights, and the living wage (Luce, 2004). In certain cities, organizers rearticulated neighborhood-based mobilizing strategies to confront displacement or employment loss, as well as to demand community benefits in the form of jobs, affordable housing, and public space (Parks and Warren, 2009). These activities also introduced social action organizations to new (or long-forgotten) coalition partners, such as environmental public-interest groups and labor unions (Fine, 2005).

#### **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: TOWARD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OR COMMUNITY BUILDING?**

The post-1970s socioeconomic conditions that undermined the social action model posed both challenges and opportunities for the community development field. Although cutbacks in federal urban aid restricted access by lower-income community residents to non-market resources, expanded

low-income housing tax credits and block grants subsidized a growing number of community-based housing providers. A community development industry established itself, and in the process the archetypal community development corporation (CDC) redefined the community development model (Stoutland, 1999). Though earliest examples were designed to address community revitalization holistically, CDCs over time emphasized the *development* in community development (e.g., bricks-and-mortar projects), shifted from community participation and accountability to entrepreneurial inventiveness, and redefined community from lower income or minority to mixed income (Halpern, 1995). Not surprisingly, turf or inter-organizational rivalries became common, though as this competitive “industry” matured it also succeeded in building practice partnerships and advocacy coalitions as well as intermediaries that provided funding and technical support. Perhaps more frustrating to CDC proponents has been the long-term problem of moving beyond housing to other kinds of economic development, especially small businesses and stable, well-paid employment (Lemann, 1999).

The central tension of this model endures, as CDC-style bricks-and-mortar development has not lifted neighborhoods out of poverty or preserved them from gentrification even while struggling to sustain grassroots participation and accountability. Partly in response, “community building,” inspired loosely by communitarianism and supported by foundations, made social networks and institutional collaborations a central hub linking together both physical redevelopment and group empowerment (National Community Builders Network, 2000; Beck and Eichler, 2000). This more *socially* focused community development paradigm promised to enhance community-level capacity to make meaningful change while anchoring accountability in community-based institutions.

Yet *how* such agendas might be implemented in the face of neoliberal economic structures and government policies was often unclear. Implementation was further complicated by the ambiguities and constraints

built into community building efforts, including the reliance on broad principles rather than articulated theories of change, the contrasting priorities of stakeholders, and the fickleness of funders (Chaskin, 2005). These dynamics produced a set of inherent tensions—between capacity building and development outcomes, between long-term and short-term change, between broad community change ambitions and aligning expectations with the scale and nature of interventions supported (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). In the meantime, the community development field experienced pressure to resemble traditional social planning approaches (e.g., an increased focus on data-driven and “evidenced-based” practice) but with less tolerance for notions of long-term system change.

#### GLOBALISM AND POSTMODERNISM: RECENT INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGES

Beyond these structural and strategic difficulties, there were also two major intellectual developments that threw into question long-standing notions of community organization shared by all three traditions. One such challenge was posed by *theories of globalization*, which have problematized nation-state-centered conceptions of community, emphasizing instead the potentially new kinds of communities that emerge at (or connect across) international and regional scales. Such notions undermine at least two conceptual moorings of the social planning tradition: the nation-state as a stable arena and actor in social development, and social and political assimilation as an unquestioned trajectory for immigrant populations (Castells, 1997; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). Conceptions of globalization challenge the other two traditions as well. For community organizing, transnationality questions the primacy of national citizenry as the ideal activist subject, shifting attention instead to the political potential of transnational advocacy networks, cross-national publics, and global

democratizing projects (Smith, 2001; Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink, 2002). For community development, the challenge of globalization is that new forms of community detached from (or stitched between) local or neighborhood places might be better understood through conceptions of regional or translocal development. More generally, notions of globalization make clear that all three paradigms have assumed a certain kind of urban spatial structure and locus as the natural setting in which community practice was conducted—the “inner-city” neighborhood or community of concentrated neglect—that now needs revision.

A second intellectual challenge to 20th-century traditions of community organization has been posed by *postmodern conceptions* of community and identity. These conceptions tend to argue that traditional ideals of community—emphasizing unity, shared consciousness, and face-to-face relationships—dissolve or essentialize internal differences between members, enshrine deceptive notions of full presence and understanding, and rest upon the exclusion of outsiders (Young, 1990, 2000). Rather than a fixed and autonomous subject, community for postmodernists is a fluid and relational form of identity and community building involves the capacity to accommodate oneself to strangers (Young, 1990) or the construction of complex solidarities across multiple oppressions (Kelley, 1997). To some extent, these conceptions are echoed within the practices of organizers, social workers, and planners who recognize differential power and social identity (Weil and Gamble, 2005; Gutiérrez, Lewis, Nagda, Wernick, & Shore, 2005). Efforts to embrace multiple identities and constituencies within particular communities through governance mechanisms and simultaneous translation at community meetings (e.g., Medoff and Sklar 1994), or through design elements responsive to multiple ethnic and cultural traditions in development projects (e.g., Robinson 2005), are also examples of this recognition. Yet radical postmodernism continues to challenge the use of power in traditional notions of community organization—whether that is the power to define

and “fix” communities that is claimed by *social planning* experts, or the micro-power of the community organizer to “manipulate the masses” implied in Alinskyite *community organizing* models, or the discursive power to speak for “the community” that is often claimed by *community development* practitioners.

