We’re City Lifers: Transformative Community Organizing in Boston’s City Life/Vida Urbana

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"We’re City Lifers": Transformative Community Organizing in Boston’s City Life/Vida Urbana

by

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City Life/Vida Urbana is a base-building community organization committed to structural transformation through racial, economic, gender, and other forms of social justice. Its local work currently focuses on preventing evictions as a result of foreclosures. Most people come to City Life out of the desire to save their homes. However, all City Life organizers noted that saving one’s own home appears to have no impact on one becoming a long-term participant in the movement, or a negative impact when this is accomplished through purely service rather than service-supported direct action. People stay in City Life due to the “incentives” of (1) community and a culture of solidarity, (2) radical moral ideology, and (3) the power members themselves have internally within and externally through the organization. These three organizational characteristics are produced through solidaristic cultural practices and community building, radical political education, the development of organic intellectuals, leadership development, bottom-up organizational structure, and militant and effective protest tactics. Through these mechanisms and “incentives” City Life is able to develop a radical organizing project notable for its ability both to build a substantial base and win gains in the present and to build a significant, committed, and talented base for a long-term transformative movement. City Life therefore exemplifies a radical alternative to neo-Alinskyist community organizing models.
“The arc of moral universe has never bent towards justice — it bends only where organized groups of people force it to bend.”

—Jay Driskell, “Writing History with Wite Out,”
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Introduction

REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

My interest in City Life/Vida Urbana, other organizing models, and radical social transformation grows from a set of questions in critical sociology about consciousness, culture, and social movements, as well as from my practical social movement participation. Through my initial participation in Occupy Wall Street, I became a volunteer organizer for Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson, a Poughkeepsie-based anti-foreclosure and housing rights organization. I first became involved with the group when it was several months old in early 2012. Shortly after, I helped re-structure the group along the lines of the radical organizing model of City Life/Vida Urbana. The re-alignment took place after another group member and I attended a two-day training workshop during which City Life/Vida Urbana explained its theory and method. Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson has had a close relationship with City Life ever since, and both groups, Nobody Leaves and City Life, are members of the Right to the City Alliance, national coalition of community organizations with over 50 member groups. Through the Right to the City, Nobody Leaves worked closely with City Life/Vida Urbana to organize a demonstration of several hundred people in New York City in Summer 2012. City Life/Vida Urbana’s head organizer came to Poughkeepsie in the beginning of 2013 to train us on direct action tactics used by the anti-eviction movement. I also attended a couple of City Life’s Boston Bank Tenant Association (BTA) meetings,¹ as well as a meeting between NEW ROAD, a 10-site New England network of anti-displacement community organizations, and the Chief Counsel of the

¹ The weekly meeting of homeowners and tenants facing foreclosure and/or eviction and their allies
Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA). For the last 18 months I’ve participated in numerous phone calls and exchanged e-mails with the organization. Throughout this period, City Life/Vida Urbana has answered our many questions and provided crucial guidance to our fledgling organization. I spent three weeks embedded in the organization from June-July 2013 doing participant observation and in-depth interviews for this undergraduate thesis. My analysis of City Life, therefore, is motivated in part by my own use of the model and informed by a close practical, as well as theoretical, knowledge of its work.

ARGUMENT

City Life/Vida Urbana is considered a radical or transformative community organization, because it aims to transform social structures in order to realize economic, racial, gender, and other forms of justice. It initially attracts the vast majority of individuals to the group based on the idea that their individual homes can be saved. People primarily come to the organization out of self-interest and expect to receive a limited service, not to be drawn into an extended radical organizing project. However, all City Life organizers noted that saving one’s own home appears to have no impact on one becoming a long-term participant in the movement, or a negative impact when this is accomplished through purely service rather than service-supported direct action. People stay in City Life due to the “incentives” of (1) community and a culture of solidarity, (2) radical moral ideology, and (3) the power members themselves have internally within and externally through the organization. These three “incentives” are produced through solidaristic cultural practices and community building, radical political education, the

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2 According to Hall (1983), ideologies are “the mental frameworks—the languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 26). In this thesis, I will make use of this conceptualization of ideology.

3 When I refer to City Life/Vida Urbana “members” throughout the paper, I refer to homeowners and tenants who have been threatened with displacement who regularly participate in the life of the group.
development of organic intellectuals, leadership development, bottom-up organizational structure, and militant and effective direct action tactics. Through these mechanisms and “incentives” City Life is able to develop a radical organizing project notable for its ability both to build a substantial base in and win gains in the present and to build a significant, committed, and talented base for a long-term transformative movement. City Life therefore exemplifies a radical alternative to the neo-Alinskyist Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and Congregation Based Community Organizing (CBCO) community organizing models. I argue that effective radical organizing can simultaneously win immediate gains for oppressed communities and build the movement to transform systems of oppression. Organizing projects do not have to choose one or the other.

RATIONALE

In the last several years the concept of community organizing has re-entered popular discourse, both from the liberal-left of the Democratic Party and from the Right of U.S. politics. Much of this can be attributed to the election of former community organizer Barack Obama and ACORN’s impact in this victory through registering millions of voters. The Right responded by painting the entirety of community organizing, from Saul Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) to the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and the “Cloward-Piven strategy” to Barack Obama and ACORN, as the inherent and powerful domain of Leftists looking to “take over” the United States.

I define community organizing as the process of activating people holding minimal power as individuals—connected by neighborhood and/or issue and—into an organization in order to create change through the power of collective action. I define social movements as

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4 Throughout the thesis I define “the movement” as “sustained activism of various organizations and individuals working towards a common goal of political, economic, cultural or social change” (Lee and Williams 2013).
historical mass struggles (on national and/or international scales) by diverse actors “from below” who seek social change and have an at least partially aligned vision of that change.

In reality, community organizing may be reactionary, conservative, or reformist/neo-Alinskyist just as easily as it may be radical (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2010). Saul Alinsky actually emphasized “pragmatism” amidst the structural and cultural context of the Popular Front, McCarthyism, racism, and patriarchy of the late 1930s-1960s. While his model utilized the militant direct action tactics of the Communist Party (CPUSA) and he conceived of community organizing as part of a broader social movement, his approach to organizing was non-ideological, based upon participants’ self-interest, and race and gender-blind. Reflecting Alinsky’s lasting impact, as well as the failures of more radical forms of community organizing in the 1960s, most left-of-center community organizations remain reformist or neo-Alinskyist, though most have departed from traditional Alinskyism to at least some degree. I define neo-Alinskyist or reformist community organizations as those “which accept the basic premises of the status quo, but try to tweak it a bit around the edges. They try to reform gross inequities to improve and maintain society” (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2010). They also believe that organizers should not bring their ideology into their organizing, that political education should stay within the realm of “common sense”, that economic issues should be the sole focus of organizing. They usually believe that race and gender should be excluded, and that material interest alone drives member participation in organizing. I define radical or transformative organizing as that which:

• fights for structural change with a vision of alternatives

• fights against all forms of oppression

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5 In the mid-1930s, as a means to combat the international rise of fascism, Communist Parties throughout the world adopted a “Popular Front” strategy of softening their hardline Left ideology to align with and support liberals.
focuses on base-building in oppressed communities: particularly working class people of color, women, and immigrants

- emphasizes the leadership development of and leaders from the base: particularly people of color, women, and immigrants

- conducts radical political education

- emphasizes local organizing as a means to build national movements, which will in turn bolster local organizing

- emphasizes social movement participation

- emphasizes internal solidarity as means of organization building

- emphasizes direct action and conflict as the central means of forcing change

While community organizing is not the bastion of left politics that the Right often makes it out to be, it is one of the few areas where meaningful left politics are possible. Left politics, in the sense in which I am using it, refers to a project of structural transformation. This project involves a critique of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression, an affirmation of the fundamental worth and equality of all people, and the mobilization of marginalized people in an attempt to transform society. Community organizing should be of increased importance to the left for several reasons related to globalization and the economic, political, and cultural power of neoliberalism. These reasons include the decline of left parties in many capitalist democracies and their absence in the U.S (Piven 1992; Ackerman 2012), plummeting unionization rates (Voss 1993), an economic shift from traditional “point of production” jobs to the difficult-to-unionize and contingent service sector (Klein 2002), the pervasiveness of unemployment and underemployment (Wilson 1987), the increasing separation

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6 This definition heavily incorporates elements of those of Mann (2011 and 2011), Fisher, Katiya, Reid, and Shragge (2013:172-73), and Williams (2013).
of workplace from residence and social networks (Piven 1992), and the increasing spatial segregation by class (Wilson 1987).

Communities themselves are crucial sites for social reproduction or change. They are where people concretely live their lives of work and pleasure, interact with the state and dominant institutions, and politically participate (or not). Community is the everyday terrain on which ideology and “common sense” is formed and thus where social movements are incubated and where counter-hegemonies must be built (DeFilippis et al. 2010). However, it is also important to recognize the limits of community in our neoliberal moment. The ultimate power of the state and capital to shape localities, the ongoing decline of barriers to capital in public policy, and the continued decline of the “Left” hand of the State that provides for the public welfare in favor of the “Right” hand of militarism and social control means that movements that seek justice for communities must ultimately address injustice at its national and structural roots.

Generally, how people come to join, stay with, and play leading roles in social movements and what makes for effective organizing given structural limitations are questions of how change can be created and are of both theoretical and practical interest. Whether and how radical community organizing can flourish is also of interest to those committed to radical social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been very limited academic reflection on community organizing in the United States. The limited existing scholarship is located almost completely outside of social movement research, in which community organizing is relatively invisible (Swarts 2008). Furthermore, with few exceptions (Fisher 1994; Wood 2002; DeFilippis et al. 2010; Fisher, Katiya, Reid, and Shragge 2013), the limited research focuses almost exclusively on the ACORN and CBCO

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7 I define community simply as a localized geographic area in which people spend the majority of their time, as well the local area’s physical, economic, social, and cultural contents.
models and either explicitly or implicitly treats neo-Alinskyist community organizing as defining and encompassing all community organizing in the United States (i.e. Hart 2001; Swarts 2008; Beck and Purcell 2013). While several of these books include intensive studies of individual neo-Alinskyist community organizations, one includes an in-depth examination of different neo-Alinskyist models (Swarts 2008). But even critics of neo-Alinskyist models such as Beck and Purcell (2013) ignore radical organizing models. They criticize American community organizing for its localism, lack of critical analysis, and redistributionist rather than transformative aims, advocating instead Freirean critical consciousness development and Gramscian counter-hegemonic work. While they make important and valid critiques of dominant forms of community organizing, they ignore the growing power of the transformative organizing movement, which treats critical consciousness and counter-hegemony building as the central aims of its work and explicitly cites Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire as its intellectual cornerstones.

The few existing academic reflections on radical organizing, with the exception of Fisher (1994), lack deep examination of concrete practices. Fisher provides an historical overview of

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8 Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a Brazilian educator and leading theorist of radical pedagogy and popular adult education. He theorized that by replacing the traditional teacher-student relationships with a relationship based on equality and the understanding that students have important knowledge, teaching based on students’ lived experiences, asking problem-posing questions designed to push students to critically reflect on their world, and connecting students to collective action to transform the world, that young people and adults could develop radical consciousness.

9 Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was a leading theorist and figure in the Italian Communist Party. He is most famous for developing his theory of hegemony. Hegemony depends upon the idea that in order to rule, the dominant must have “consent” from the population as a whole. Consent is obtained through influence over the set of dominant ideologies that all societies need for social cohesion; the dominant classes and dominant interests largely control the “common sense” of the time—by controlling institutions that construct people’s subjectivities and identities and their ideology, though hegemony is in constant flux and continuously incorporates the understandings and interests of the dominated in order to maintain their consent. Hegemony is not totalizing; it is also shaped “from below”; and people also have agency and hold their own non-hegemonic ideas (Williams 1980). In order to challenge the dominant, the subordinate must create its own “sense,” a counter-hegemony, to contest the “common sense.” Contrasted to a material struggle for power, this ideological struggle or “war of position” is fought within dominant institutions in an attempt to transform the subjectivities they produce through their everyday machinations. This struggle is best advanced through the work of organic intellectuals who, contrary to the abstract theorizing and elevated structural position of traditional intellectuals, are structurally situated alongside the oppressed and able to relate theory to their shared experience (Gramsci 2000).
community organizing in the United States from the late 19th century to the late 20th century, including the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, 1960s, and 1970s. He argues that despite the committed leadership of its organizers, radical political analysis and education, and effective militant tactics, the top-down nature of the Communist Party’s community organizing efforts and its placing the perceived needs of the Party ahead of needs expressed by community members led to a substantial loss of support in the late 1930s (Fisher 1994). In the 1940s Saul Alinsky took what he believed to be the essential militant tactics of the Communist Party and the central role of the dynamic organizer in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and applied them to his own style of non-ideological organizing.

In the 1960s, radical organizing proliferated, particularly earlier in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later in sectarian revolutionary socialist groups. SDS and SNCC largely abandoned the idea of leadership and the importance of effective action to reach collectively desired goals in favor of a romanticized notion of the inherent abilities of community members to decide everything for themselves. The result was organizations without much purpose, membership, capacity, or accomplishment (Fisher 1994: 104-18, 226-27). Sectarian groups couldn’t build significant bases due to abstract and rigid ideology that isolated organizers from working class people. Largely in reaction to this failure, neo-Alinskyism emerged as dominant in the 1970s, and it has remained relatively dominant in left-of-center community organizing since.

Neo-Alinskyism turned to “practical” remedies for the failures of 1960s organizing. As a remedy for the structural weakness of SDS and SNCC, neo-Alinskyist groups rightly embraced accountable leadership, a focus on power and conflict, and the importance of concrete victories.

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The CIO, largely led by Socialist and Communist organizers, was formed in the late 1930s as a reaction to traditional labor unions’ refusal to organize whole workplaces together rather than separating “skilled” and “unskilled” workers within the same workplace into different unions and privileging the “skilled” workers.
though for some of these groups leadership development of members was not emphasized enough. As a remedy for the ideological failures of sectarian groups, neo-Alinskyist groups embraced a non-ideological strategy that focused on a “majoritarian” concern for class. However, organizers always bring their ideology into their work (Fisher 1994:138-40), and the question is whose interests this ideology advances and whether organizers are held accountable for their ideologies. Solely focusing on economics excludes the majority of people, who have complex intersectional identities affected by interlocking systems of oppression.

Most of Fisher’s (1994) other conclusions are repeated or elaborated upon by DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2010), who emphasize that community organizing, generally regarded as a homogenous and static practice, is in fact ideologically varied and shifts along with structural change. Specifically, they demonstrate how neoliberalism has led community organizing to become more conservative and localized and how national and global capitalism dictates that community organizations must be radical if they seek meaningful social change. Fisher, Katiya, Reid, and Shragge (2013) highlight the Right to the City Alliance, a national coalition with over 50 member community organizations (many of which are oriented towards transformative organizing—as is the Alliance itself) and contextualize the group within neoliberalism as an exception to the related trend of increasingly more conservative and localized community organizing. They also build on the argument articulated by DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2010) by proposing a definition of radical community organizing (what I also call “transformative” community organizing) and insisting on the need for it. While they provide a brief overview of some radical community organizations within Right to the City, including City Life/Vida Urbana, the purpose of the article is to compare Right to the City to their radical
definition of community organizing and assess its possibilities for future success. The article does not deeply examine the specific practices of any member organization.

Wood (2002) actually compares a neo-Alinskyist CBCO organization (Oakland Community Organizations or OCO) with a transformative organization (People United for a Better Oakland or PUEBLO). However, he primarily focuses on the CBCO model. A total of about five chapters are spent on OCO compared to two on PUEBLO. Furthermore, Wood doesn’t analyze PUEBLO as using a “transformative” community organizing model, but a “race-based” one. Other organizations Wood identifies in an appendix as “race-based” community organizations also would be more accurately categorized as claiming and using the “transformative” model (i.e. POWER and FUREE or Families United for Racial and Economic Equality).

Race is absolutely central in the transformative model. The model emphasizes race as a crucial axis of oppression and struggle, is committed to organizing people of color, and emphasizes the critical importance of people of color as leaders. However, to describe these organizations as primarily focusing on constructing a shared racial or multicultural identity is to underrepresent the other aspects of their work that correspond with the tenets of the transformative model. Wood briefly touches on key aspects of the model as PUEBLO expresses them in practice, such as an ideological focus on race, class, and gender, an emphasis on community and culture, and non-sectarian radical political education. Wood notes that members originally come to the organization out of material self-interest, but stay for these other reasons. However, all of these elements are only noted in passing, within fewer than 30 pages of one particular chapter. There is no concrete discussion of how radical political education is conducted or how community and shared culture are constructed, beyond collective sharing of
food and celebration of non-dominant cultural occasions such as Cinco de Mayo and Juneteenth. In the literature as a whole, this lack of focus on concrete practices of radical community organizations prevents us from assessing what makes a successful or unsuccessful radical community organization, how radical community organizations practically compare to neo-Alinskyist organizations, and whether successful radical community organizations provide lessons for creating long-term and dedicated participation in community organizing and social movements.

Movement intellectuals within the transformative organizing movement itself have written about their work outside of the academic and/or formal publishing world. Goldberg (2010), Social Justice Leadership (2010), Mann (2011 and 2011), and Williams (2013) are examples of these writings. These (mostly) short articles provide basic overviews of aspects of the transformative organizing model. Williams (2013) draws his insights from his fifteen years with the transformative community organization POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights). He cites Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and Myles Horton as key inspirations to transformative organizing. His paper is intended for a general (Left) audience and intentionally only covers some of the fundamentals. The paper by Social Justice Leadership (2010) mostly emphasizes the same points as Williams. Mann (2011 and 2011) who several of the movement organizers I spoke to pointed out as being central to codifying transformative

11 Goldberg’s piece was originally a blog post and later published in a collection from AK Press, a worker-owned cooperative that prints Anarchist and other Left materials. The blog post can be found at http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/building-power-in-the-city/. Social Justice Leadership’s writings are on its website. Williams’ Demand Everything: Lessons From the Transformative Organizing Model (2013) was published by the New York office of the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, the private foundation of Germany’s Left Party. Mann’s writings were published by Beacon Press, a small non-profit press run by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

12 Myles Horton (1905–1990) was an American educator with pedagogical practices very similar to Freire. He was one of the founders of the Highlander Folk School, which filled a crucial role as an educational and planning center for the CIO and the Civil Rights Movement.
organizing theory, has some of the most in-depth writings on transformative organizing. The 7 Components of Transformative Organizing is a highly abstract theoretical overview designed to complement the more practically grounded Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer. However, Playbook focuses on what makes an organizer transformative and provides brief examples drawn from a variety of organizers in numerous different organizations and contexts. Goldberg (2010) addresses many of the same points and also discusses the Right to the City Alliance and the National Domestic Workers Alliance as new transformative-oriented national coalitions of community organizations. Again, while helpful and informed by decades of transformative organizing work, these are general overviews and not in-depth studies of detailed practices. Thus, the literature on community organizing largely comes from outside of formal academic circles and usually provides a brief picture of a set of generalized best practices. What is absent is detailed description of concrete practices in particular organizations and of the range of outcomes they produce.

While academics have largely ignored community organizing practices and the radical organizing model in particular, they have focused on the question of what leads to social movement participation. Academics have intensively analyzed this question, though, barring exceptions such as Eric Hirsch (1986), they have not looked to community organizing to help answer this question. The debate tends to stress experiential solidarity (Fantasia 1988), material self-interest (McCarthy and Zald 1977), or ideology and morality (Fireman and Gamson 1979; Jasper 1997; Hart 2001). Exceptions, such as the work of Eric Hirsch (1986), have argued that multiple incentives are present, and that they play differentially important roles at different stages of involvement.
Debates regarding the character of participation within the community organizing world often treat the question of quantity versus quality as an either/or proposition. Neo-Alinskyists claim that change can only come from getting large numbers of people to participate, and large-scale participation only results from a “majoritarian” platform: having non-ideological politics and emphasizing self-interest. Radicals claim that real change only occurs through movements that seek structural transformation. Both tend to ignore the academic social movement literature about participation.

Both sides would benefit from cross-pollination. Social movement academics should pay attention to a rapidly growing radical community organizing development, which is a site of transformative politics and a site where movement-building is in evidence. Community organizers need to pay attention to what social movement academics have to say about what leads to movement participation. My thesis begins to synthesize these two different fields. This thesis suggests that effective social movement participation can be produced when there are multiple incentives present to different degrees at different stages of involvement and that the question of quantity versus quality is a false dichotomy for community organizing. Specifically, I argue that City Life is only able to build a large and dedicated base precisely because it is radical in its culture, ideology, structure, and tactics.

WHY CITY LIFE?

Asked to contextualize City Life’s ability to retain long-term members, develop members engaged in broad struggles, develop member-leaders, and win victories for its members, Robert Fisher described City Life as “one of the more successful community organizations operating in the United States across all the variables…” (personal correspondence). City Life/Vida Urbana is at the center of this thesis due to its ability to transcend the dichotomies between fighting for the
present versus a possible radical future, achieving scale versus conducting radical political education, and retaining members versus basing participation on solidarity. Though rooted in local communities in Boston, its reach is much greater. It participates and leads in multi-issue coalitions locally, regionally, and nationally, and it trains and feeds leaders into other social justice movements. Its replicable model has been reproduced across the state, region, and country. However, my primary original fieldwork focuses upon City Life in Boston, where I have conducted participant observation, open-ended interviews, and reviewed organizational documents. While I have not done significant fieldwork in organizations that represent contrasting models, I have read the literature on ACORN and CBCO community organizing.

**THESIS OUTLINE**

Chapter two introduces my research methods, which are qualitative and rely heavily upon analyzing long interviews, participant observation, and review of documents, and City Life as an organization. Chapter three discusses the importance of the community and culture of solidarity present in the organization. City Life demonstrates that both a more generalized commitment and specific interpersonal bonds are crucial for (emotionally, ideologically, and socially) tying individuals to collectivities. Chapter four highlights the importance of morality for social movement participation, as well as the significance of radical political education at City Life, which is non-sectarian, participatory, holistic, and experiential. Chapter five revisits key sociological theory in more depth than other chapters in order to demonstrate the importance of, and how City Life produces, organic intellectuals. It discusses how these intellectuals must combine an embodied subjectivity, or habitus, similar to those they are organizing, and more objective skills and understandings, or consciousness. Chapter six argues the significance of, both in general and in the specific case of City Life, the power members themselves have
internally within and externally through their organization, as well as the essentialness of leadership development for achieving “power within” and “power through” simultaneously. It argues that without intensive leadership development one of these forms of power will come at the expense of the other. Chapter seven compares City Life’s transformative model to the neo-Alinskyist ACORN and CBCO models, and highlights it as a successful radical alternative. It argues that City Life demonstrates valuable lessons about how to build a counter-hegemony in practice.
Studying City Life/Vida Urbana

My case study of a radical community organization and the process of radical community organizing focuses almost exclusively on City Life/Vida Urbana. City Life describes itself as engaging in radical organizing. It is a base-building community organization that organizes, educates, and develops leaders from its base constructed on radical ideology. Its ultimate goal is to contribute to transformative local, regional, and national social movements. The majority of its members, member-leaders, and organizers are working-class people, people of color, and immigrants. Women are as well represented as men as members, member-leaders, and staff, although there are a few more male than female organizers. City Life is also successful by the standards of neo-Alinskyist community organizations. It has been able to build a large base in a short amount of time since transitioning to address the foreclosure crisis, it has exceptionally dedicated members, and it wins enormous gains for its members. Its model has successfully spread throughout the state, region, and country.

METHODOLOGY

I became deeply interested in City Life due to its ability to both build a base for radical organizing and to win immediate victories for its members. My goal in studying the organization has been to understand how this success has been created, to explore how consciousness is transformed, to examine how social movements grow and develop, and to learn about different models of community organizing. Among other items, my thesis examines the importance of culture, “common sense” consciousness versus critical consciousness, and collective identity in social movement participation. These social phenomena largely exist subconsciously, are fluid,
and are complex. They belie the rational, narrow, and static categorizations on which quantitative study depends. Therefore, I use in-depth interviewing, participant-observation, and review of organizational documents in the study.

The use of multiple qualitative methods addresses some of the objections to using mainly interviews to find descriptions of social reality. In interviews it is possible that people perform for the interviewer and manufacture a narrative, making interviewing about what people say and not what they do. However, combining interviews with observation and review of records strengthens the values of the interviews by allowing the researcher to cross check the information and the narratives produced by participants in the study. In addition, since my study is in large part focused on how people think about things, how their critical consciousness develops, and how their sense of the world changes, interviews appropriately capture this meaning-making process. The sort of participant-observation in which I engaged allowed me to see action in physical spaces, to note actual relationships in the organization, and to observe the cultural symbols and rituals operating in that context. Organizational documents are official statements by an organization, often expressing principles and aspirations rather than everyday procedures. However, combined with other qualitative information, they are valuable pieces of evidence of the organization’s organizing model, structure, and general practices (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Pugh 2013).

My study of City Life/Vida Urbana began in the Summer of 2012, when I read its manual and first watched the Bill Moyers’ Journal episode featuring the Boston-based group. Since then, I have been thinking about, writing about, and attempting to duplicate in practice their work in the mid-Hudson Valley. While I am primarily trying to triangulate between the manual created by the organization, other available videos of Bank Tenant Association (BTA) meetings and
direct actions, and the participant observation and in-depth interviews I conducted during the
three weeks I spent with City Life during the summer of 2013, my thesis is certainly informed by
my continuous involvement with the group and its model of organizing.

There are clearly intellectual benefits from and drawbacks to my prior and deep
involvement with City Life, Right to the City, and Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson. I have spent the
vast majority of the last two years trying to reproduce this model and have dramatically shifted
my own identity and ideology as a result of this work. I am quite familiar with the work, but also
have a significant emotional stake in believing in its success. There is certainly a danger that I
will be painting a romanticized portrait of the work of the group. However, I am both aware of
this danger and am aware that criticisms of City Life will help the group improve its practices far
more than compliments will. This will hopefully allow me to paint a fairly honest picture of the
group (Kurtz 2002: Appendix).

Since theory is supposed to be constantly modified in the process of data collection,
another danger of qualitative work is that early conclusions may be treated with too much
sanctity, and subsequent data may be forced within categories it should be exploding. I do think
that I began this project with a strong idea of what I’d find. However, I also think that the data
quickly and overwhelmingly changed my simplistic categories; I was not so rigid that I couldn’t
recognize that early on in the process. For example, I believed the general idea of a “culture of
solidarity” contributed to a long-term and committed membership at City Life, but from the
initial interviews I saw a pattern of members naming the specific interpersonal relationships and
experiences of community they had in City Life as central alongside a more generalized
solidaristic culture. Consequently, I think my theory has been extensively modified throughout
the process as a result of data collection and analysis, and I feel confident I was able to ask the
questions the data was pointing me to. Another advantage I have is that City Life member-leaders and staff members do a tremendous amount of reflection. Their practices are theoretically informed and intentional. Consequently, a significant part of my project is simply letting people speak. I intentionally quote people at length in an attempt to make sure that their voices are heard and that I am not unintentionally distorting anyone’s words.

Occupying a different social location than those one interviews can lead the interviewee to mistrust the interviewer and be unwilling to speak freely and, in turn, to a distortion in data. However, several factors have helped me navigate this challenge. First, organizers trusted me as someone they or others in the group knew and had worked with for the past year, and they trusted me as someone who understood their project and was pursuing the same work. Second, members trusted me as someone whom the organizers trusted, and, again, as someone who understood City Life’s project and was pursuing the same work. They were excited that Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson was founded and is growing thanks to City Life. Third, I was also helped by the internal culture of City Life, which emphasizes the importance of the sensitivity to diverse race, class and gender positions and the importance of discussing issues and structures of capitalism, racism and patriarchy across identity boundaries. In head organizer Steve Meacham, members had an example of an organizer and theoretician who cared about them and issues of race and gender despite being a white male. Quoting at length is also an important practice for me as a young, white, upper middle-class male with a substantially different structural position than those I was interviewing. My thesis allows members and member-leaders to speak for themselves at length. A major limitation is that I only interviewed members who continue to be involved with the group. Interviewing members who had come to the group, but not turned into
long-term members, or left after being long-term members, could provide a different and important perspective on how City Life could improve its efforts at retention.

During my time in Boston I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 staff and members of City Life. I interviewed 6 staff including Melonie Griffiths, who had recently left City Life for another organizing job, and I interviewed 14 members over 11 interviews. All of the staff and Melonie were interviewed in the Jamaica Plain office, and members were interviewed at various places including the office, restaurants, their homes, and over the phone. Staff were all interviewed one-on-one and in person. Interviews for staff ranged from approximately 30 minutes to two hours. The median interview took about 62 minutes. Many members were also interviewed one-on-one and in person, although five were interviewed in groups, one of two and the other of three, and three were interviewed one-on-one over the phone. Interviews for members ranged from about 30 minutes to about two hours. The median member interview took about 56 minutes.¹³

The central City Life office is still located in Jamaica Plain, which is also the home of the Boston Bank Tenants’ Association (BTA). Staff who organize at other branches go back and forth between their locations and the central office.¹⁴ I only interviewed staff who organized at the Boston branch or had responsibilities at all the branches but were centrally located in Jamaica Plain. Those I interviewed included Executive Director Curdina Hill, Head Organizer Steve Meacham, Boston Lead Organizer Antonio Ennis, Bilingual Organizer Maria Christina Blano, and Tenant Organizer Jim Brooks. I also interviewed KC Bailey, who leads courthouse

¹³ The median interview time per member would be less, as I’m counting the group interviews as a single interview here.
¹⁴ On top of the branch in Jamaica Plain, City Life also runs meetings on the North Side of Boston and Brockton. An attempt was being made to develop another meeting in the South Shore area of Boston at the beginning of summer 2013. Additionally, off-site City Life staff run BTA meetings in Worcester, Lynn, and Providence. With the inspiration and support of City Life, other groups in Massachusetts using the same model have developed in Springfield, Chelsea, and the Merrimack Valley.
organizing and is paid by the Urban League of Massachusetts to work at City Life as part of a training program. Finally, I interviewed Melonie Griffiths, who after being Boston Lead Organizer for a number of years recently left the staff to become the Head Organizer for Massachusetts Jobs With Justice. She is still heavily involved with the group as a member-leader, and she still carries the symbolic weight of staff in the eyes of other members. Melonie, Antonio, Maria, and KC all first came to City Life as members, went through leadership development, and eventually came to occupy staff positions. All except Steve, who is a white person, are people of color. Consent was secured from all staff and members for recorded interviews. All staff consented to being named. Those members who consented to being named are named, and those who did not consent to being named are given pseudonyms. All quoted either gave consent at the time of the interview and/or were re-contacted for permission. Allowing interviewees to review quotes was not only a way of ensuring informed consent, but also of checking that I had used what they said in ways they considered appropriate.

During my period of immersion in City Life, when I wasn’t interviewing, I was conducting participant observation. I was based in the central Boston office in Jamaica Plain and focused on observing that branch’s events and workings, but went to events at nearby branches when I could. As far as major events, I attended a Brockton Radical Organizing Class on June 24th and a Brockton BTA meeting on June 26th, Boston BTA meetings on June 25th and July 9th and attended Boston Leadership Team meetings on June 28th and July 12th, and a North Side vigil on June 26th. Finally, I attended a Radical Organizing Conference planning session and a Radical Organizing Conference discussion group on July 8th. I also went to three weekly staff meetings, a NEW ROAD15 meeting on July 12th, and socialized to a limited degree with members outside of formal settings, such as going out for drinks with several members once after

15 A 10-site New England network of anti-displacement community organizations.
a BTA meeting and attending a Fourth of July gathering with a member. However, my participant observation data is significantly limited by the fact it was only collected over the course of three weeks. It is also possible that my presence changed the dynamics of the situations I observed.

HISTORY OF CITY LIFE/VIDA URBANA

City Life/Vida Urbana was originally founded as the Jamaica Plain Tenant Action Group (JPTAG) in 1973 in a political context dominated by the decline of the New Left and rise of the sectarian neighborhood organizations. In contradiction to these groups, JPTAG was a five-person horizontalist collective, ideologically rooted in feminism, anti-racism, socialism, and anti-imperialism.\textsuperscript{16} From the beginning, the tenant action group was a base-building effort that rejected sectarianism and vanguardism and featured working class people and people of color in its leadership. JPTAG began organizing against slumlords and helped organize against plans to run I-95 through the heart of Jamaica Plain, then a predominantly black neighborhood. As other neighborhood groups dominated by white, middle-class people and characterized by sectarianism died out, City Life was growing and gaining a reputation in the community.

In the 1980s the group began mobilizing against tenant evictions resulting from gentrification. In the 1990s City Life developed further, as Steve Meacham, City Life Organizer, explains:

Gradually, by the early ‘90s, City Life formed a non-profit and hired staff, because it was growing to be more and more of a mass-based organization. It dropped its explicit socialist self-designation. It remained a radical group, but dropped the socialist designation and became more of a mass organization, achieved non-profit status and hired staff. Then when I came in 1999, there was a desire to move... there had been a large campaign in the ‘90s around something called the ‘Campaign of Conscience’ which was trying to create a neighborhood-based movement in [Jamaica Plain] for affordable housing. It was called the Campaign of Conscience for a Stable and Diverse Community,

\textsuperscript{16} Particularly rooted in Left feminism, horizontal collectives are groups that attempt to run without hierarchy and consensus-based decision-making.
something like that. But when I came in late ’99, the idea was that we wanted to move back to organizing the people directly affected and the people faced with rent increases and displacement. And that required a return to a more explicit radical politics in order to do that. So that launched the collective bargaining organizing campaign in the early ‘00s, and then the bank campaign.

The collective bargaining campaign consisted of organizing tenant associations to win affordability contracts and limit rent increases through a model of collective bargaining with landlords. In 2007, after City Life noticed that the biggest evictors had become banks evicting tenants post-foreclosure, the group reoriented itself to primarily organizing to prevent these specific types of evictions.

CITY LIFE/VIDA URBANA AT PRESENT

City Life/Vida Urbana’s mission statement states that it is:

committed to building the power of low-income and working class people to work toward social, economic, racial justice and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing poor and working class people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders, and build collective power to effect systemic change and transform society.

In response to the foreclosure crisis, City Life began primarily organizing against displacement due to foreclosure in 2007. Their Bank Tenant Association (BTA) organizing model, also described as a radical organizing model, prevents evictions through a “three legged stool” strategy called “the sword, the shield, and the offer.” The sword consists of public pressure through direct action such as vigils, auction protests, bank protests, and eviction blockades.\(^\text{17}\) As the BTA Organizing Manual details, “The shield represents a range of legal defense options. Local lawyers and law students are available during BTA meetings to counsel homeowners and tenants on their legal options. With the lawyers’ help, we can buy time for homeowners, keeping

\(^{17}\) The most militant action in City Life’s arsenal, eviction blockades consist of picketing and sit-ins at evictees’ homes at the time that the sheriff attempts to evict the residents on behalf of the bank. The bank and sheriffs are forced to decide if they’re willing to arrest many people and face negative press or finally work a deal out with the residents.
them in their homes and supporting them in court or with bank negotiations.” The offer consists of Boston Community Capital (BCC), an allied community development financial institution, buying back foreclosed properties from banks in order to re-sell them to the former owner at an affordable rate. The sword and shield are the essential aspects of the strategy, while the offer is an extra element that they have been able to add more recently.

City Life’s growth since adopting its current structure is illustrated by Melonie, who has gone from member-leader to organizer and back to member-leader during her time with the group:

Oh, my goodness. When I first came to City Life [in 2008], there was twenty members in the [weekly BTA] meeting. We’ve got some points where we have like 150 members in the room at a time. We were doing smaller actions and we went from doing maybe two or three actions a month to doing like two or three actions a week. Our staff tripled in size. We’ve expanded to East Boston, Quincy, Brockton and now it sounds like Malden. We expanded into eight cities throughout our region and are part of a national framework that has a lot of attention. Our name is on the map... when I first got to City Life we had... and I’m just going to guess... maybe $250,000. Now it’s like a million dollar budget. So I think we’ve made some enormous strides. We have a training manual for our model. We’ve gone on several national TV shows and have been able to...And we’re doing model shares. We’ve gone around to probably about ten cities already sharing our model. And there are some cities that have reported tremendous success.

Numbers for the weekly Boston branch meeting in Jamaica Plain have dipped from their peak of around 120 attendees a couple years ago to around 90-100 attendees, though a contributing factor to the fluctuation in these numbers is that separate meetings have started both on the North Side of Boston and Brockton since City Life’s main space in Jamaica Plain wasn’t big enough. An attempt was being made to develop another meeting in the South Shore area of Boston at the beginning of summer 2013. Additionally, off-site City Life staff are running BTA meetings in Worchester, Lynn, and Providence. The branches outside of Jamaica Plain have been steadily growing, and many are large for only being several months to a few years old. As of Summer 2013, North Side meetings were drawing around 25 people, bi-weekly Brockton meetings were
drawing around 25, weekly Worchester meetings were drawing around 30, weekly Lynn
meetings were drawing around 35, and weekly Providence meetings were drawing around 20.
With the inspiration and support of City Life, other groups in Massachusetts using the same
model have developed in Springfield (drawing around 50 people a week), Chelsea, and the
Merrimack Valley.

There are numerous other indicators of City Life’s success. As Melonie indicated, City
Life also obtained funding to write its 250 page organizing manual and travel nationally sharing
its model, and the model has spread throughout Massachusetts and to sites across the country
such as Atlanta, Minneapolis, and Seattle. City Life was instrumental in forming, and is a leader
in, NEW ROAD and is a key member of the Right to the City Alliance. Harvard Legal Aid
Bureau director David Grossman indicates that as result of their efforts, more homes have been
saved in Boston than any other city (Fisher et al. 2013). According to City Life’s head organizer,
they prevent evictions for around 95% of the people who come to them before they have been
forced out. Member-leaders are dedicated and talented organizers, staff positions are filled by
people who first came to them as members, and members have gone on to occupy key staff
positions and leadership roles in other social justice movements and organizations, including
Jobs with Justice and MassUniting.\textsuperscript{18} City Life has been featured in mainstream media such as
the \textit{Bill Moyers Journal} and the \textit{New York Times}, and has won numerous local awards as well as
national awards, such as the Institute for Policy Studies’ Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award.

\textbf{STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES OF CITY LIFE/VIDA URBANA}

City Life’s organizing is carried out through four different sets of formations, consisting
of organizational structures, movement building alliances, arts and organizing collaborations,
and education collaborations. Organizational structures consist of the BTA meeting, a

\textsuperscript{18} Both community/labor coalitions.
Leadership Team and (newly formed) Executive Committee, Radical Organizing Classes (ROC), a Radical Organizing Conference (also generally referred to as ROC), and the Comité Latino.\(^1\)

City Life recruits new members by canvassing at buildings that are publicly listed as scheduled for foreclosure and sale, and these members are brought to the weekly BTA meeting. At meetings members learn the practices of the group, learn about their legal rights and receive legal counsel, plan future protests, and have political discussions. At this meeting, members are invited to attend Radical Organizing Classes and the two to three direct actions City Life holds per week. If members demonstrate commitment to the group, they are invited to Leadership Team meetings.

**Organizational Structures**

**BTA meeting**

The weekly 2-hour BTA meeting is at the heart of City Life. The first images one has upon entering the City Life meeting space are the wall decorations, essential to the vibrant and solidaristic atmosphere. A large paper-mache sword and shield and colorful handouts, including the articles for the political discussion of the day and extra articles for people to take to read, frame the entrance. City Life’s blue and red banner hangs at the front of the room, with the group’s numerous awards on the wall to the right. Above the pizza, salad, and soda on the left sits a sign-up sheet for volunteers, a declaration of support for OUR Walmart, the Zapatista Revolutionary Law for Women, and a map showing that Boston foreclosures are overwhelmingly concentrated in neighborhoods of color. Farther to the left is City Life’s 40\(^{th}\) anniversary banner and a map of the world. On the walls and from the ceiling hang other bilingual and colorful banners, posters, and pictures from past City Life and Right to the City struggles, labor struggles, and other fights for social justice. Facing the back of the room is a

\(^{1}\) Organizers also want to create a Haitian member committee.
large Bank vs. America banner (a play on Bank of America, the banner has the bank’s same logo and color scheme) and a stack of City Life’s massive and colorful house-shaped paper-mache props with slogans in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. Paper-mache life preservers with “principal reduction” written on them cleverly make the point that this policy is desperately needed by homeowners who owe more on the mortgage than their house’s current market worth, a situation commonly described as being “underwater.” In the back on the left sits a multi-colored “we will not be moved” banner, African masks, and a gigantic “Count Bankula” costume that is worn by members at demonstrations. Posters from a Bank vs. America protest in Charlotte at the 2012 shareholder’s meeting dangle from the rafters.