Taking globalism and postmodernism seriously may point each model toward new modes of engagement. Globalism draws attention to opportunities for transnational planning, cross-border organizing, and international community development. Globalism also highlights the importance of cross-national comparative research in order to understand the conditions for community action in, or across, multiple contexts. Postmodern theory, for its part, may suggest ways in which different modes of community practice can be deepened through a more rigorous encounter with the social construction and valorization of difference. Social planning needs to grapple with its own historic role in the “regulation” and “surveillance” of social groups. Community organizing, through its confrontation with “identity politics,” may come to better understand coalition building as a longer-term process of inter-group recognition, overlapping interest-building, and respect for autonomy. Community development, informed by postmodern critiques, might more easily grasp the exclusionary elements in communitarian visions that ask certain groups to give up who they are in order to participate in broader collectivities. At the same time, such critiques could also push multicultural practice to move beyond superficial designations of group characteristics in order to understand how a given community may embrace multiple traditions of community self-definition and self-organization.

#### **FUTURE OF COMMUNITY PRACTICE: SUSTAINING TRADITIONS, CROSSING BOUNDARIES**

Multiple models of community organization and practice remain relevant to contemporary conditions. Indeed, basic precepts from

each tradition offer important signposts for 21st-century community practice. Core insights of the social planning tradition continue to be crucial elements to any community practice that seeks to address social disadvantage in an informed, effective manner. Key insights from the community organizing tradition remain fundamental to generating power from below in a society marked by growing economic and political inequality. Important insights from the community development tradition are still valuable lessons for building a robust civil society in which citizens gain the experience needed to debate, design, and govern their own institutions. None of these traditions can we afford to do without.

If it is important to recognize the distinctive contributions of each model, though, then what unites this disparate field of endeavor? The ultimate power of community, or of any community practice, lies not in its status as a distinct sector of activity but in the extent to which it contributes to social justice (Fainstein, 1999, 2005). Of course, each mode of practice is positioned to make its contribution in a unique way. Within the social planning tradition, community offers a crucial mode of understanding and differentiating social needs so as to respond to them in ways that effectively improve material and psychological well-being. For community organizing, community designates any number of spaces or collectivities that can be leveraged to challenge dominant forms of social power. For the community development tradition, community furnishes a recognition that all forms of modern social activity—even those dominated by supposedly “self-regulating” markets and large-scale political institutions—depend on certain communal ties, values, and modes of social regulation in order to function cohesively. What unites community organization across the various models, therefore, is not simply a common field or site of practice but a larger *social project* or *mission*.

Even while reflecting on the importance of a broader social mission, we believe that it remains useful to sustain the three traditional paradigms as conceptual frames that orient community practice. It is important,

however, not to focus on these paradigms and their boundaries to the exclusion of opportunities for innovation that come from other theories or from emerging practices in the field. In closing, we suggest four sites of “transgression,” where new ideas, or new realities, are encouraging practices that cut across the sorts of traditional community barriers that too often reflect structures of inequality and division.

The first type of useful boundary-crossing concerns the bridging of *social* divides, such as those between immigrant and native-born communities or between classes, as a way of forging common initiatives, extended networks, or broader coalitions. Many community organizations have been engaged in deliberately multi-racial organizing efforts that bring African American and immigrant residents together, especially in rapidly changing demographic contexts. A number of service-sector unions are pursuing such strategies as well, often drawing upon community partnerships to broker connections between workers (Parks, 2006).

The second site of productive transgression relates to the crossing of *spatial/political* boundaries, as in efforts to link communities across cities and suburbs or to connect local projects cross-nationally. Certain progressive regionalist initiatives seek to organize metropolitan-wide coalitions in support of state-level redistributive policies (e.g., on health care or housing) that have historically foundered because of suburban-centered resistance (Sites, 2004). Meanwhile, innovative cross-national initiatives at the community level range from the organizing, networking, and support of local producer cooperatives to the transnational advocacy work of activists, NGO networks, and others around such issues as indigenous rights, debt relief, and environmental justice.

A third area concerns the crossing of *sectoral* boundaries, as when traditionally discrete areas of service or action (e.g., housing and social welfare, or labor and community) are brought together. Many recent comprehensive community initiatives, for example, have sought to connect development strategies and activities across sectors in an effort

to promote integrated social, economic, and physical community change, either through multi-faceted project implementation or through supporting interorganizational collaboration (Chaskin et al., 2001). Cross-sector mobilization around living-wage policies targeting private-sector jobs reflects the carefully coordinated organizing activities both of labor unions and of community organizations. The most successful community benefits agreements across the country similarly reflect campaigns initiated and diligently carried out through labor and community partnerships (Parks and Warren 2009).

Our fourth site of productive barrier-crossing relates to the traversal of *scalar* boundaries, as in shifting initiatives to more promising venues (e.g., scaling up or down) or building organizational connections that bridge local and extra-local arenas. The World Social Forum, for example, which began as an international counter-summit to the one held regularly by global corporate elites, has spawned over time an array of regional and local “social fora” that facilitate interconnection between an enormous number of economic and social justice organizations (Köhler, 2005).

While hardly exhaustive, this typology provides at least a preliminary sense of certain directions that innovations in practice may be taking. These four areas tend to mark new “spaces” of community practice without dictating the type of practice that is appropriate—i.e., they point to the “where,” but not the “how” of new community practices. The *how*, of course, is always in part a strategic question—hence, the enduring importance of bringing to bear insights derived from a reassessment of the traditional community strategies and from the efforts of contemporary organizers, developers, and planners themselves.

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