BTA meetings\textsuperscript{20}, often compared to church services by members, are highly collective, ritualistic, and loving in an attempt to provide support and combat the shame most people feel\textsuperscript{21} when they enter the space. There is continuous call and response and clapping that affirms the speaker and group’s moral righteousness, condemns the evilness of the banks, and provides emotional support to all. Everything of importance is written for all to see on butcher paper at the front of the room. As people walk in they pick up bilingual agendas and articles for the meeting’s political education discussion. Boston lead-organizer Antonio’s movement-themed rap album called “The Bank Attack” plays in the background as people enthusiastically greet each other, talk about life, and get food and drinks. A member greets new attendees, signs them in, and gives them welcome packets. Children run to the food and then go back to their parents or to the teenagers providing child care. Members and staff jointly facilitate meetings, and different people lead each meeting section on a rotating basis.

\textsuperscript{20} Sample BTA meeting agendas can be found in Appendix 1.
\textsuperscript{21} This sense of shame was explicitly mentioned in interviews with both members and staff.
The first section of the meeting is the reading of the mission statement, which also always appears at the top of the printed agenda that all meeting participants have. A different member or child of a member volunteers to read it each meeting; the reading is followed by clapping. At the meeting I attended on June 25th, a 10-year-old child of a member read it.

The second section of the meeting involves explanation of the sword and shield model and introductions by new members. Explanations of the sword and shield are collective and involve call and response. For new member introductions, new attendees are told to raise their hands. They are asked to come to the front of the room one-by-one and tell their story to the group, which shouts encouragement and support as they go. As bank names are spoken, people boo and yell “shame!” Details of the individual cases are written down on butcher paper, and they are discussed as symptoms of a systemic failing. After each new attendee is done, a member walks up with the paper-mache sword and loudly and seriously tells the new attendee to raise the sword above their head. After they do so, the older member asks the new attendee if they are willing to fight for their home. The new attendee says yes, and the entire room shouts “then we’ll fight with you!” The process repeats until all new attendees have spoken. The ritual may seem clichéd to an outsider, but the group imbues it with an enormous emotional and spiritual significance felt by both existing members and new attendees. Older members are then invited to share any important updates that they have about their cases.

The third section of the meeting, “the sword and shield in action!”, includes reports on recent housing actions and victories, as well as other struggles and events City Life members have participated in. During the June 25th meeting, this included updates on local and national minimum wage campaigns and the announcement that a City Life member has been invited through MassUniting to a national meeting in DC with the Secretary of Labor. The meeting also
included the news that City Life members gave testimony at a hearing about housing at the Statehouse, a report on a rally City Life members attended at a detention center for undocumented immigrants, and an invitation to attend a City Life-themed puppet show in New York City that City Life members were starring in. Finally, the group watched footage of a recent vigil for a group member, and there was shouting in response to statements made in the video and clapping after it finished. Upcoming actions were then announced. On the meeting I attended on June 25th, this included a vigil, other housing protests, and a rally in support of security officers in a labor dispute.

The fourth section, “you make the movement work!”, asks that members donate to the group, volunteer to serve food at the next meeting, canvass homeowners in foreclosure, operate the phone bank to get people to meetings, buy a t-shirt or Antonio’s album, participate in a focus group on City Life’s communication with members, and attend future actions. After this section and for the rest of the meeting, the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau and law students who work with City Life call people into the back offices to go over their cases as needed.

The fifth section is political education and discussion. The section is usually 20-30 minutes and may cover any range of issues dealing with race, class, gender, or immigration status. If anybody isn’t holding the articles that are being discussed or the extra articles that have been made available for people to read in their spare time, someone makes sure to pass them copies. The group then goes over the articles and reflects on them. On the meeting I attended on June 25th, the group discussed articles about the local and national minimum wage fight and the striking down of provisions of the Voting Rights Act. The group then watched a video produced by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) that discusses how immigration has been framed solely as a Latina issue in the US, but that it is also a Black issue and that Black people
and Latino people need to stand in solidarity on the question. Affirmative shouts such as “that’s right!” were almost continuous. After the video there was a 30-minute discussion on immigration and the ongoing local protests.

The final section of the meeting is evaluation and reflection, where people highlight positive things about the meeting and things they’d like to see change (“plusses and deltas”), and their answers are written down on the butcher paper. The group ends with a solidarity clap, and members linger for a long time to talk to each other, and many go out for food or drinks together afterward.

*Leadership team and executive committee*

The purpose of the 2-hour bi-weekly Leadership Team meeting is displayed at the top of every Leadership Team meeting agenda:

1. **Training**
   - Political education and discussion
   - Technical training in legal rights
   - Organizing training in how to build a movement
2. **Help Organize**
   - Designing agendas-doing facilitation and presentation
   - Discussion of how to do protests and actions
   - Discussion of how we relate to other organizing efforts
   - How we combine individual cases with changing the system

Attendance at the two meetings I observed was on the lower end since summer had just started. At the July 12th meeting I counted 21 people, 18 of whom were people of color. There were 11 women and 10 men. Again, socializing and eating takes place before and after the meeting, and everything of note is written on butcher paper. The meeting starts with the purposes of the

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22 The video can be viewed here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr_DZlxhkeg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr_DZlxhkeg)
23 Sample Leadership Team agendas can be found in Appendix 2.
Leadership Team, and norms are reviewed. Members go around and do introductions and describe their feelings about the current state of “the movement” in one word. Past decisions of the committee are reviewed, and at the meetings I attended these included the decision that one of the two Leadership Team meetings a month would be joint meetings of Leadership Teams from all of the Boston-area chapters. It was also agreed that the group would have a three-person Executive Committee with positions that would rotate every six months. Its members would meet regularly with staff in between leadership meetings to work particularly closely with staff, make key decisions, and receive more leadership development training. Leadership Team meetings would be facilitated by a rotating member of the executive committee. That summer’s Radical Organizing Conference was approved. The meetings then moved to education and discussion to prepare for the Radical Organizing Conference and the ongoing campaign against Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The meeting concluded with a discussion of ideas about how to better retain new members and plusses and deltas for the meeting.

**Radical organizing classes**

There is usually only one course of classes going on at one particular branch (e.g. North Side, Boston, Brockton) at any given time, since all classes are coordinated by head organizer Steve Meacham. There is one class every two weeks, and sessions cover capitalism, racism, and patriarchy; the nature of radical organizing; and the building of radical movements to challenge these forms of oppression. Classes involve discussing assigned readings and connecting lived experiences with more theoretical understandings of oppression. The form and content of these classes reflect the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton. For example, the classes

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24 A sample Radical Organizing Course outline and an outline from one of the particular classes of that course can be found in Appendix 3.
emphasize broad participation and draw from and build on life experience to develop critical consciousness.

**Radical organizing conference**

City Life also hosts an open Radical Organizing Conference bi-annually or annually. It is jointly planned with and attended by other social justice allies from around the area, though City Life clearly leads the project. This conference often focuses on the topics that are covered in the Radical Organizing Classes, but also may focus on how broader radical movements to challenge oppression can be built. This summer, the conference focused on the Ear to the Ground Project’s 2013 report *More Than We Imagined: Activists Assessments on the Moment and the Way Forward* by N’Tanya Lee and Steve Williams. Lee and Williams have spent decades engaged in transformative community organizing, and both recently decided to leave Executive Director positions in transformative organizations partially due to frustrations with the local ghettoization of transformative efforts. This project, conducted over 16 months, was an attempt to assess the current strengths and weaknesses of the movement and included in-depth interviews with 158 movement activists from around the country. Following this effort, Williams and Lee decided to launch a project called LeftRoots, which is attempting “to create a vehicle for leftists engaged in social movements to come together, to answer the hard questions of the day, while building community with one another…to contribute to something that [they] think is absolutely critical—reigniting an engaged and engaging Left.” The 2013 Radical Organizing Conference was titled “Boston LeftRoots” and was intended to contribute to the building of a left-oriented “movements of movements” in Boston, the region, and around the country. City Life and other Boston organizations involved in the planning and/or interested in the project convened study

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groups for *More Than We Imagined*\textsuperscript{26}. The actual conference included a plenary, a presentation from Lee and Williams, report backs from study groups, and small group discussions and report backs. The conference was attended by almost 200 people representing over 20 community groups from around New England.

*Comité Latino*

The Comité Latino is a leadership body that meets once a month and works to maximize the presence and capacity of Latina and Spanish speaking members in City Life. This includes both an internal focus on current members and an external focus on the Latino and Spanish speaking community as potential members. Comité Latino’s responsibilities include evaluating whether City Life’s materials are culturally and linguistically effective for Latinas and Spanish speakers, examining and extending internal political education, and planning and carrying out outreach to the Latino community. Outreach to thousands of Spanish speakers is accomplished at Latina churches and cultural festivals.

*Movement-Building Alliances*

City Life is involved with many different coalitions that span the local, regional, and national levels. Locally, these include Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, MassUniting, and Community Labor United, three different community/labor coalitions. These community/labor groups are often focused on issues hyper-exploited workers face in their jobs and neighborhood, such as wage theft and underfunded public transportation. Currently, these coalitions are playing roles in the immigrant rights movement for a moratorium on the deportation of undocumented immigrants, as well as the fast food workers’ “Fight for 15!” campaign demanding a $15 industry minimum wage and the unhampered ability to unionize. Another coalition City Life is

\textsuperscript{26} A flyer and study guide for the 2013 conference can be found in Appendix 4.
involved with is the regional NEW ROAD27, which spends much of its time fighting for municipal and state policies to protect homeowners and tenants from banks and corporate landlords. A national coalition that City Life plays a role in is the Right to the City Alliance28, which is currently focused on increasing the amount of affordable housing in the United States by pushing for new national policies from the Federal Housing Finance Agency, which sets policy for Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the banks that own over half of the housing stock in the United States. City Life is a leader in both NEW ROAD and the Right to the City Alliance.

**Arts and Organizing Collaborations**

City Life collaborates with a number of artists and artistic groups since the organization views art as having an important role to play in the cultural life of the movement, political education, and general outreach. One such artist is a photographer who has created photo exhibitions on the group, and another has taught playback theater29 to City Life members over the course of 13 classes in 13 weeks. City Life’s own Organizer, Antonio Ennis, is a locally famous rapper who has produced a movement-themed album based on his experiences with City Life called “The Bank Attack,” which can often be heard playing before BTA meetings. A City Life member, who is also a videographer, works on videos for the group and is currently working on a video curriculum to complement the City Life/Vida Urbana Organizing Manual. Finally, another artist works on various creative projects with City Life. For example, he worked with members to create City Life’s famous paper-mache props and worked with members to design and perform a puppet show about City Life.

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27 a 10-site New England network of anti-displacement community organizations
28 a national coalition with over 50 member community organizations (many of whom are oriented towards transformative organizing—as is the Alliance itself)
29 A mechanism to process, adapt, and interconnect personal stories, participants share stories from their lives, and these are then acted out by the group in multiple forms. City Life members can directly use these skills to engage with and share their stories of threatened displacement and the circumstances behind this threat.
**Education Collaborations**

In the summer of 2013 City Life began a trial-run collaboration with The City School and its Summer Leadership Program (SLP). The City School is a Boston-based group that has year-round programming for 14-19 year olds that teaches them about oppression, justice, and organizing. This summer SLP welcomed around 100 youths to its six-week program. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays the teenagers learn about racism, sexism, and classism, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays they intern with social justice organizations. City Life was an internship site for the first time, and students learned the group’s radical organizing model and how it can be applied to housing issues beyond it both through study and by participating in City Life activities such as canvassing. City Life is also developing a financial literacy project, called “Economic Self-Defense Training,” in collaboration with United for a Fair Economy and the Haymarket People’s Fund. The project includes a series of workshops that combine financial literacy training with popular education about (racialized) economic structure and social justice movements.

In summary, since 2007, when City Life began primarily organizing against displacement due to foreclosure, it has been directly running meetings in three locations around Boston and has placed off-site staff in three other locations around Massachusetts and Rhode Island. It also helped organizations in three other locations in Massachusetts adopt its model, which has also spread to Atlanta, Seattle, Minneapolis, Baltimore, and beyond. Its model is based on a “sword and shield” of public pressure and legal defense. The group’s central structures are the BTA meeting, a weekly mass gathering of members; a bi-weekly Leadership Team meeting for leadership development and political education; an Executive Committee to work more closely with staff; bi-weekly Radical Organizing Classes for political education; annual Radical
Organizing Conferences to build radical local, regional, and national collaboration; and the monthly Comité Latino meeting to review whether City Life’s materials are culturally and linguistically appropriate for and to plan education and outreach to the Latino community. City Life has been a key factor in the growth of new organizations that have joined and helped energize the Right to the City Alliance and the national movement for housing justice. City Life also particularly emphasizes collaboration with local artists. City Life plays a central role in numerous local community and labor coalitions, in the NEW ROAD regional network of anti-displacement organizations, and in the national Right to the City Alliance of social justice community organizations. City Life’s context and structure provide a basis for understanding the organization, and the rest of the thesis examines the mechanisms and “incentives” for membership which allow City Life both to build a substantial base and win gains in the present and to build a significant, committed, and talented base for a long-term transformative movement. The following chapter emphasizes the first “incentive” of community and a culture of solidarity.
Community and a Culture of Solidarity

The first major phenomenon that allows City Life to retain members as long-term and dedicated activists is its creation of a community and culture of solidarity. “Solidarity,” a slogan so often invoked by the Left, is not the same as community, though the two are intertwined. City Life not only creates a long-term culture of solidarity, or unity around shared interests and values, but also creates a community, a group with dense ties and interpersonal relationships. City Life demonstrates that both a more generalized commitment and specific interpersonal bonds are crucial for (emotionally, ideologically, and socially) tying individuals to collectivities. Deep solidarity and community in City Life are created in a number of ways. First, they are generated through emotional work that, among other things, causes members to identify with the group. Second, they are created through the cultivation of reciprocity not only between individuals but also between individuals and the organization. Third, they are created through the institutionalized practice of solidarity as City Life calls people together in meetings and actions. Fourth, they are created through caring relationships that yield emotional and instrumental forms of support for members. Fifth, shared symbols and rituals create shared meaning and cohesion. Sixth, a shared radical ideology emphasizes the importance of community and solidarity rather than individualism. Last, solidarity and community are created through attention to power differentials based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status, and this analysis is used to bridge these differentials and identities, rather than to divide or create resentment.
While scholars have noted that direct action is crucial for developing a culture of solidarity (Hirsch 1986; Fantasia 1989), the recognition of the importance of emotions and practices socially constructed as “feminine” is much less prevalent. While militant direct action is crucial for community organizing efforts to exert power to win material victories, too much of a masculine cultural emphasis on direct action and corresponding aggressive emotions to the exclusion of a culturally feminine emphasis on community and more supportive and empathic interpersonal emotions may lead to an alienating climate (Swarts 2008) and weaker community-, solidarity-, and identity-based cohesion.

EMOTION AND IDENTITY: TOWARD EMPOWERED INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

Identity “is about a self that is constituted through and against other selves in contexts that serve to establish the relationship between the self and the other” (Rodriguez 2003:5). People have multiple identities, identities may be individual or collective, and different identities are mobilized and have differing importance in different contexts. Swarts (2008) and Klandermans and de Weerd (2000), as well as movement intellectual Steve Williams (2013), highlight the causal relationship between identification with and commitment to a movement or community organization.

A key factor in the construction of collective identity is emotion, something that scholars have criticized sociology and social movement research for traditionally overlooking (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Hart 2001). Specifically, organizations and movements that can transform the experience of marginalization from one of individual stigma to one of collective moral and emotional empowerment find that their members often come to identify with and commit to them by way of emotional connection and a profound sense of belonging. For
example, Verta Taylor (2000) observes this in a study of the women’s self-help movement, and Britt and Hesie (2000) see the same phenomenon in the gay-rights movement.

One of the central reasons that members stay with and become deeply committed to City Life is that the group is able to forge a powerful individual and collective identity among its members, expressed in the fact that many members refer to themselves as “City Lifers.” This identity is formed through the same practices that build City Life’s overarching community and culture of solidarity: emotional work, reciprocity, institutionalized solidaristic practice, rituals and symbols, radical ideology, intersectionality, and relationships. In this section I focus on emotional work. In part, City Life produces individual and collective identification by transforming negative emotions of shame, helplessness, fear, and isolation into positive feelings of moral righteousness, power, confidence, and community membership. The intertwined collective practices that make up this emotional work are rituals such as new member inductions and storytelling, systemic critique and analysis, and direct action.

The dominance of the ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility mean that homeowners and tenants typically enter City Life/Vida Urbana believing that it is their own fault that they are losing their homes. It is understood as a personal problem and failure, while the structural causes and collective consequences of the foreclosure crisis are hidden. Foreclosure is a complex and almost unintelligible process, so most people also enter City Life unsure, afraid, and defeated. However, by naming and educating around foreclosure as a systemic failing, by demonstrating that foreclosure is a collective problem, and by showing that people can fight for and win their homes through direct action, City Life turns the negative emotions of shame, fear, and helplessness into positive emotions. Members feel morally righteous through understanding that people in foreclosure are victims of systemic injustice. They feel pride and confidence
because they are not reduced to victims, because they fight back in a righteous struggle, and because they can win.

This transformation is evident for a new member named Tamika, who was frightened not only of losing her home, but also by not understanding the process of foreclosure:

[Before City Life] I was completely petrified and ashamed, you know. I really was. I was just basically going to lay low until it just went down, and probably move out of my house. I would have left it... And because I was afraid. I didn’t want to lose my house. I didn’t know anything. I was petrified. And then when City Life came in and explained everything to me and they looked over my mortgage and you know, I felt more comfortable. So when I came to a meeting, yeah I was still petrified. There was no person I wanted to discuss my business with all up front. Yeah, I was scared. I was really scared. But when I found out that there were people who were going through the same thing like I was [I thought] we’ll see where this goes. I still, you know, I still get scared to this day. But I just know that there’s people there that I can trust and who are going through what I’m going through. So they’re not judging me. They’re just trying to help me.

So all my pride and shame just went out the door. They went right out the window. You know, I’m comfortable with it, but I still get sad because it’s my situation that I’m really fighting for my life. It’s for my house.

The depth of Tamika’s transition away from fear, shame, and paralysis towards bravery, righteousness, and a willingness to fight is illustrated by the degree to which she not only changed her rhetoric and abstract thought, but also embraced bold new material practices including putting these signs in her windows. City Life often asks members whose home is approaching auction to put City Life/Vida Urbana signs in their windows. This visual dissuades potential investors looking to buy the property by signaling to them that they will face a difficult struggle to realize a profit if they buy the home. Tamika explains:

It was basically like I had just simple signs and I put them in my windows, but it wasn’t enough to cover all my windows, you know?

But I knew I wanted to save my house and then I think I called Brandon and I was like, ‘Should I wait until I can go to another City Life meeting to get more signs?’ He was like, ‘No, you can photocopy. You know? And just fill up your windows or whatever.’ I kind of was a little hesitant at first, like it’s not going to be orange like the other signs are.
But [laughs] got over that real quick, like whatever. It still gets the point across. And, *I just did it* and my neighbors were kinda like... you know, I think that was the hardest thing because my neighbors really didn’t understand what was going on. And I just assumed that they understood because they had read it in the paper... Because when they seen all the signs fill up all the windows and they were like, ‘Now what’s going on?’ And I know that a lot of times people like to ask questions because they are ashamed and like then notice me you know?

And I’m like not sure if they want to help you or just know what’s going on or whatever. I should have, but I really, after like probably the first two times that I had to explain this to different neighbors, then I started to just accept what was happening. I was like, ‘You know what? I don’t care who was want to be judgmental or assume anything about me, I’m fighting for my home and my family.’ I just felt more and more encouragement as I kept coming to meetings before my first auction. I just really started to feel that encouragement, and that was pretty much I just took off. I mean, that showing here, you know the bank bought my house back. The windows... the signs are still on my windows. I haven’t taken it down or whatever, because I know this fight is not over. And [if those help somebody else see] ‘there’s a place I could call to save my house’... If that’s going to help somebody, then good. Because I felt like City Life, yeah, they saved me. Because I really would have left this house. And I just would have moved out of here. It would have been an easy take for anybody that was wanting to take it...

A key factor that allowed Tamika to transition from shame to righteousness was her eventual recognition that foreclosure was a social and not an individual problem. The first development that allowed this transition to take place was that she was able to see that foreclosure was a widespread issue by seeing many other people who had been through or were in foreclosure at the weekly BTA meeting:

Well, I don’t, don’t feel any shame anymore. Um, I think, it’s because they’re still empowering, and then where you think there’s a newcomer, you know... each week. [At first] you’re the one raising your hand. And then as you keep going to meetings, you see you’re not the only newcomer. Ok, now you’re not the newcomer, and then someone else is new. And then the next week, it’s someone else. And next week, they’re still, like, this is a... this is a problem that’s out there. And people are finding out about it and they’re coming to seek help. So how can I be ashamed of something that’s a common problem, that everybody is looking for help with. Or people have already been through, or are still going through right now. They’re in court fighting through this. What am I ashamed about? Just cause my neighbors ain’t going through it? But just because they don’t got signs in their windows doesn’t mean they ain’t going through it or about to go through it. So I can’t be ashamed. I just have to live for me. And so it’s just a little bit of letting this pride aside, my pride aside, just going to save my home for me and my children. I’m willing to put that aside. And my neighbors will all get to see me, enjoy my
presence just one more day, yes you will, heyy [laughs]. Yeah, you know? Good. I
really can’t be ashamed any more, I’m not. I really am not. I’m like, kind of proud now,
you know? As I keep pushing forward, I’m really starting to get more proud.

Before coming to City Life, Tamika was going to give up and leave the home long before
she legally needed to. Instead of giving up and leaving, at the time of interview she had already
participated in an auction protest on her behalf, which was a victory because it stopped investors
from buying the house and forced the bank to buy it back.30 By attending meetings with others
going through the same thing, Tamika understood that foreclosure wasn’t her personal problem
but a systemic one. When Tamika talks about losing her pride, she means she overcame feelings
of personal responsibility and the idea that foreclosure was an issue she should handle by herself.
Tamika went from being hesitant to put up City Life signs to refusing to take her signs down. By
attending the meetings, learning about the foreclosure process, taking public action through
putting City Life signs up in her windows and protesting with City Life at the auction for her
property, Tamika began to lose her shame and fear, feel willing and proud to fight back. Despite
just recently joining the group, Tamika is not only volunteering to attend actions for other
homeowners, but also getting involved in issues beyond foreclosure. She has already gone with
the group to a jobs committee hearing at the State House and minimum wage protests at
Wendy’s and other locations. While Tamika was not yet commonly using the collective pronoun
“we” in reference to City Life (though she did refer to City Life as family in a BTA meeting a
week later), this collective identity marker was common among other members I interviewed
who had undergone a similar experience but who had been with the group longer. While the
importance of political education for moral righteousness was not a heavy theme in Tamika’s
story, it was for many others, and its centrality will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

30 This is the goal of the auction protest, because it is much easier to win an agreement that keeps a homeowner in
their home from the bank that owns the loan rather than a 3rd party investor
One of the most powerful storytelling experiences that allows members to overcome their shame and fear is the new attendee introduction ceremony, detailed in Chapter 2 (see page 28). This ceremony is almost universally highlighted by members as one of the most important factors in helping them overcome their internalized blame. New attendees often cry from the emotional release. Member Raymundo describes storytelling and the new member ceremony as:

very important because, like [City Life organizer] Jim Brooks always say, ‘Leave your shame at the door’ because everybody’s different. I saw a lady one day. She was shy to talk but when she saw another lady that was older than her, saw a story that was worse than her, then she saw the lady crying. She was speechless. She had courage and she stand up and said she wanted to talk and tell her story. So like I said, you have to be there and see what people goes through for you to experience, that is not just myself. It’s so many people out there. Some people could even be worse. Some people can be the same. I mean, it’s all the same situation, it’s just different stories.

Organizers and members are explicit about emotions, acknowledging the shame and fear that new members feel and helping them replace these with care, love, and moral righteousness through collective practices. The importance of feminine practices and emotions runs through the rest of this chapter’s subsections.

RECIPROCITY

In his study of a Chicago community organization, Hirsch (1986) stressed reciprocity—or “giving back”—as a key factor motivating individuals to remain with the organization. Tamika’s case demonstrates the importance of feelings of reciprocity, both towards individuals within City Life and towards City Life as a whole, for creating community and retaining members. Tamika affirms that she will continue to be involved with City Life after her case is resolved:

I think so. I think I totally believe that…It has given me something, you know, it’s something for now, you know, until I figure out whatever my big quest is. Who knows? But it’s given me something in the meantime to say, ‘Look, you can help them do this. And you can do that. That’s going to help somebody.’ I feel good about that. I think I will keep coming. Like, that’s not a question. I know I might drag in and drag out sometimes. But now, I’ll keep coming. I told them, when they had my last auction, I said, ‘you know you can’t….’ they said, ‘We don’t know if we’ll see you next Tuesday.}
Are you going to come?’ I said, ‘Oh! You already know, you didn’t know? You can’t get rid of me that easily.’ [laughs]…I’m going to help out as much as I can. If I can help someone else not be as ashamed as I was. Or if they do feel the shame that I was. You know, I think that’s what I feel most ashamed of is that I was going to let this happen, because I was so shameful of what was going on. I felt like I had worked so hard and that I did something wrong. So, I was going to let this happen. And just walk away. I think that’s what always makes me feel bad about it, because I was just going to walk away. Had it not been for them, that’s what I would have done. That’s shameful to me. You know, to find out I had options. I didn’t know that. But if I can help anyone else avoid that feeling, like… I’m down. I’m down to do it.

Zia, another member, put it concretely:

Well, the reason why I would still continue with City Life is because of the fact that just because they helped me, I need to be supportive of those who have issues, who have problems, because I am the proof that this system works and all the movement is... the movement worked for me. So I need to be unselfish and to help those that have the issues that are behind me.

A commitment to reciprocity was pervasive among members I interviewed. Feeling as though the movement fought for them appears crucial to making members want to give back and fight with the movement. Its impact is evident in the fact that both members and organizers pointed out that members who fought for their homes through direct action and lost were significantly more likely to remain active and more likely to become leaders within the group than those that were able to keep their homes through Boston Community Capital but didn’t fight. Active, political support lends itself to an in-kind response that is lost when a passive, non-political, third-party service is supplied instead.

Feelings of reciprocity are deliberately and continuously cultivated by City Life staff and experienced members. Perhaps the best example of this is the section of every BTA meeting labeled “you make the movement work!!” on the weekly agenda. It is declared that this is a community organization, not a service organization, and it only works because “we” support one another and the movement. Members are asked to financially contribute for the food if they can

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31 A community development financial institution that partners with City Life by buying back foreclosed properties from banks in order to re-sell them to the former owner at an affordable rate.
or to give enough to become an official City Life member.\textsuperscript{32} People are exhorted to make phone calls, help canvass homeowners in foreclosure that weekend, volunteer to serve food at the next meeting, or come to an upcoming protest for a group member. Organizers and member-leaders proclaim that the organization depends on “your” help, and since “you” are only here because somebody else volunteered to canvass and make phone calls, and “your” auction protest, vigil, or blockade was only successful because others volunteered to come, “you” need to give back and volunteer. Experienced members in the audience shout affirmations such as “that’s right!”, “yup!”, or “tell ‘em!” in response, and call for more volunteers.

SOLIDARITY AS INSTITUTIONALIZED PRACTICE

Solidarity is critical to community organizations and social movements. A precursor to specific acts of solidarity which may involve reciprocity between individuals and the organization or among individuals in the organization, are institutionalized practices of solidarity. Hirsch (1986) emphasizes the importance of institutionalized practices of solidarity for creating feelings of reciprocity, although he solely conceptualizes the practice of solidarity in terms of collective direct action. Acts of caring also benefit from institutionalized practices of caring, while contributing to group cohesion and collective action.

In fact, every City Life gathering is a site for the practice of solidarity, although the BTA meeting is crucial in its own way. As has already been highlighted, the first BTA meeting for a new attendee is essential. However, the meeting is also a site for maintaining and deepening buy-

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\textsuperscript{32} Being an official City Life member doesn’t actually mean much, in that it conveys almost no responsibilities or benefits, doesn’t have eligibility requirements, and the organization doesn’t actually keep track of official members. This is a practice open to critique, as I’ll return to later. When I use the term “members” throughout the paper, I refer to homeowners and tenants in or who have experienced foreclosure and (at least the threat of) eviction who regularly participate in the life of the group. I argue that using participation as a measure of membership as opposed to a list of those who have paid dues is often more accurate. Many community organizations have paper memberships significantly larger than the number of people who play an active and regular role in the group. Organizations also often collect dues irregularly, count anyone who has made a high enough donation as a member, and may inflate their membership to appeal to funders. Ideally an organization would a strong overlap between official, dues paying members and those playing significant and durable roles within the group.
in. By volunteering to make calls for the next meeting, to canvass on the weekend, to serve food at the next meeting, or to come to an action, members produce a culture of care that pushes newer members to also volunteer. Furthermore, simply coming to BTA meetings, Leadership Team meetings, Radical Organizing Classes, and direct actions is a demonstration of solidaristic commitment and helps produce such a culture. By turning out regularly to these gatherings, many members come to City Life events 3-4 times a week.

Furthermore, the practice and culture of care is another important site for solidarity. Care has also been emphasized by movement organizers and intellectuals (Social Justice Leadership 2010; Williams 2013) as an important practice to combat alienation and suffering and maximize what committed members are able to give to the movement. A member named Carolyn makes this point:

When I first got [to City Life], I had the kids and maybe even a couple grandkids with me. And I saw somebody that I was familiar with. And they was like, ‘Why don’t you let the kids get some pizza.’ And because I was comforted by this person I knew, I was comfortable with letting the kids, even though it’s right there, be cared for by the daycare at City Life. At that time, the room was so full, so packed because it was new. They said, ‘can’t nobody put you out. Only a judge can put you out.’ And I’m not going to say that the tears stopped, but what that did was that gave me the leverage I needed to continue to fight [other personal battles]. Not that I put the housing thing on the back burner, but someone else was helping me to maneuver that. And it was almost like a support group. What it was like was they sent me a lifesaver. And so the lifesaver was, you know, they surrounded me with love and assured me, ‘We’ll be there with you no matter what’… And by that time, even though I was going through [personal battles], I kept going to City Life because they were... they are, you know [she starts crying] an extended family.

Tamika also emphasizes the importance of care and its links to reciprocity:

I have had several phone conversations with people outside of any kind of actions. And I’ve started to know a few people like outside of the group [meetings]. And it’s just regular people trying to make it. Like they’re going through normal shit, you know… like whether it’s divorce… they’re just normal people. It’s really not some special, elite group of people that have just decided to band together to like save poor and displaced people. These are normal people. They still have to go to work, and still have to, you know, do normal things, but they use their free time to like help people, you know? There are just a select few people that actually work there. The rest of them are
volunteers and people that give their time back, and give it to other people. You know, finding that out, I’m totally amazed. So I’m like, ‘I can give my time back too. I don’t have any problems with that.’... It’s regular kind of people that are taking time out because they care. They come out to help you. Yes, that makes a big, dramatic difference. Especially in this country, where everybody’s paid to care. It’s like, you know it’s impressive that you can find people that, you know, it just really means a lot if you can find people... ‘No, I’m not paid to care. I really care.’

However, members and organizers also highlighted direct action as central for maintaining and deepening a culture of solidarity. Melonie notes that:

…So what we see is that members that buy back to BCC usually are not as invested in the movement. Members that have gone through struggle, did some blockades and were put out after... you know, that lost, came out the strongest. Like the people that eventually had to move out of their homes have been our strongest, most fearless leaders. Like Heather... she was evicted after we did, I think, two blockades at her house. The second one she lost. They ended up being our most fearless leaders. It’s something weird. We can’t figure it out. It almost makes me feel like that third leg to the stool is more of a service that we maybe should be providing. Maybe our role should be having people... because when I had to run around and look for solutions on my own, the impact was different. When we connected with BCC, it was almost we were sending them there. They were getting a service provided, and all they did was work to get their house bought back. There was no resistance. There was no direct action. So we felt like folks that went through it that way came out less ready to take on leadership and the folks that lost, like lost... went and got themselves together for a week and came back like stronger.

The fact that people are much more likely to become long-term activists if they fought for their home and lost than if they won their home back through BCC, despite the fact that both go through the new member induction and other meeting rituals, suggests that direct action is a crucial solidaristic cultural element. In fact, direct action made Melonie commit to the movement before she had come to a meeting:

Ironically, my first City Life meeting was after my first blockade. So I never had the benefit of sitting through a City Life meeting. Back then, the meetings were very different. They were much smaller, maybe 25 people, and most of them were tenants working on collective bargaining contracts, with bigger landlords throughout the city and some activists that were supportive of City Life. After I did the first blockade, the next day I came into the office and the phones were ringing off the hook. People were calling from all over the country saying, ‘Hey, that was great what you guys did. How could we do the same thing?’ And so I knew then I’ve got to get involved in this. I started volunteering. I was working as a program coordinator for a non-profit; a youth program
We’re City Lifers

coordinator. I would volunteer all the time. I was just telling them about one of the blockades I went to on my lunch break and remembered well after that, ‘Shit, I was supposed to go back from lunch.’ The organization I worked for when I did my blockade were really supportive, like me standing out. And then, it just became a struggle because we were doing a lot of blockades and I felt so connected to the movement, I think one of the powerful things about movements like this... and people don’t talk about it. You often don’t hear about the solidarity and the love that come out of it. Like just seeing that people are willing to throw down for you, even when your families won’t, you know what I mean because a lot of people are really embarrassed and ashamed, and these folks were fearless.

It is striking how integrated traditionally masculine and feminine practices and emotions are in this comment from Melonie. A willingness to seek confrontation through direct action is portrayed as an act of care and a sign of love. This also came through in the comments of other members, Ken, for example, says:

It’s a real family. I always say that about City Life. And sometimes I boo-hoo it because sometimes when I talk about them, they’re like a family that I... not ‘don’t have’ because I do have a family. But they are... they’ve got your back and I don’t know if people really realize that. Even when they tore down my door to get in my house, people had my back. Like Melonie was just going by. And the next thing I knew, fifteen people were up at my house just like that. One by one, showing up like... they’ve got your back. And that’s maybe the other part that people should realize, that they do have your back.

Organizer Maria Christina Blanco also notes the importance of solidaristic direct action for bridging differences in social location between members:

There’s a real spirit of unity [at City Life], despite [the same tensions around race, class, gender, etc. that permeate all of society, existing within the organization]. I remember when I did civil disobedience with City Life... it was in solidarity with people who are Bank Tenant Association members being foreclosed and evicted by Bank of America. The target was Bank of America. So I’m not directly affected by Bank of American, but I was one of the arrestees. There’s another member..., but Bank of America wasn’t her bank. So again, she was doing it in a way in solidarity...we got put in the same police vehicle to be transported to the police station. And so I remember Carolyn saying... I think there were two white women, her and me. She was saying, ‘Yeah, we did it. Look at this. We’re black, white and Latino in here. That’s how it should be. ‘We’re all standing together.’ I was kind of struck by that, that despite all these tensions, City Life does, in practice, bring people together. Because we are all fighting the same enemy, you know. So experiences like that of doing direct actions together really draw people together. People go out to each other’s auction protests and court dates where we’re all... It’s like, ok we have our differences, but when we’re out in front of the constable or the
judge in court or the auctioneer or bank representatives, it’s like you really form a sense of unity. Because to them, they don’t care so much about who is going to be affected more by the arrests they’re about to do. They just see you all as an obstacle.

City Life’s frequent participation in actions beyond their own, for example labor and immigrant actions, is crucial to developing a holistic culture of solidarity among those at City Life who identify with or are interested in these other movements. However, it also extends solidarity to those not at City Life but involved in “the movement.”

As Steve Meacham emphasizes, direct action creates solidarity for members who are not leaders, as well as those who are:

… there’s a whole set of people who go to actions for whom it’s their... it’s almost like something connected with a church. It’s their community. It’s their sense of identity. It’s a sense of self-worth. A sense of righteousness. You know, like going out for today’s action, or the one you were at last night. People go... people automatically... a lot of the same people volunteer a lot to go to the actions at each Tuesday meeting. Some of them are really quiet people, they just... every time there’s an action, ‘I’ll go.’ And you kind of wonder why, actually we should do a focus group on this, but I just think it’s all those things that are all those positive things. We often say that anger isn’t the main feeling at our protests. It’s more that we’re angry at the bank or whoever we’re fighting. But there’s more of a feeling of love and solidarity and that kind of thing. I think that’s really compelling for people who have experienced that. It really makes them want to get in over and over again…

Steve once again draws a connection between direct action, love, and solidarity. Clearly at City Life the linking of feminine practice and emotion to militant direct action is an essential part of what makes direct action so meaningful and such a crucial factor in creating community and solidarity, and thus in long-term and dedicated movement participation.

RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

Rituals are sets of standardized actions performed in a particular order and imbued with certain meanings by groups or communities. Ritual can be defined as “an embodiment of a presupposed set of attitudinal stances, demarcated by social convention” (Blasi 1985:59) and “may be said to be the cause of the integration of a social system, and of continuing adherence to
a set of ultimate values…” (Bocock 1970:286). However, scholars have also noted that rituals may help to produce realities outside of dominant narratives and institutions (Cheal 1992) and that their emotional power makes them an effective “means of dramatizing injustice, discharging distressing emotions, generating emotional energy, building solidarity, and affirming identity” (Aminzade and McAdam 2001:41).

City Life’s rituals fill all these functions, producing group identity based on solidarity and moral righteousness. It is a testament to the power of City Life that members often compare the group and its rituals to church, the social institution that holds the ultimate moral position and most deeply entrenched rituals for much of the membership. City Life’s regular gatherings, particularly BTA meetings, but also leadership team meetings and direct actions, are repetitive enough and imbued with enough ritual meaning to make attendance and active participation important rituals in their own right. Eating food together, call and response, clapping, storytelling, and standardized meeting segments are all examples of ritualistic practice. Food is shared at all meetings, including Radical Organizing Classes and Leadership Team meetings. Call and response, clapping, standardization, and storytelling, all of which affirm the moral righteousness of City Life and its members and the evilness of the banks, are heavily present at every City Life gathering, including direct actions. The City Life office and its decorations, the paper-mache sword and shield, and the other paper-mache props (see page 27) are all imbued with meanings of solidarity and struggle, and the presence of these symbols at meetings and direct actions also contributes to the group’s solidarity and identity.

RADICAL IDEOLOGY

Scholars have noted the importance of shared ideologies for creating unified collective actors, but fewer have the stressed the importance of having those shared ideologies be
specifically oppositional or emphasize irreconcilable interests and conflict. I argue that shared ideologies that explicitly advocate this latter view of the world, including those that emphasize solidarity among the oppressed and radical collective justice, are more unifying than those which do not. Identity is about distinguishing between the individual or collective “self” and the other, and thus the stronger the symbolic boundary between the self and the other the stronger and more durable this identity will be. As Swarts (2011) notes, creating a shared ideology is crucial for creating a strong collective identity and dedicated and long-term participation, particularly in community organizing where explicit collective struggle is so outside of the “common sense”:

Cementing a common [collective] identity across lines of race, ethnicity, language, class, and religion requires intensive ideological work. Part of that cultural work involves disseminating a new set of symbolic boundaries to members…Community organizing for power is so foreign to hegemonic understandings of community participation—benevolent volunteerism, or at most social and recreational projects that seek an apolitical ‘diversity’—that it requires extensive ideological work in which strong boundaries are fundamental (p. 454-55).

Shared ideology creates unity by itself, but the fact that the shared ideologies of City Life are based on power and class conflict\(^{33}\) makes the group’s collective identity (and thus community and culture of solidarity) stronger than it would be if the shared ideology were less oppositional, because its radical ideology draws stronger boundaries between the “just” self (City Life member, participant in the movement) and the “unjust” other (the banks, the actors that support them, those who stand against the movement) as having irreconcilable and opposing interests. City Life consistently and explicitly refers to and emphasizes radical ideologies of solidarity (often expressed both through the word “solidarity” and the phrase “we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers”), economic justice (often expressed as “people over profits”), racial justice, immigrant justice, and gender justice. It is City Life and “the movement” that is

\(^{33}\) By class conflict I mean that people are divided by social stratification into different social groups with irreconcilable opposing interests-along the lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc.
fighting for people, for justice, for good, and it is the banks and those opposed to “the
movement” that fight for profit, for injustice, for evil. The interest of the people is opposed to the
interest of profit, and the people will only win what they take through collective action.

The Radical Organizing Classes and the Radical Organizing Conference are the
structures where radical ideology is the central point of the gathering and most explicit.
However, these ideologies are also produced by the cultural practices outlined above, as well as
the political education that takes place during BTA meetings. As head organizer Steve Meacham
highlights, City Life’s ability to build such a dedicated base results from the radical ideology
they support:

JB: So you think it’s really meetings and actions that sort of get people to that point of
commitment mainly. What role do the political education classes, separate from
meetings, then have?

S: They play a huge role. People volunteer for those actions. Almost all of them
have been through the courses. The people who come back regularly to all the Tuesday
night meetings and the leadership team meetings and actions. Often they are coming to
three or four things a week, which is phenomenal. I mean, I’ve never been in any
community organization that is anything like this. And I’m not even sure how we’ve
achieved it, but it’s really unusual. But those people have all been through courses,
almost all, probably 80% or 90% of them…[italics added for emphasis]

What also came through in my interviews and observations was that radical ideology was
important for building the size of City Life’s base. There are certainly different types and degrees
of consciousness within City Life, but all are willing to align themselves with an organization
that is pursuing an explicitly radical agenda, and in one form or another members express their
beliefs in solidarity and a world where all people have their needs met. As Raymundo put it:

Yeah [City Life changed my view of what is possible for people to change when they
work together], because you see the movement and the love, you know. You know, you
should support your... be your brother keeper, you know? They always say today it
could be my story, but tomorrow it could be yours. What goes around, comes around.
Who knows? The banks doing this, it’s not just myself they did wrong. They’re doing
wrong to a lot of people. That’s when we have to stand up and fight for your human
rights, because human rights and people rights are very powerful. If we don’t do anything, that’s when the bank will walk all over us. And that’s what they’re doing.

The importance of morality, radical ideology, and the educational practices primarily responsible for their production will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

INTERSECTIONALITY

City Life works to minimize the reproduction of oppression on a micro level in a manner that doesn’t lead to division or erasure of structure or materiality, but rather increases solidarity and helps build the movement needed to fight for liberation for all. As will be elaborated in the next chapter, a racial, gendered, immigration-conscious analysis is central to City Life’s education and leadership development. Its emphasis on education around issues of race, gender, and immigration, as well as on developing people of color, women, and immigrants as leaders, is certainly central to creating a solidaristic and close-knit community. Crucially, City Life’s solidaristic ideology incorporates differences in structural position rather than attempting to erase them:

JB: How does City Life build a collective, despite having these differences in race, class and gender? Is it like, ‘We are morally righteous and we’re together in fighting these evil things,’ or is that how the collective identity formed?

S: I think it is, yeah. I think there’s subcategories of that. I mean, people who are people of color, black or whatever have a consciousness that they are also defending the black community or Latino community. I think there is understanding of that. We talk about it. It isn’t the most often expressed thing. The most often expressed thing is what you said, that we’re all in this together. We’re all fighting the big corporations. If you want to fight, you’re welcome here. It really has an inclusive feel to it. But you know, the fact that there are differences in how people are oppressed, people are aware of that and we try to address it enough to recognize it.

Latina and Haitian members are included in collective practices and rituals of community and solidarity. There is simultaneous Spanish translation at every meeting, and printed materials such as agendas are always in English and Spanish. Multiple organizers speak Spanish. Props
and chants are in Spanish and Haitian Creole as well as English. The narrative that issues of housing disproportionately impact people of color and immigrants is often repeated and affirmed. However, Latino and Haitian members are also able to cultivate their own collective practices within the group. The Comité Latino is an explicit space for Latina members along with the implicit spaces they create themselves, and City Life is attempting to develop a Haitian Committee to complement the implicit spaces Haitian members themselves create.

Central to building a multi-racial and cross-gender movement is making sure that spaces are empowering for people of color and women. When asked how City Life avoids fragmentation based on race and gender, Steve Meacham responded:

Well, our approach to organizing since the privileges, you know, the race, class, gender oppression nexus, so to speak, means that we’re constantly looking to promote leaders... we’re looking at a diverse leadership body that reflects our working class communities of color base. We try to develop a really active and sophisticated feedback loop, so that whatever things come up get expressed quickly and dealt with quickly. And there is a lot of stuff like that. It generally doesn’t take the form of conflict between different races or even genders. It more takes the form of interpersonal conflict, at least in our movement right now. Maybe because we’re so careful of the other ones. That’s what kind of happens. But we just try to have a constant feedback loop that identifies stuff that deals with that.

JB: So what does that feedback loop look like?

S: It’s informal, but it means that there’s really frequent meetings at all kinds of different levels. There’s a lot of solicitation of information. If we hear that somebody’s upset, we call them and find out why they’re upset. People call us and tell us that, ‘So-and-so is upset. You should call them.’ So we do. Just lots and lots of things like that. So it is kind of informal, but it is very active, and it means that it’s very seldom that City Life staff, for instance, would make a move that doesn’t end up being supported by the leadership, or that the leadership would make a move that’s not being supported by the base.

As Steve notes, crucial to creating a community where women and people of color feel empowered is having women and people of color significantly represented in staff positions. City Life has not only women of color, but also immigrants and Spanish speakers well represented in
leadership positions. Additionally, multiple people identified the space as fairly accepting of queer people and issues, something that staff are working to foster. City Life’s participation in Boston’s Pride Parade is a demonstration of this solidarity, although a member who recognized the staff’s efforts to make the space queer-inclusive suggested that there could be more education on queer issues.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

City Life is also able to retain activists as a result of relationship-building within the group. As Stryker (2000) highlights, “if movement and non-movement relationships overlap greatly, it is likely that persons’ multiple commitments will reinforce one another…if major commitments are to relationships within the movement—there are few limits on what the movement can ask and is likely to receive” (32). In other words, the more friendships one has within a movement, and the greater the proportion of total commitments on has that are encapsulated within the movement, the greater one’s commitment to the movement is likely to be. The author notes that people who participate in movements with their family are particularly likely to stay with that movement.

In this light, one of the greatest testaments to the community and relationships City Life develops is that many of those I interviewed used the word “family” to describe City Life (and some described City Life members and staff as closer than biological family). The practices that have been highlighted thus far create the conditions that make it likely that members and leaders will more spontaneously build interpersonal relationships. The City Life family becomes a safe and enriched space for people to be and relate to one another. This relationship-making (the process of getting to know and trust and empathize with others), itself a pleasurable and positive
experience, and the relationships that get formed (existing and fairly durable bonds) then become positive reasons to stay.

Socializing takes place before, during, after, and outside City Life gatherings. Before BTA meetings, Leadership Team meetings, and Radical Organizing Classes, members share City Life-provided food together and talk about issues beyond foreclosure, such as family or work. At least at the Jamaica Plain branch, music plays in the background as people filter in to eat and talk, making the atmosphere even more festive. Kids may remain with their parents during the meetings, and often play with each other or other members. New attendees receive particular attention and encouragement from more experienced members as they walk in and attempt to orient themselves. The celebratory nature of meetings allows for socializing to take place within them. Members mill around after gatherings to continue conversations, and many regularly go out for drinks after BTA meetings. Long trips for protests, conferences, or model sharing provide members with bonding opportunities and experiences to reminisce about and further bond at later points. Many people also regularly talk and socialize independently of the group. Carolyn summed up the importance of these socializing activities:

What I like about the meetings is [laughs] it’s like a little... for me, because I’m so busy, it’s really like social hour for me. But you know, I get to socialize with people that are going through the same thing that I’m going through, and that my children get to see me in a different arena. Because I’m always serious, you know, because I’m always busy with them on the phone or writing letters, or I’m at my job, dealing with clients. And I smile sometimes, but I think I’m very happy, more happy when I’m at City Life and that that’s a part of me the kids don’t really get to see. Two hours straight! [laughs] That’s hilarious. Ohhh. And you know, some people might say that even though I go to church and that’s social, but right after I get out of church I need to get home and I’m busy. Everybody knows we go to City Life on Tuesday nights. That’s what happens. The neighbors, the family, everybody knows. But it’s so amazing. And not to mention that they really let [my seven year old son] Tony say some of the stuff he says. Like Tony will be in that back room and he’ll come out and be like, ‘I’ve got something to say.’ I’ll say, [whispers] ‘Tony, you can’t talk about it because me and you haven’t talked about it.’ [regular voice] And somebody will be like, ‘Let little Tony talk!’ [laughs] And so
here they are building a young leader, and willing to listen to someone. They’ve been listening to him for a minute since he was seven.

JB: Do meetings remind you of any other experience in your life?

C: Well, it’s almost... it’s like family. It’s like getting together every week with your family. You know how family goes. We don’t always agree [chuckles], but we agree to disagree sometimes. And sometimes that’s why there’s so much talking the room. I think people come there excited. When they come to the meeting excited, it almost reminds me of church, because you know, once you feel relieved or stress-free, you understand that... for example, for me. When I go to church, the moment I walk in the door, the tears flow. They flow because God has protected me and my family, kept us safe from harm, even in a place where bullets have flown. We didn’t know about it until we came out or whatever. And so to be protected at all times, and the children in different places and they are protected and the people give unconditional love, even like when I got the diagnosis that my son has autism, it’s almost like therapy for him. He comes, they talk to him. They don’t even know. Because he runs the conversation, ok. But they just... it’s just an amazing place. I can’t... it’s just a wonderful place to be. And to know that I bring six, seven, sometimes eight kids to the meeting with me. Once I get in, no kids. It’s everybody’s kids. So that’s what’s exciting, you know. The kids don’t even want to eat before they leave home. They want to get to City life, get their pizza and go in the back with the children of the other parents that are there facing foreclosure. And it’s just an amazing thing. They call themselves ‘the Children of City Life’ and it’s a wonderful place. No judgment. No stress. Plenty of hugs and laughter and people checking in on you. When I say that they can really say we are each other’s keeper, if you don’t see somebody, you hear, ‘Have you seen So-and-so?’ It’s a wonderful place to be! And so in such a busy life, it’s a resource. It’s a place to go and just enjoy.

GENDERED SOLIDARITY

City Life’s emphasis on both traditionally masculine practices such as direct action and on related masculine emotions such as righteous anger, along with its emphasis on traditionally feminine practices such as relationship-building and caring for children, and on related emotions such as love and care, strengthen the community and create a solidarity that would be weaker without each element. Indeed, members and leaders often understand willingness to seek confrontation and direct action participation as caring acts and the expression of love. Meacham points out, “We often say that anger isn’t the main feeling at our protests. It’s more that we’re angry at the bank or whoever we’re fighting. But there’s more of a feeling of love and
solidarity…” Melonie Griffiths notes, “People don’t talk about the solidarity and the love that come out of [movements like this]. Like just seeing that people are willing to throw down for you, even when your family’s won’t… because a lot of people are really embarrassed and ashamed, and these folks were fearless.” These comments highlight the degree to which rigid gendered dichotomizations can be transcended, traditional masculinity and femininity combining to become more than the sum of their parts, in a community that values both masculine and feminine cultural practices and emotions. While Swarts (2008) warns that too much of a cultural emphasis on direct action and confrontation at the expense of feminine practices and values can both be alienating to women and lead to a weaker community and sense of solidarity in general, City Life demonstrates that a feminine framing of direct action can be particularly powerful. City Life also illustrates that feminine practices such as community- and relationship-building and care for and integration of children, along with feminine emotions such as love and care, play crucial roles in creating solidarity.

In summary, City Life is able to retain members as long-term and dedicated activists through creation of a community, a group with dense ties and interpersonal relationships, and through a culture of solidarity, unity around shared interests and values. City Life demonstrates that both a more generalized commitment and specific interpersonal bonds are crucial for (emotionally, ideologically, and socially) tying individuals to collectivities. Community and culture of solidarity are built in many ways in City Life: through emotional work, cultivation of reciprocities, institutionalized solidaristic practices, individual caring relationships and actions, shared symbols and rituals, and radical ideology. Both community and solidarity are developed through often inseparable actions and emotions identified as traditionally masculine (i.e. confrontation) and traditionally feminine (i.e. caring). In addition, attention to power differentials
based on race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status unites the membership and prevents long-term divisions and conflicts. The next two chapters will focus on key mechanisms cultivating radical moral ideology in City Life, another major “incentive” for membership. The next chapter focuses on radical political education, and the following chapter focuses on organic intellectuals.
Radical Political Education

In addition to community and a culture of solidarity, the second major phenomenon which allows City Life to retain members as long-term and dedicated activists is its radical moral ideology, which radical political education plays a major role in creating. City Life’s political education is transformative and effective because it is radical (in the Freirean sense), participatory, holistic, and experiential. I define radical education as that which cultivates the idea that one can be an actor who helps to transform structure and further justice, which exists in a context where participants care for one another, and which remains non-sectarian (Freire 2005). Participatory education is based on dialogue, collective interrogation and learning, and it strives for accessibility and equity in its form (Freire 2000; Horton 2003). Holistic education points to structure as the cause of oppression based on race, class, gender, citizenship status, etc, and to collective struggle as the means by which oppression is overcome; it interrogates both oppression and resistance practically as well as theoretically, historically as well as in the present. Experiential education draws from learners’ experiences and connects these to structure and more abstract understandings. Additionally, experiential education connects theory to and further educates through action (Freire 2000; Horton 2003). Creation of community and a culture of solidarity are essential precursors to (and in reality cannot be separated from) effective political education and effective cultivation of moral righteousness. Moral righteousness and critical political education are also deeply intertwined, as the latter is integral to creating the former. City Life demonstrates that both critical political education and moral righteousness are essential for creating dedicated and long-term social movement participation.
MORALITY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPATION

Michèle Lamont (2000) has found that morality, not material self-interest, is generally at the center of how working class and lower middle-class white and black American men view themselves and the world. White working class men emphasize individual responsibility and a “disciplined self,” while black working class men emphasize altruism, solidarity, and a “caring self.” Both, however, emphasize morality and are morally critical of those of a higher class.

Aligning with this analysis, research has demonstrated that creating moral righteousness is key to producing dedicated and long-term social movement participation, and that material self-interest as a motivation is often directly opposed to dedicated and long-term participation. This research includes studies of anti-war activists (Hart 2001), the Unemployment Councils and SNCC (Fisher 1994), neo-Alinskyist groups themselves (Hirsch 1986), and CBCO groups (Hart 2001).

City Life places a great emphasis on morality and supporting moral righteousness in its members. As described in Chapter 2, one of the primary purposes of the BTA meeting is to portray homeowners and tenants in foreclosure and City Life as an organization as deeply moral actors fighting the immorality of the banks. The same framing is used for direct actions. Every staff person and member I interviewed emphasized the importance of moral righteousness for creating dedicated and long-term members. As described in Chapter 3 and exemplified in Tamika’s case, the ideological dominance in American culture of individualism and personal responsibility mean that homeowners and tenants typically enter City Life believing that it is their own fault that they are losing their homes. City Life understands that as long as foreclosure is understood as a personal moral failure, fighting back is not an option.

City Life also knows that foreclosure is understood as a personal moral failure because the structural causes and collective consequences of the foreclosure crisis are hidden, and thus a
critical political education becomes essential to instilling moral righteousness in members. This point is emphasized by both staff and members. Steve Meacham, for example, describes the centrality of moral judgments to members both as they enter and as they go through political education and other City Life experiences:

JB: So what do you think make some people regularly come back to City Life and some people not? Are there any patterns to that?

S: Definitely. People who get, you know, a broader radical analysis come back. People who don’t, don’t come back…

JB: So why do those people come back when they get a radical analysis?

S: Well, a radical analysis, like we talked earlier, is both analysis itself, but also a sense of your moral place in the world. So that’s very satisfying, to have a sense of your moral place in the world that resonates with a slogan like, ‘We are our brothers’ keepers.’ That’s a very fulfilling thing.

Meacham is pointing out how City Life’s perspective allows members to align themselves and knowledge of their situation with a new political view. Zia, a member, explains how City Life recast her moral assessment of her situation and so drew her into the analysis, the community, and the organization’s work:

The reason why I came back [to City Life] was because…I realized that it’s not something I did wrong. Also, it’s bigger than what I am because of the fact that they were some major CEOs that made the wrong decisions and put everyone’s lives at stake. So then, I realized that. That’s when I started learning about the political side of what’s going on truly with the mortgage…to find out that the same thing had happened to the other persons who are speaking here, they actually played with the numbers and duped a lot of the paperwork to get these people into homes [they wouldn’t be able to afford], just so they [the banks] can [take the home back later]…

Rose describes a similar dynamic:

Well, when I first came [to City Life], I was sort of checking it out. A friend of mine’s daughter works for a neighborhood development, community development center, and suggested I come. I was sort of checking it out. So I really wanted to be a fly on the wall. But City Life doesn’t really let you do that. So I kept coming back and kept getting pulled in. But I really ended up not buying into it right away. I listened. And after a while, I really got the message. But it took me a little while. This is something I really want to be part of. This is a movement. This isn’t just my story. This isn’t just...
more than a collection of stories. This is a social movement and it’s bigger than any of us. And what we’re fighting against isn’t just one oppressor. It’s a whole system.

Zia and Rose, like many other members, describe a process of being drawn further into City Life through new political and moral ideology. This ideology first expresses itself by challenging the dominant belief that foreclosure is an individual failing, and instead points to foreclosure as a structural problem. As members become more involved with the group and are exposed to more political education, many, like Rose, begin to hold more overtly radical ideology that identifies foreclosure and housing injustice in general as linked to broader systems of oppression. This ideological progression is made possible through City Life’s incorporation of radical political education into all of its structures, some of which primarily exist to be sites of this education.

RADICAL POLITICAL EDUCATION

Closely aligned with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, City Life’s education is characterized by its radical (in the Freirean sense), participatory, holistic, and experiential nature. BTA meetings, Leadership Team meetings, Radical Organizing Classes, and Radical Organizing Conferences are all sites of this education. Political education during BTA meetings consists of group discussion of various political happenings and is lightly facilitated by one or more organizers or members. The education segments of Leadership Team meetings are facilitated by a rotating member of the executive committee and explicitly connect the day-to-day work of City Life with building a movement to transform capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other structures of oppression. Radical Organizing Classes are intensive educational sessions that cover the same type of material discussed in Leadership Team meetings, but more extensively.

34 see Chapter 2 pages 25-33 for a description of those structures
and for a longer period of time. The Radical Organizing Conference covers similar material, and focuses on building “the movement” as a whole.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Radical Education}

City Life’s education is radical, in the Freireian sense, as it emphasizes radical agency and takes place in a context of community. In particular, Freire contrasts this type of education with a sectarian one:

Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen. It is predominantly critical, loving, humble, and communicative, and therefore a positive stance. The man who has made a radical option does not deny another man’s right to choose, nor does he impose his own choice. He can discuss their respective positions. He is convinced he is right, but he respects another man’s prerogative to judge himself correct. He tries to convince and convert, not to crush his opponent…The sectarian, whether rightist or leftist, sets himself up as the proprietor of history, as its sole creator, and the one entitled to set the pace of its movement…[sectarians impose] their own convictions on the people, whom they thereby reduce to mere masses. For the sectarian, the people matter only as a support for his own goals…The radical…does not consider himself the proprietor of history. And while he recognizes that it is impossible to stop or to anticipate history without penalty, he is no mere spectator of the historical process. On the contrary, he knows that as a Subject he can and ought, together with other Subjects, to participate creatively in that process…(Freire 2005:9-10).

The community and solidarity described in Chapter 3 are integral to making City Life’s education loving and communicative. City Life is also radical because it explicitly acknowledges the importance of ideology and an ideology that includes structural transformation to end capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression.

However, members do not have to also hold these radical ideologies, though City Life organizers and member-leaders “attempt to convince” attendees through their work in Radical Organizing Classes, Leadership Team, and the Radical Organizing Conference in particular. These assertions of radical ideology are not made by staff or member-leaders acting as unchallengeable authority figures, but as highly respected members of a closely knit community.

\textsuperscript{35} Sample BTA meeting, Leadership Team, Radical Organizing Class, and Radical Organizing Conference agendas can be found in Appendix’s 1-4
For example, Steve Meacham described capitalism as inherently exploitative during a Leadership Team meeting I attended. While most members nodded in agreement, one exclaimed he thought that the problem was primarily those in charge of it. Rather than condemning this view, Steve opened the space up for other members to comment, and several began to explain why they agreed with Steve. This debate was passionate but friendly, and everyone ended it on good terms.

While City Life staff or member-leaders do have particular influence, they have earned this influence among members by respecting members’ experiences, opinions, and agency as well as demonstrating their own skills and knowledge. This was observable, for example, at the Radical Organizing Class I attended when members were stating their “pluses and deltas” for the entire seven session course. Several members thanked Steve for leading the sessions, expressed that they felt their experiences and voices had been incorporated well, and said that their understanding of the connection between forms of oppression and “how the system works” had increased significantly. In interviews a number of members commented on the mutual respect between themselves and Melonie, Steve, and other leaders, and also commented on the high intellectual regard in which they hold those leaders.

City Life helps cultivate transformative agency in its members, or makes them feel like subjects who can help create history, by making its education experiential. A widespread observation among members I interviewed was that the experience of participating in a victorious fight more than any other factor made them feel that they could contribute to social change. Quotes such as this one, from a member named Ken, are typical:

I think [victory is important because] it shows what we do… that fighting power [that is] in a group of people. There are so many [fights] like that go down to the deadline. I remember a house in Roxbury, the one that Sandy lives in. I mean, the trucks were there. They were going to move them out, and we just turned it around and now they live there.

36 See Horton (2003) pages 272-78 for more on how organizers and leaders can assert their opinions in a manner compatible with popular participation.
They bought the house back. That kind of stuff blows my mind. We locked hands. The cops were ready to arrest us, then something clicks. Like the constable didn’t have a paper that the cops kept looking for, so they turned around. Then we’re ready for another fight, but it turned around. It’s hope that this can happen, and it should happen…

Members like Ken feel transformative agency because they are transformative agents in the social movement participation and victories they win with City Life.

*Participatory Education*

City Life’s political education is also participatory, in that it strives to be accessible and emphasizes collaborative learning. Along with City Life’s community and culture of solidarity, the bottom-up structure of City Life as a whole (which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 6) creates pre-conditions favorable to successful participatory education by establishing a norm of bottom-up participation. There are also numerous equity measures used during actual sessions: everything is written on butcher paper for all to see, attention is paid to physical spacing and circles are created when possible, pluses and deltas are conducted at the end to review what people liked and what they didn’t, facilitators seek to maximize the number of voices that are heard (for example through go-arounds at Radical Organizing Classes), and problem-posing questions are asked in order to stimulate critical thinking. While facilitators present material more extensively at Leadership Team education segments and Radical Organizing Classes and Conferences than at BTA meetings, dialogue plays a major role in all political education segments. The planning process for Radical Organizing Conferences are collective, and due to their large size the Conferences themselves include small group discussions and report backs.

Art and fun increase the accessibility, inclusiveness and participatory nature of City Life’s education (Horton 2003:xi-ii, 189). For example, at one of the Boston BTA meetings I attended, political education included a skit put on by City Life staff, member-leaders, and members, during which the audience participated through call and response, unsolicited yelling,
clapping, and laughing. Two members (Sarah and Dawn), acting as distressed homeowners unsure of what to do, discuss how badly they need affordable housing, that they both have Fannie and Freddie loans, and that the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) isn’t reducing principal or contributing to the National Housing Trust Fund even though Fannie and Freddie are legally and morally obligated to. Meanwhile, other members stand behind paper-mache doors symbolizing homes in the background. An organizer (Steve) and another member (Melonie) overhear Sarah and Dawn talking. Steve and Melonie come over and tell them that there’s a movement fighting FHFA and winning victories that they can join and also fight and win. They go on to explain Right to the City and the Homes for All campaign. The four then lead a “Fannie Mae” “Fannie Might” “Fannie Will” “If We Fight!” chant, which is answered by the audience. Steve and Melonie then explain the importance of canvassing to building the movement, and ask Sarah and Dawn to go canvassing with them. The four knock on paper mache doors, and other members answer (acting as other distressed and confused homeowners).

The canvassers go through the City Life canvassing spiel and explain Homes for All and the fight against Fannie and Freddie. They explain they are in foreclosure with Fannie and Freddie and fighting back, and so the homeowners and tenants can too, and they can win. The “homeowners” respond by telling their stories. Some explain that they are also fighting Fannie and Freddie and join. Some say they aren’t with Fannie and Freddie, but with private banks, so why should they care? The canvassers say that the problem with both Fannie and Freddie and private banks is that they put profit over people, that we have to fight the whole system to win against both, and that if you fight for others against Fannie and Freddie, then they’ll fight with you on your case—“that’s how we build our movement.” The homeowners are convinced and join the canvassing. Everyone then goes to a City Life meeting, where they enact the new

37 Not their real names
member induction ceremony with the sword and shield props (with the audience chanting along). The skit members and audience then end with the chant: “Are we all ready to fight for Homes for All? We’ll fight with you!”

A significant amount is accomplished through this creative and enjoyable educational skit. The main participants bond through production of the skit, and the entire group bonds while watching it and through secondary participation. The skit incorporates storytelling and political analysis. It educates members about the systemic nature of the foreclosure crisis and shows the empowering nature of viewing problems as structural rather than personal (and the usefulness of storytelling for this). It underlines a new moral analysis—that it is the banks, not individual homeowners who are responsible for foreclosure, and it is the banks to whom negative values and feelings should be attached. Institutionalized solidarity and reciprocity are demonstrated as skit-members volunteer to canvass after they are themselves canvassed, and members join the struggle against the FHFA even though they don’t have FHFA loans. Members learn the importance of canvassing for building the base and a bit about how to actually canvass.

Education revolves concretely around the FHFA, Right to the City, and people power. The skit further explains that Freddie and Fannie should be acting in the interest of ordinary people since they are a public entity, but instead they are acting just like private banks and putting profit over people. This activity suggests that the state has the potential to put people over profit but does not do so the way the state and economy are presently organized. The education session thus touches on more abstract issues of the state and capital, the relationship between the two, and the potential of public power to be exercised for people in general. Skit members learn all this through the process of producing the skit and the audience learns by watching the performance.
Members have a chance to take ownership and create something. The idea that people can come together to fight and win is institutionalized in the membership’s collective memory.  

*Holistic Education*

City Life’s political education is also expansive in terms of its theoretical and practical engagement with different forms of structural oppression and different social justice struggles. BTA meeting education covers a range of notable political events and movements. For example, the two Boston BTA meetings I attended explored issues of the minimum wage and the labor movement, deportation and the immigrant rights movement, immigration’s relationship to black people, suppression of black people’s votes, and the role of the FHFA and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac in the housing crisis. A course of Radical Organizing Classes might cover the limits of American democracy; imperialism; the market, the economic and financial crisis and its impacts by class, race, and gender; radical organizing (including what is organizing, what are worldviews, and leadership development); how movements are built to challenge capitalism; white supremacy; patriarchy; and the Left and how a Left party could relate to a base-building group.  

I attended a Boston BTA meeting at which the political education session consisted of an intersectional examination of immigration. It included watching a video and group discussion in response. The video and discussion focused on how immigration has been framed solely as a Latino issue, but that it is also an issue for black people, and that black people and Latina people need to stand in solidarity on the issue of immigration reform. Sub-topics included the history of corporate and state control of what is designated legal and “illegal” immigration.

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38 The skit can be viewed at: [http://vimeo.com/70425194](http://vimeo.com/70425194)
39 A sample Radical Organizing Course outline and an outline from one of the particular classes of that course can be found in Appendix 3.
40 The video can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr_DZlxhkeg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr_DZlxhkeg)
Slavery was discussed as coerced immigration in the interests of wealthy whites and the state. They also discussed control of immigration as a means by which white supremacy and corporations profit from all people of color (including Asians/Pacific Islanders) by creating a super-exploitable workforce and class-based inequality in paths to legal immigration. Further sub-topics included immigration as a phenomenon caused by global trade policy, global aid policy, privatization, deregulation, inequality, and poverty. Mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex were linked to immigrant detention, and black liberation and immigrant liberation movements were connected. Displacement from countries was linked to displacement from homes and jobs, and displacement was talked about as a frame that could unite a “movement of movements” with immigrants in the lead. City Life also discussed the solidaristic role the organization has been playing locally in immigrant struggles and encouraged members to go to an upcoming anti-deportation action. This is a personal issue for City Life members, many of whom are black immigrants from Haiti, Cape Verde, and elsewhere as well as Latino immigrants.

*Experiential Education*

City Life’s education is experiential in multiple ways. First, it goes through the lived experience and “common sense” of its members. Complex theory is discussed, but in a way that is accessible. Problem-posing questions are used to get members to reflect on their experiences, and connect them to systemic power (Freire 2000:109; Horton 2003:xv, 61). Like many people in oppressed groups, most members had a prior sense of general unfairness and exploitation. Members know that racism exists and can point to particular instances. Members know that unions greatly improve living standards, while working at multiple minimum wage jobs doesn’t secure a decent livelihood. City Life helps members take fragmented and somewhat mystified
understandings of oppression and transform those understandings into more coherent and consistently radical worldviews.

For example, the Brockton Radical Organizing Class I attended explored the interconnection between racism and capitalism. Steve Meacham began by going around the circle and asking what people’s first experience with racism was. The vast majority of things Steve said from that point on were problem-posing questions that pushed people to think critically and often communicated information at the same time. People’s personal experiences with racism were discussed, elaborated upon, and transcended to differentiate attitudinal racism from institutional racism. This served as a transition to and lens for discussing the articles assigned for that class and the issues they raised of the creation of race and historical nature of white supremacy, the historical break from overt white supremacy to a formally anti-racist liberal capitalism, the connection between race and profit and privilege, how class and race combine to oppress people of color, and the impact and limit of white privilege in the working class. For example, one participant’s first memory of racism was that her parents and the other black sharecroppers with which they worked had different water ladles from the white sharecroppers. Steve asked questions prompting her to think about the psychological benefits the white sharecroppers gained from that, the limitations of those benefits given their immiserated condition, and how the white land-owners encouraged and facilitated this division so that workers would remain divided and they could reap more profits. This led to a group discussion about the readings on historical racism and inequality within the working class and observations about the necessity of fighting white supremacy (and patriarchy) in order to unify the working class and putting it in a position to fight capitalism.

41 The readings for the class can be found in Appendix 3
Second, City Life’s education is also experiential in that it is connected to the group’s collective action (Freire 2000:51-53, Horton 2003:141, 261, 263). It is linked to the radical organizing model of City Life, their local struggles and attempts to build a regional and national movement, and linked to the labor, immigrant, and other struggles City Life and its members also participate in. As a City Life member put it:

I had a taste of [organizing] before [City Life], but it wasn’t broad spectrum political organizing the way City Life is. City Life has its focus, but it collaborates with a lot of other social justice movements. If you stay around City Life, you can really appreciate the value of that. There’s a big education.

As this quote illustrates, City Life’s holistic theoretical education is complemented by a holistic practical education coming from City Life’s participation in coalition work and direct action focused on labor, immigrant, and other struggles. Additional evidence for this practical commitment to different areas of struggle comes from my observations from the June 25th Boston BTA meeting I attended. This meeting included a recap of City Life’s participation in a local minimum wage campaign and the announcement that a City Life member (who had been activated into that struggle through their participation in City Life) had been invited through the local community/labor coalition MassUniting to a national meeting about raising the minimum wage in DC with the Secretary of Labor. The meeting also included a report on a rally City Life members attended at a detention center for undocumented immigrants.

BETWEEN “BANKING” AND “ROMANTIC EXPERIENTIAL CELEBRATION”

City Life’s political education is effective in producing both learning and social change because it successfully synthesizes objective and subjective elements of education. The traditional “banking” mode of education was first labeled as such by Paulo Freire, and it is his critique of this form of education for which he is the most famous. In “banking” education the teacher has an absolute position of authority and the students have none. The teacher holds all
the knowledge and simply fills the “empty” heads of students who passively receive the information. Students’ opinions and experiences are treated as irrelevant. Freire theorized that by replacing traditional teacher-student relationships with a relationship based on equality and the understanding that students have important knowledge, teaching based on students’ lived experiences, asking problem-posing questions designed to push students to critically reflect on their world, and connecting students to collective action to transform the world, that young people and adults could develop radical consciousness. However, as Donald Macedo, Freire’s collaborator of 16 years, warns in the Introduction to the 2000 edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire also rejected what could be called “romantic experiential celebration.” Macedo laments that some educators:

> in the name of liberation pedagogy, often sloganize Freire by straitjacketing his revolutionary politics to an empty cliché of the dialogical method…

> Some strands of critical pedagogy engage in an overdose of experiential celebration that offers a reductionistic view of identity, leading Henry Giroux to point out that such pedagogy leaves identity and experience removed from the problematics of power, agency, and history. By overindulging in the legacy and importance of their respective voices and experiences, these educators often fail to move beyond a notion of difference structured in polarizing binarisms and uncritical appeals to the discourse of experience...

> That is to say, dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge. Otherwise, one could end up with dialogue as conversation where individual lived experiences are given primacy. I have been in many contexts where the over-celebration of one’s own location and history often eclipses the possibility of engaging the object of knowledge by refusing to struggle directly, for instance, with readings involving an object of knowledge, particularly if these readings involve theory (Freire 2000:17-18).

By treating the experience and analysis of oppressed people seriously but not romantically, simultaneously structuring educational spaces around realities of objective knowledge and power differentials among people while not imposing a sectarian ideology, and insisting on the point of education being that it leads to collective action (itself a crucial type of education) that
transforms structure and material conditions, City Life practices a truly Freirean pedagogy that allows oppressed people to transform their conditions and simultaneously transform themselves. The next chapter examines the role organic intellectuals play in facilitating this self-transformation.
This chapter examines effective leadership in community organizing and discusses how “organic intellectuals” must combine an embodied subjectivity, or habitus, similar to those they are organizing, and more objective skills and understandings, or consciousness. I also consider the complexities of class and identity politics as they emerge in movement leadership. I explore these issues in the context of City Life as an organization that is committed to developing members into leaders who combine subjectivities and styles of the organizing base with objective skills and analysis. While the organization doesn’t frame their leadership-development practices in such academic terms, I argue that these concepts help interpret their leadership development practices and account for a significant degree of the success of the leadership and the organization as a whole.

THEORY

Subjectivity is both ideological and material, and conscious and unconscious. The concepts of consciousness and habitus will be used to incorporate these different (though intertwined) dimensions of existence. Consciousness is analytic, to varying degrees intentional, and may be said to be the sum of one’s ideology. Habitus is a concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu and must be understood as a part of his overall theoretical project. Bourdieu was primarily concerned with the question of how social reproduction occurs unconsciously from generation to generation (Swartz 1997). To answer this question, he utilized the concepts of capital, field, and habitus. According to Bourdieu, any resource that provides power to its holder is capital. The central types of capital are economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital.
Economic capital includes wealth and productive assets. To have cultural capital is to prove one’s capability in a socially prized area of practice. Cultural capital consists of credentials, goods, attitudes, behaviors, preferences, and knowledge. Social capital consists of relationships through which resources can be utilized (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007). Symbolic capital is “a form of power that is not perceived of as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others” (Swartz 1997: 43).

Fields are structured social arenas in which power (capital) is struggled over. “Like a game, a field has rules for how to play, stakes or forms of value (i.e., capital), and strategies for playing the game…yet the most important game in any field is establishing the rules to define ‘the legitimate principles’” or rules of the game (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007: 24). The arenas of housing, education, and employment are examples of fields.

The concept of habitus holds that external structures are internalized in individuals through early socialization, creating a durable, subconscious, and embodied orientation towards the world which leads to social reproduction. The concept is separated from consciousness through its deeply subconscious nature, relation to the concept of field, and perhaps most of all its emphasis on materiality and practice. Habitus includes disposition, behavior, bodily mannerisms and communication, verbal language, habits, and modes of reasoning as well as values, aspirations, and expectations (Swartz 1997). Though habitus is extremely durable, change is usually possible if usually slow and unconscious (Swartz 1997). Fields are produced by, create, and take for granted a certain habitus. A habitus’ connection (or lack thereof) to its environment is unconscious and appears inherently natural or unnatural. When a habitus is in social world of which it is the product, it finds itself “as a fish in water,” it takes itself, the world about itself, and the synchronized relationship between the two for granted (Bourdieu and
Wacquant 1992:127). If this ideas is extended, it means that when a habitus encounters a field of which it is not a product, it finds itself “as a fish on land,” and is hyper-aware of its “foreignness,” its hostile surroundings, and the incompatibility between the two.

For Bourdieu, practice is the result of the interrelationship between habitus, capital, and field, rather than reducible to any one of the concepts, and may be expressed as [(habitus (capital)] + field= practice (Swartz 1997:141). Social reproduction thus occurs unnoticed, because social structure and one’s “place within it” are internalized and taken for granted, leading agents to actions that reproduce social structure. Consciousness and habitus are concepts that overlap, but do not preclude each other. I treat both as integral parts of explaining who people are, how they act, and the potential for transformation. These concepts illustrate the subjective and objective qualities that make City Life’s leadership so effective at supporting members’ radical consciousness transformation. The concepts also illustrate the importance of the emphasis City Life places on developing the leadership of members who are working class people (particularly women and immigrants) of color, and why City Life emphasizes hiring already highly skilled and radical working class people of color who are embedded in the community when they don’t hire from their membership.

BACKGROUND

Historically, a section of the Left has both emphasized economic class to the exclusion of other axes of structural oppression and emphasized leadership by those already possessing a high level of organizational skills and highly developed critical consciousness. This section has argued that progressive and radical movements should reject issues of race, gender, and sexuality, which will “splinter and doom” the Left, to unite solely around oppression based on “majoritarian” issues of economic class. It has also argued that developing the leadership of the
base is unnecessary. The race-blind, gender-blind, and non-developmental approach has dominated both left-of-center social movements and community organizing, elevating middle-class white men and marginalizing people of color, women, working class people, and immigrants. This focus and consequent exclusion of those most impacted by oppression have in fact been key constraints on movements (Kelley 1997; DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2010). Advocating only a macro focus on economics and dismissing leadership development among the general membership misses the interconnectedness of social structure and oppression (based on race, class, gender, etc.) and reproduces oppression on a micro level, making movement-building to change oppressive social structures impossible.

However, there is also a tendency on the Left that, attempting to correct this pervasive historical deficiency, swings too far in the other direction by focusing primarily on identity. This tendency loses sight of the fact that oppression is fundamentally structural and material, because its ultimate injustice is premature death and severely worsened quality of basic material life. An overemphasis on identity can ignore the fact that oppression can only be mitigated through skillfully organized solidaristic collective action (Kelley 1997; Lipsetz 2006; Melamed 2011). Romanticizing the spontaneous feelings and actions of particular marginalized subjects misses the objective intellectual and organizational work of constructing effective resistance (Fisher 1994). Conferring on that group a predetermined historical role ironically mirrors a major shortcoming of orthodox Marxism, substituting the “most intersectionally oppressed” figure for the (white male) factory worker.

THE QUESTION

A key yet understudied aspect of community organizing has been the role of organic intellectuals. I define an organic intellectual as having both objective organizing skills and
political analysis and a subjective habitus that reflects that of the base they are organizing. According to this definition, both Left tendencies have misunderstood the meaning and importance of organic intellectuals. “Majoritarians” have underestimated the subjective characteristics of these figures and their essentialness for building movements capable of shifting power in society. “Identitarians” have underestimated the objective characteristics of these figures and their role within movements. Organic intellectuals must be studied more rigorously in order to understand the importance of movement leaders with organizing skills and with demographic characteristics and experiences reflective of the base.

CITY LIFE’S ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

Currently, all of City Life’s paid organizers are working class people from the Boston area. The vast majority are people of color, and about half are women. City Life’s member-leaders are dedicated and talented organizers, many staff positions are filled by people who first came to them as members, and members have gone on to occupy key staff positions and leadership roles in other social justice movements and organizations. This chapter focuses on the Melonie and Antonio as case studies of organic intellectuals. Both, loved by members and staff, have been crucial to the group’s ability to recruit and retain members, conduct radical and transformational political education, and win victories for their members. Each has brought a distinctive habitus to the common political education and leadership development offered by City Life.

City Life’s organic intellectuals develop a counter-hegemonic consciousness that rests on a critical analysis of finance capital as precipitating the foreclosure crisis, capitalism as valuing profit over people, and class, immigration, race, sexuality, and gender intersectionality as forming and countering oppression (City Life/Vida Urbana 2012). They also hold a wide range
of objective organizing skills\textsuperscript{42}, and their habitus reflects those of City Life’s predominantly working class, person of color, immigrant, and Boston-based membership. The following discussion explores the integration of habitus and objective analytical development and skill building in the cases of Antonio and Melonie.

\textit{Antonio}

Original born in Honduras, Antonio grew up in the low-income Boston neighborhood of Dorchester and has lived in the area for over 45 years. After dropping out of high school Antonio turned to drug dealing, gangster-rapping, and song writing full-time. He was part of internationally famous gangster-rap groups, first Almighty RSO and then Made Men, and wrote music for and recorded with superstar artists. After spending 18 months in prison for gun possession and narrowly escaping death after he was stabbed in the back after a concert, Antonio left his group and the danger he was putting himself in. He and a partner launched the extremely successful international “Antonio Ansaldi” clothing brand and store, which included the infamous “STOP SNITCHIN’” t-shirt.

Antonio came to City Life after discovering his home was in foreclosure in late 2009. Antonio already had a habitus similar to a significant portion of City Life’s base as a male of color from a working class family who had lived in Boston his whole life. He had organizing-related leadership skills, such as the ability to control and agitate a crowd, from his music background. However, at the point of his arrival at City Life, he lacked knowledge of the foreclosure crisis or economic structure, commitment to radical social justice work, and understanding and experience of organizing. However, his desire to help others and in initial political education helped him develop a commitment to the group that allowed him to put.

\textsuperscript{42} For examples of objective organizing skills, see Eric Mann’s (2011) \textit{Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer}. 
herself in a position to learn the objective analysis and more of the skills necessary to organize. He attended City Life’s Radical Organizing Classes and meetings for member-leaders, both of which were spaces for in-depth radical education on oppression and organizing base-building movements.

Antonio describes the process by which the organization supported his acquisition of a broader analysis and new organizing skills:

Well, once I started, when I came back that second week, the information started sounding even more believable. It started sounding even more intriguing to me. It was like a mystery, and I wanted to add my two cents to try and uncover that. So I was like, ‘Well, in order for me to understand what this shit is really all about, for me to really understand how to fight this and what the fuck is going on is for me to learn the terminology, learn the language, learn why, learn how, learn when.’ So the best way to do that was for me to volunteer. So I started to volunteer for everything. Auction: volunteer. Eviction: volunteer. Pass this out: volunteer. Canvass: volunteer. Pizza: volunteer. Whatever it was: volunteer. And one day Steve came to me and said, ‘Would you like to come to our leadership team meeting?’ I was like, ‘What’s that?’ He said, ‘We need leaders, blah, blah, blah...’ I was like, ‘Why do you want me to come to that?’ He was like, ‘We think you have leader qualities.’ So I came and one thing led to another. Once I came to that, they asked me to chair it, like you seen me do last week. I did that for a couple weeks, maybe four weeks in a row. Just little things I was doing. I think I was opening eyes. I wasn’t really trying to... I wasn’t trying to do anything other than just what I do. And what I was doing was just making him see, ‘He’s pretty creative. He can draw. He can lead a chant. He knows how to control a crowd.’ That was one of the things that Steve... he was like, ‘When you hold the megaphone like you really know what you’re doing. Did you ever do this before?’ I was like, ‘No, but I perform and I hold microphones. I get people into it.’ He was like, ‘Oh, that’s what it is.’ So from that, every time they’d see me, whether it was City Life, whether it was MassUniting, whether it was Jobs With Justice [two different community-labor coalitions], wherever we would go, as soon as I would show up, people would run to me and hand me the megaphone before I could ever get settled in...

In addition he describes the development of his political analysis and view of the world, particularly how he came to understand structures and processes in financial capitalism and how he might be able to incorporate a new political consciousness into his existing habitus:

[City Life] changed my mind from A to Z. I didn’t know anything about the banks and what they were doing. The only thing I knew about banks was going to cash a check from Interscope records and Def Jam records. That’s all. We didn’t put any money in the bank. We didn’t deal with credit cards really. We might have had a Source
[magazine] corporate black credit card that we all used. But individually, it was all cash. Everything was cash. So when I started hearing what these banks were doing and all it was all concocted and how it was going down, it was like that really... that and all the information that I was getting, all of that stuff started to make me think differently. The people here... I wasn’t used to being around these type of people. When I say ‘these type of people’ I guess I can say non-street people or ‘non-urban street setting’ people where I’m from. I wasn’t used to that. I wasn’t used to being around people who like really care... City Life has changed the way I think about the political spectrum of the world. It changed the way I think about banks. It changed the way I think about friends. It changed the way I think about people of different backgrounds, cultures, nationalities… it changed my views because I realize that when you align yourself or when you form a movement or when you have a mass amount of people there agreed upon one justice or several justices that are unjust and they want to fight for it, things can get done. Like I used to see people holding picket signs when I would be driving by in my big Mercedes. Looking at them was like, ‘What are they doing?’ And now, I realize what they were doing. I was too ignorant because in my world, all it was big cars, money, drugs, girls. People picketing didn’t register with me. But that was my ignorance. Now I see what they were doing, and because I was being ignorant then in my own little mind, it encompasses me to give back to that ignorance that I once portrayed towards this type of stuff...Political education was critical in all of that, because I think without the political education that is supplied here and taught here, I wouldn’t have been able to do all the other things. I wouldn’t have been able to develop into a... I’m still developing now as a organizer, something I never thought I would be doing… So political education is a major driving force. If I didn’t have the political education, I wouldn’t be comfortable doing this work…

However, Antonio became an effective organic intellectual as he incorporated these new understandings into a subjective habitus reflective of City Life’s base. He narrates his particular connection to a “street” black masculinity and his need to reinterpret what he has learned in a manner that will connect with the community’s habitus. Hence, he emphasizes re-interpretation of political analysis through re-wording and use of different language and creating an album blending his old style of rap with a consciousness of the foreclosure crisis and racial and economic structure. He understands that style, manifested in physical appearance, images, language, and gesture, is critical to conveying key points of content. Mirroring his own shift, Antonio emphasizes turning intra-group violence into collective action against the real enemy, the banks. He also struggles with how to align his new consciousness with his durable habitus as expressed in music, not leaving his old rapping style but modifying it for the purposes of...
collective social justice action. Antonio’s consciousness has changed dramatically, and he is trying to spur a similar consciousness transformation in others with comparable habituses through articulating a critical worldview in ways that will be comprehensible:

I think, being from the community, I bring a sense of exactly the pulse of the people that are affected by it because I am one. I bring that. I know what these people feel... their joy, the pain, the embarrassment, the not knowing the facts. So I bring being able to communicate with those people directly in their own language, in their own tongue. I bring a musical background that started in 1979. I turned professional in 1984. I’ve been a professional ever since then. I’ve been on many major labels. I’ve written songs for and recorded songs with many platinum artists. I wrote songs for plenty platinum artists, such as Faith Edmonds, Dionne Warwick and Montel Jordan, just to name a few. But that’s what I do. … I’m at my most relaxed and reserved when I’m making music. So I bring that. I bring a passion of music. When I was sitting in these meetings and absorbing all this information about this bank or this CEO, that bank, this attorney general, this law... I’m getting all these things and I’m like, How do I go back to my hood and explain this to people? How do I go back to my hood and explain this to people? How do I just leave this meeting tonight on a Tuesday and maybe go to the barber shop tomorrow and see somebody who is going through this, how do I explain it? If I tried to explain it how they [explain it at the meeting], people are going to turn me off. You know what I mean? So I started figuring how can I... and that’s when the thought of an album started to come about and me being at an auction scene or a blockade, seeing a family get evicted. You know, that shit brought tears to my eyes. So that was one of the things that made me say, ‘You need to use your music to start crafting this.’ And I started taking all these papers [articles for political education] that we get on Tuesday night. I started taking them home. I started highlighting certain things and coming up with concepts and titles. I just made one song, and that one song turned into an album just because I realized one song wasn’t enough to hold the information that needs to be disseminated…I bring a sense of comfort for people who come here who don’t know... who would rather talk to somebody who they think looks like they’re from their neighborhood...when I was creating the album, I didn’t want to use any swears. I didn’t want to use any beats that I thought were true, true street gangster. But I did have to make sure I keep it hip hop because I’m coming from a successful background in music, and I didn’t want my fans to turn me off... You can’t go from hot to cold, there has to be some common thread. That was the thing for me: How do I make this album for everybody? First off, I’ve got to write every song with no curse words. So im’ma have to edit anything like that. And besides, I don’t need to curse with this message... by cursing, I’m not giving myself the optimum words to use. I wanted people from eight to eighty to be able to hear this album, because that’s who we’re dealing with. We’re dealing with children and their families all the way up to the 80s, to grandmothers and all…. So the art we use, again it brings a visual. The music brings a visual. ['The Bank Attack’ music] video brings a visual. I did the video because I wanted to show how... I don’t know if you’ve seen the video, but I wanted to show how street kids are fighting each other, pulling guns out popping each other for nothing. And the banks are profiting from it. I wanted to show how you guys are fighting and your
home’s in foreclosure. It’s bigger than that…I tried to bring the inner city into understanding what it was about.43

In his decision not to swear and not to use any beats that “were true, true street gangster,” Antonio demonstrates his understanding that his musical habitus reflects a particular age and generation, and that he has to expand the music in this album outside of what might feel “natural” for him in order to maximize its impact for people of all ages in his community.

However, Antonio also notes with regret that the album has been more popular with white people than working class black people from his community. While Antonio ensured the form of the music resonated with the habitus of those he was trying to reach, he observes that the content remained distant to them as people outside of “the movement,” as people outside of the context of a sustained community, culture, ideology, and practice found through initial crisis that might open a person up to new ways of thinking and doing things. Antonio says:

So honestly, this album has been being embraced more by white people than black people. I guess, like I say, more black people are going through [eviction due to foreclosure] than white people per se. And so you say, ‘Well, why are more white people listening to it?’ Because this album was generated for this movement, for this market. And then you’ve got the other people over here who are just into drinking, Lil Wayne and shit like that, and that’s all they want to hear. They don’t want to hear anything that might be pertaining to their home.

Antonio has modified his own habitus by incorporating a changing conception of and practice upon the world, but his album does not (and could not) reproduce the long-term, deep work that he has done on himself in the context of City Life as an organization.

Melonie

Originally born in Jamaica, Melonie has lived in Boston since migrating there in the early 1970s. She grew up in the black working-class neighborhood of Roxbury, though her family was middle-class and she was bused to Lexington, a white middle-class area, for school. Prior to

43 The “The Bank Attack” music video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Phh6Ea8t9eQ and the entire album of the same name can be found here: http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/twicethou
joining City Life, Melonie was a Boston Public Schools teacher and youth program coordinator, worked around gangs and youth violence, occasionally went on the radio, and had a realtor’s license and food truck business. Thus, she was connected with City Life’s base, but she had a different class background and work history than Antonio.

Melonie came to City Life with her home in foreclosure in 2008. She had a habitus similar to a significant portion of City Life’s base as a woman of color and an immigrant from a working class neighborhood who had lived in Boston for decades. Like Antonio, she had skills and knowledge applicable to organizing from her prior work, including some knowledge about the housing system, popularity within her community, an ability to communicate effectively across cultural differences to a wide variety of people, and the ability to manage and teach groups of people. However, when she arrived she had neither a particularly developed political understanding nor history of political involvement, and she had never engaged in base-building organizing. Her feelings were, as she put it, “I can’t vote [as a non-citizen]. Why get involved with politics?”

Melonie committed to the movement after her struggle to save her home expanded her understanding of political possibility and made her feel solidarity with the struggles of others:

After I did the first blockade [City Life’s direct action protecting her home], the next day I came into the office and the phones were ringing off the hook...And so I knew then I’ve got to get involved in this. I started volunteering. I was working as a program coordinator for a non-profit; a youth program coordinator. I would volunteer all the time... And then, it just became a struggle because we were doing a lot of blockades and I felt so connected to the movement, I think one of the powerful things about movements like this... and people don’t talk about it. You often don’t hear about the solidarity and the love that come out of it. Like just seeing that people are willing to throw down for you, even when your families won’t, you know what I mean because a lot of people are really embarrassed and ashamed, and these folks were fearless. So it just made me feel like, ‘Wow, this is something I want to do.’ So I was always around. I was always doing stuff for City Life... the willingness to resist, I think, was heightened like by a thousand bolts. Like I had always been somebody that questioned, but it’s pretty powerful to see that, ‘I can actually do this?!’ You know, even somebody that’s always known I had
rights, I just never... you know, not having seen movements and knowing that you can build a unified front to support you in the fight, you know, is different.

In explaining her motivation for deepening participation, Melonie immediately invokes love and support, a family reference, an emphasis on the group solidarity. This contrasts with Antonio’s initial motivation for further participation, which he describes as driven by a more analytical interest in the practices of banks and the foreclosure crisis. Melonie’s consciousness deepened through the same opportunities Antonio had as a member, but also significantly as a result of the added opportunities she had as a staff member after she was hired in 2009:

So some of it came in the meetings initially. But I think most of it came when I first started at City Life because it was a much smaller organization. Steve and myself were the only two full-time staff. Actually, I was part-time when I first came on. So we spent a lot of time pulling from each other, so I got a lot of political education just directing with Steve. And through readings and things like that, but mostly in City Life’s space, there were times at like the radical organizing conference. And then later on in my career, being exposed to some trainings. I did a black directors training nationally for a year, where I traveled to different parts of the country. I also did a, um, I’m on the national steering committee of Rights in the City. Being involved in the Rights of the City campaign work. So I’ve been able to get a lot of leadership development in other spaces. Then also board participation as a member of City Life and as a member of the staff, I sat on a couple of boards on behalf of City Life where I got a lot of experience as well.

Melonie now has an extremely deep and complex analysis of power, culture, structural race, class, gender, immigrant, and sexual oppression, and movement-building and social change. The same development occurred with her objective organizing skills:

City Life changed my whole life. I’m a whole different person. As I think about... I’ve been privy to be in a lot of training spaces, both locally and nationally and get a lot of development in the movement. As I learned more, it’s really about transforming. Like this is transformative organizing. Not only are you transforming the people you’re organizing, but as organizers we get transformed going through the struggle.

Her objective organizing skills became outstanding, and she left City Life when she was hired as the head organizer in Boston for Jobs with Justice in mid-2013.
Melonie is an organic intellectual not only because of her objective skills, but also because her subjective habitus connects her to City Life’s base, allowing her to communicate and organize particularly effectively:

Well, I think one of the advantages [I have as an organizer]… is that I’m totally on the front lines. It’s like there’s no being ‘off of work’ when you deal with social justice issues and you live in the community, people knock on your door all the time, and when I go to the supermarket. But the other thing is that it really keeps me on top of what are the important issues in our community? What’s going on right now, right? And it also helps a lot with member engagement. I think another advantage I have, too, is that I was a Boston Public Schools teacher. I am a realtor in the City of Boston, and have done a lot of work around gangs and youth violence. So a lot of people already know me. I go on the radio station from time to time. I have a food truck business. So I think a lot of people in this city know me.

Melonie is deeply integrated in, trusted by, listened to, and understood by the community. As she noted, this is particularly important for communicating theory effectively. Melonie recognizes the importance of hiring from the base for these reasons, but emphasizes the importance of objective organizing skills and the need for leadership development to build these in people from the base:

the disadvantage [of City Life hiring from its membership] is that it really takes some development tools that I don’t think we have had on the East Coast to bring people up to where they need to be. So that’s been a challenge. Building the tools to foster leadership from the grassroots. And so that’s another thing I’m committed to... building training modules and things like that to bring the message. I think we’re really good at like re-developing or continuing to develop seasoned organizers. But I think if we are going to do grassroots leadership and we’re building the space and we want a united front, they have to figure out how to tailor that message and then have structures to build people up to that place where they can go to a ROC [Radical Organizing Class or Radical Organizing Conference] and get it.

*Gendered Habitus*

Antonio and Melonie have and continue to subconsciously move through the world based on binary gendered experiences. Despite both going through enormous and convergent changes in ideology, the subconscious gendered differences in the way this shared consciousness is
expressed remain. Antonio’s gangster rapping and a world encapsulated by “big cars, money, drugs, girls” reflected a habitus characterized by the experiences of a particular kind of racialized working class masculinity, but so does his present-day automatic selection of a barber shop as the place he would most likely be among community members. His embodied presentation of self (i.e. speech patterns, the way he walks) and taste (e.g. rap, pit bulls, clothes) reflect the masculine habitus of someone from a particular generation and a particular racialized class background and remained relatively constant throughout his ideological shift. Melonie emphasized the importance of community, care, family, love, and communication heavily throughout her interview, and presented these as values she’s always held. She also advances a critique of an organizing model based on a male worker unencumbered by relational care responsibilities and always available for work:

I had always been a community person. Ever since I maybe turned eighteen [I’ve been very involved in community]… it’s really important to change the culture of what organizing looks like, especially now we’re talking about building leadership from the grassroots, right? So we’re talking about people that have families, children, live in communities that we want to restore and uplift, so we can’t have this model of like working 80 hours a week and killing yourself and being the best organizer you can be, and saying, ‘Oh, I’ll just do it because I don’t have a family,’ or, ‘I’m young and don’t have kids yet.’ We’ve got to do it and almost pretend like you have kids and you have a family because one day you want that. Organizing doesn’t mean that the world is going to change and people are going to be rigid and we’re not going to have nurturing, fruitful families anymore. It means that we want to rebuild the family structure; recreate community in a way that allows people to take of themselves, allows them to work less, right? Why should we work so hard to counter capitalism? Not ‘hard’ in the sense… it is hard, because we’re not useful to the movement when we’re half-dead… Maybe I could create a position here and come back. I don’t know, because I love City Life.

The durability of these values and ways of orienting herself to the world throughout her ideological shift reflect her feminine habitus.

A striking example of how the dramatically altered and convergent consciousnesses of Antonio and Melonie coexist with unchanging and polar opposite gendered habituses are their
answers to the question of why victories are seen as so important for and framed so broadly for the base. Melonie responds:

Well, victories are important, not just to City Life, but to movements. It’s just kind of like if you go on a diet, you want to lose a fucking pound, to stay on the diet… It’s that you keep that hope alive. I think that’s why wins are so important to movements. I think that collective wins are really important, as opposed to individual wins, because it helps us to show up differently in the world. We look at ourselves less as individuals and more as a collective. But I also think the broad framework of it is important because it allows people to measure their own win. So you know, principle reduction would be the ultimate long-term goal, right? But even a day longer in my home is a win because I really should have been gone. And helping people to see that helps it to become easier when you’re part of a collective movement. It might not be… your individual win might not be what’s best for the movement.

Antonio responds:

Well, I think we frame victories because people need to see results. People want to play for a winner. You look at the NBA, nobody wants to go to a loser. You know what I mean? So it’s the same with this. You won’t want to go to an organization that’s known for losing. So you have to uplift, but at the same time, you don’t want people to get the false impression that every case is won. You’ve got to keep it real to keep people on. If you keep it real and keep a level, then you keep that fight in people. If you paint this picture that everyone’s home gets saved, then nobody has no fight in them. And it’s a detriment to the movement. So you keep it honest. Hey, we win some; we lose some. But guess what? We win more than we lose.

Melonie and Antonio’s answers are exactly the same and perfectly different at the same time.

They both give the same conscious answer to the question, saying that victories are important because winning motivates people to continue to struggle. Reflecting their radical consciousness development, both frame the question in terms of movements and the collective good rather than simply individual benefit. Yet the subconscious ways in which they most readily express that answer, each using the first metaphor they can think of—Antonio’s men in the NBA and Melonie’s people (women?) on a diet, reflects binary gendered socialization.

COMPLICATING IDENTITY AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Subjectivity and the concept of “lived experience” are too often reduced to macro and essentialist abstractions of race, class, and gender rather than conceived of as micro social
experiences conditioned by diverse and varied factors including ideological socialization, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, geography, family structure, neighborhood, friend group, and levels and types of economic, cultural, and social capital. Steve Meacham, City Life’s Lead Organizer, and both Antonio and Melonie, illustrate these complexities.

Steve Meacham, a white male, City Life’s first paid organizer and current head organizer, strongly exemplifies the limits of abstract identity and essentialist notions of who does and does not have a role to play in movements. Born in 1948, Steve grew up in Morristown, New Jersey, a working class city surrounded by an upper-middle class township. His father’s support for the civil rights movement led Steve to notice class and race inequality from an early age; he was radicalized by the black liberation and anti-war movements in college in Boston. He briefly attended graduate school in City Planning, but dropped out to become a community organizer. He worked as a school bus driver to support himself while organizing tenants in a working class neighborhood, but the organizing project fell apart after six years due to sectarianism. In this time he saw both the possibility of radical ideas thriving in the American working class and the dangers of sectarianism. He then “salted” in a 6,000-worker shipyard as a welder for nine years. Sectarian conflict meant that only five of 40 original left-wing salters remained after two years. Steve then returned to tenant organizing and joined City Life in 1999.

Steve played an irreplaceable role in building City Life. He was instrumental in creating the anti-foreclosure organizing model spreading throughout the country. Steve played a key role in founding the Radical Organizing Conference, which draws in City Life and other radical organizers, and he runs Radical Organizing classes for City Life. Despite having very different experiences than Antonio and Melonie, he was instrumental in their development as organic intellectuals. Steve still works very long hours, the first to arrive and the last to leave, despite
being in his mid-60s. Though Steve’s habitus is greatly influenced by his being a white male from New Jersey, this simple identity does not capture his habitus or consciousness, as it erases the importance of age, decades of radical practice working with working class people and people of color in Boston, and his historical context.

Despite being from a middle-class family, Melonie’s habitus was deeply impacted by living in a working class neighborhood of color, a product of a particular geography and historical context that is no longer present for most middle-class people of color due to increasing class segregation. Being “middle-class” does not automatically impart a particular “middle-class” habitus to Melonie, as this designation abstracts a particular axis of power from its intersectionality with every other axis, as well as the fact that power and its meaning differs greatly across social and historical context. Melonie’s conservative parents did try to cultivate a middle-class and conservative habitus and consciousness when Melonie was a child and partially succeeded:

I was bused out to Lexington to go to school. So although I lived in this community that I thought was really great and fruitful, a lot of what was instilled in me like contradicted those feelings because I was kind of sent other places for better education…I guess that my growing up as a Jamaican young person, you know, struggling to identify with my African-American counterparts and finding it a lot easier to identify with my white [and middle-class] counterparts in Lexington. I learned really early on that a lot of the things that we think connect us, like similarities like you can look and see like I’m black, you’re black. I’m a girl, you’re a girl, are very… and not really what’s important… I grew up really thinking that Republicans were all nice and they all want the same shit as us and they’re all for us, and the Democrats are those bad people…

However, Melonie’s commitment to the working-class black neighborhood and community where she grew up, her increasing participation in this community through work and service from young adulthood, and her residence in this community as a class-precarious mother meant that her habitus transformed to more closely match that of City Life’s members by the time she came to the group.
While an immigrant from Honduras, Antonio was socialized into a black masculine “street” habitus relatively devoid of traditional “Latino” or “immigrant” markers including the ability to speak Spanish:

When we would go to school, we would get picked on because we’re Spanish. When you speak Spanish back then, you were looked at like you’re dumb or you just weren’t treated equal. So my mother didn’t really want to subject us to that, so she didn’t really press on teaching us Spanish and stuff. We started really speaking English around the house and changing the whole culture to try to Americanize us so we wouldn’t be singled out... that me and my brothers would go to school and would get picked on.

An abstracted identity that reduces Antonio to “black,” “Latino,” or “immigrant” or a “corresponding” ideology reflects dominant ideology in its essentialist shortcomings by erasing Antonio’s black masculine “street” habitus and the opposing consciousnesses Antonio has held over time within his durable habitus.

When identity, lived experience, and habitus become abstracted, essentialized, and reduced solely to the level of the individual, they lose their meaning and their value for social justice struggles. While each person’s identity results from their micro location, it is also true that micro locations reflect macro conditions and that each person’s “identity” is actually multiple identities that shift on spectrums of collectiveness versus individuality and in relative importance (Rodriguez 2003). City Life has been able to build a large and dedicated base for a radical project not only because the group seeks to transform structure based on race, citizenship, gender, etc and addresses micro power differentials within the group, but because the group successfully cultivates a shared collective identity of “City Life” that exists alongside the differentiated identities that members have related to race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is not that these differentiated identities exist in perfect harmony, but the fact that members proudly and righteously call themselves “City Lifers” is indicative of the fact that members refuse to let difference and addressable micro issues lead to division or the destruction of their shared project.
As City Life illustrates, a central part of building diverse movements for justice is building a shared collective identity based on solidarity that doesn’t erase other identities or micro power differentials within the movement, but is also a materialist identity that views structure as the primary source and expression of oppression and collective organizing to transform it as the primary source of liberation. The members who become leaders, or the “organic intellectuals,” of City Life move through this process and then lead this dynamic in the organization.

City Life recognizes the importance for leaders of both objective consciousness and skills and subjective closeness to the base. It cultivates organic intellectuals by developing objective skills and analysis among those from their base that demonstrate objective promise as organizers. City Life also shows that these leaders are crucial to building a transformative movement based on a radical, nonsectarian politics that embraces and views as inseparable class, race, gender, sexual, and immigrant struggles. The fact that organic intellectuals have a habitus closely aligned with those of the organization’s base places them in an optimal position to lead and transmit objective skills and analysis to members. Finally, City Life reminds us that the recognition of differential structural positions and working to minimize the reproduction of oppression on a micro level can be done in a manner that doesn’t lead to division or erasure of structure or materiality, but rather increases solidarity and helps build the movement needed to fight for liberation for all. Habitus is a deep subjectivity that can be changed through a modifying and additive process rather than through denial of its existence or attempts at transformation that go around its “common sense” rather than through it. Consciousness also can be developed when ideas are introduced in culturally appropriate ways that corresponds with the habitus. The next chapter focuses on the third “incentive” that produces durable and committed City Life membership, namely, the power what members have internally within and externally through the
organization. The chapter also stresses leadership development as a necessary mechanism that enables the coexistence of these two forms of power.
6

“Power Within,” “Power Through,” and Leadership Development

The balance of the objective and subjective is not only a question for organizing in terms of organic intellectuals but also in terms of balancing democracy and bottom-up control with objective differentials in skills and knowledge and collective needs and desires for objective results (Fisher 1994). This chapter argues that both bottom-up control of the organization, or “power within,” and objective leadership development and organizational power and success, or “power through,” are crucial factors that allow City Life to retain members as long-term and dedicated activists. Leadership development, including political education, is essential so that bottom-up control can coexist with successful action rather than one existing at the expense of the other.

“POWER WITHIN,” “POWER THROUGH,” AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT PARTICIPATION

Feeling that victories are possible and can be obtained through a particular course of action are central for participation in social movements and community organizing in general. Without these, action loses its point (Fisher 1994; Meyer 2002; Horton 2003). The irreplaceable method that allows people to feel that victories are possible is for them to actually win victories. The more a group has an understanding of the root (or structural) causes of their condition, which actors are perpetuating these conditions, what the interests of these actors are (and how they are opposed to their own interests), and how to challenge these actors and their interests effectively, the more likely victory is. A group must be willing to challenge dominant actors and their interest by whatever means are most effective, which at its most powerful non-violent stage
takes the form of militant direct action. To paraphrase others (Fisher 1994; Defilippis et al. 2010; Fisher et al. 2013), I call this a radical analysis of power and conflict. For example, workers are most effective at improving their conditions when they identify (racialized, gendered, global) capitalism as the root of their condition, their bosses as the actors who most perpetuate their condition, the opposition of their bosses’ interest in profit and their interest in well-being, and collective struggle through direct action that targets their bosses’ ability to profit as the best means of improving their condition. For community, labor, and other struggles around the world and in the United States, militant direct action guided by a radical analysis of power and conflict has been the most effective non-violent action for winning victories for the marginalized. In the context of community organizing, a radical analysis of power and conflict includes an understanding of the relationship between community, capital, and the state; the understanding that issues impacting communities stem from large-scale structures and must be addressed by targeting these beyond the level and space of community; and views that community organizing is deeply connected to social movements and that local efforts create the base for larger movements and that these movements ignite local efforts (Fisher et al. 2013).

Additionally, without democratic practices and members feeling they have a say in an organization’s decisions, social movement groups will not be able to maintain a substantial and dedicated membership. For example, while in the late 1920s and early 1930s the Communist Party built a substantial base through radical community organizing, its Popular Front strategy in the late 1930s placed the concerns of New Deal and CIO officials over the voices of its community membership, and particularly black workers. Through actions such as refusing to support legislation designed to limit the ability of unions to discriminate against black workers, the Communist Party lost the support of its community organizing base (Fisher 1994: 48-49).
A BALANCE OF SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE

Throughout history, community organizations which have too dogmatically stuck to principles of “power through” or “power within” and ignored the importance of the other have seen their membership dwindle and have become incapable of effective action. Despite the committed leadership of its organizers, radical political analysis and education, and effective militant tactics, the top-down nature of the Communist Party’s community organizing efforts and its placing the perceived needs of the Party ahead of needs expressed by (particularly black) community members led to a substantial loss of support in the late 1930s (Fisher 1994:48-51). Largely in reaction to the errors of the “Old Left,” “New Left” organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that began community organizing at the beginning of the 1960s swung too far in the other direction. SDS was a group of white, middle- and upper-class, very intellectual students that mainly organized in poor northern urban centers. SNCC organizers were both black and white, though also students, and until 1966 focused on race and citizenship claims around voting and segregation in black rural and urban areas of the south. Despite strong Left ideology among organizers, particularly in SDS, both organizations claimed to be non-ideological. Both organizations severely hampered their organizing efforts by largely abandoning the idea of leadership and political education among the general membership. Certainly SDS, and at times SNCC, abandoned the importance of effective collective action to reach collectively desired goals in favor of a romanticized notion of the inherent abilities of community members to decide everything for themselves. Especially for SDS, the result was an organization with limited purpose, membership, capacity, and concrete accomplishments. Even SNCC organizers in the mid-1960s felt that their efforts and victories mainly served to support relatively minor interests
for middle-class black people. SDS stopped community organizing in 1965, while that year SNCC splintered between factions advocating minimally structured horizontalism or black revolutionary nationalism (Fisher 1994: 104-18, 226-27). This history highlights the importance of City Life’s commitment to militant and effective tactics, sharp political and power analysis, winning victories for its members, leadership development, and bottom-up control of the organization.

“POWER THROUGH” IN CITY LIFE

The importance of victories for member participation was emphasized by both staff and members at City Life. Melonie and Antonio both stressed this using the gendered metaphors highlighted in the last chapter (pages 89-90), as did Ken (see chapter 4, page 64). Melonie’s comment most clearly captured what everyone expressed:

victories are important, not just to City Life, but to movements. It’s just kind of like if you go on a diet, you want to lose a fucking pound, to stay on the diet… It’s that you keep that hope alive. I think that’s why wins are so important to movements. I think that collective wins are really important, as opposed to individual wins, because it helps us to show up differently in the world.

The point of fighting is to win, and without the ability to win goes the motivation to fight. More victories, both as higher total numbers and relative to the number of battles fought, make participation more meaningful. Winning one’s own home does not impact one’s long term participation, but the ability to win homes in general is a crucial factor, because organizational power is understood as a general and collective phenomenon. City Life’s experience with the importance of winning through exerting collective power also speaks to the claim made by Hirsch (1986) that victories produced through direct action are particularly meaningful and likely to produce further movement participation (382).
City Life is able to win the homes of 95% of those who come to the group before eviction and able to influence national actors and policy out of proportion to its size and funding. These successes are due to its radical conflict and power analysis and militant direct action. City Life recognizes that (financialized, racialized, gendered, global) capitalism is at the root of the foreclosure crisis and that the banks and the state allow this crisis to continue for the sake of profit. It understands that militant direct action targeting the banks and the state most effectively challenges the banks’ profit and legitimacy and the legitimacy of the state and pushes them to address the foreclosure crisis. Local actions against banks escalate from public letters, to protests at auctions and vigils, to eviction blockades, which consist of picketing and sit-ins at evictees’ homes at the time that the sheriff attempts to evict the residents on behalf of the bank. The bank and sheriffs are forced to decide if they’re willing to arrest many people, pay the costs of those arrests, face media attention and the cost of negative publicity, or finally work a deal out with the residents. Protests at city and state courthouses over the carrying out of evictions might range from a picket to a sit-in to the point of arrest.

While City Life fights for homes locally and pushes for Boston and Massachusetts to take steps to remedy the foreclosure crisis, it also recognizes that in order to fight foreclosure the group has to move beyond Boston and target the banks and government on a national level. Fighting for individual homes locally is a means to build an organization capable of being a strong participant in a regional and national social movement to fight for universal needs including and beyond housing, and this broader movement participation, in turn, helps spur local efforts. This reasoning was captured at a Leadership Team meeting I attended where discussion reflected on Moral Mondays in North Carolina, whether City Life was ready to help lead such a
movement if it spread to Massachusetts, and, if not, what steps would have to be taken to make City Life ready.

Another Leadership Team meeting I attended focused on preparing for and contextualizing the upcoming Radical Organizing Conference. The presentation and discussion focused around this narrative:

The crisis of capitalism grows deeper, creating havoc in our lives. People with foreclosure and housing related cases come to City Life. We turn many of these individual ‘cases’ into ‘struggles’, battles that build a movement. We combine many of these struggles into ‘campaigns’ that enhance the struggles’ effect. The struggles and campaigns generate new fighters and new leaders. The struggle is a school! New leaders get trained – at meetings, in Leadership Team, in Radical Organizing Courses, at the Radical Organizing Conferences. Trained leaders from different campaigns form a movement of movements (the point of Radical Organizing Conference.) This happens in many cities, a national social change movement develops, which leads to liberation!

This presentation underscores the emphasis City Life places on “the movement” for liberation for all, as opposed to liberation only for members of its own particular organization. City Life’s commitment to moving beyond the local is also reflected in the fact that it is a leading organization in NEW ROAD regionally and the Right to the City Alliance nationally. City Life played a major role with the UNITY Alliance44 in a national protest against Bank of America at their 2012 shareholders meeting, an action which secured over 930 media stories.

Furthermore, reflecting a strong analysis of power and politics, City Life was one of the first organizations to articulate the demand of principal reduction, which has become a nationwide staple of the anti-foreclosure movement. In mid-2012 it was the first organization to argue that the Right to the City Alliance and national anti-foreclosure movement should focus attention on the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. City Life recognized that the FHFA and Fannie and Freddie were particularly good targets due to

44 UNITY Alliance is a “network of networks” that includes the national coalitions of Grassroots Global Justice, Right to the City Alliance, Jobs with Justice, National Day Laborer Organizing Network, National Domestic Workers Alliance, and the Pushback Network.
the high volume of mortgages they owned and their close links to the state, since the state is more dependent on public legitimation than private capital. Within the Right to the City coalition, City Life then helped lead regional and national protests from 2012-2013 against Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and Ed DeMarco as the head of the FHFA. A local benefit of this national work was that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac informally halted evictions of City Life members in Boston for fear of retaliation. Furthermore, the chief counsel of the FHFA came to Boston to meet with City Life and NEW ROAD to discuss the group’s national demands for principal reduction, an end to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac evictions, and turning vacant Fannie and Freddie owned properties to non-profits and community control. Vice Presidents from Fannie Mae also began a monthly discussion with the Right to the City Alliance over these demands. While the FHFA, Fannie, and Freddie simply stonewalled on giving in to any of these demands, these protests played a significant role in Barack Obama’s naming Mel Watt as a replacement for Ed DeMarco (a Bush appointee) at the FHFA, and further actions from the Right to the City Alliance and other national groups such as New Bottom Line contributed to the Senate’s finally confirming Watt months later. Unlike DeMarco, Watt has expressed support for principal reduction, and Right to the City’s previous actions against and conversations with the FHFA have set them up well to hold more regional and national direct actions in 2014 to continue pressing their demands.

Along with winning concrete victories, City Life also cultivates a sense of victory by creating a broad definition of victory and institutionalizing victories in the collective memory. While the ultimate goals of City Life are changing the social and economic structure, altering housing policy, and saving homes, keeping a member in their home a month longer than the bank wanted, winning a motion in court, and simply fighting back are claimed as victories. The latter
is exemplified in the most frequent chant heard at a City Life event: “When we fight!” “We win!” The statement that simply fighting back is a victory, if claimed as such, is supported by Kathleen McCourt’s study that found that working class women who participate in aggressive, conflict-oriented community organizations feel greater self-confidence and pride even though they felt concrete change was impossible (Fisher 1994: 212-13). Victories are institutionalized at City Life through repeated storytelling as well as symbols and rituals. This is exemplified in the new member induction segment of BTA meetings, where staff and more experienced members spontaneously retell victory stories to encourage new members, as well as “the sword and shield in action!” segment of BTA meetings, which includes reports on recent housing actions and victories, as well as other struggles and events City Life members have participated in. Photos, posters, and awards from past local and national struggles cover the walls of the City Life office as symbols of victories.

“POWER WITHIN” IN CITY LIFE

Bottom-up control manifests itself in a number of ways within City Life. The participatory nature of meetings outlined in Chapter 4 is one example. However, many other examples of this control also fit under the rubric of leadership development, because at the same time that they are a means of membership exercising power they are also a means through which members build skills and develop their analysis.

Leadership Development

Leadership development, including political education, is essential for bridging the potentially conflicting desires for members to have “power within” and “power through” an organization. City Life’s political education, discussed at length in Chapter 4, helps members to understand the root causes of their problems, explains why City Life takes the action that it does,
and generates their consent for City Life’s general direction. City Life’s leadership development can be characterized as having two levels: institutional training and individual experience. Members receive explicit leadership development training as staff, as members of the Executive Committee, in Leadership Team meetings, and in Radical Organizing Classes. In Leadership Team meetings, members are trained, among other things, in legal issues and rights of foreclosure, how to develop a campaign, how to facilitate meetings, how to conduct direct action, and in other general skills organizers need. Members of the Executive Committee get additional training by working more closely with staff, including in meeting planning and facilitation. Since the Executive Committee rotates every six months, its members gain a significant amount of experience, but many different people will have the chance to gain this meaningful leadership development. One session of a course of Radical Organizing Classes usually includes training on organizing in general, radical organizing, base-building, skill development, organizing methods and campaign development. One of the central conclusions of the *Ear to the Ground Report* (Lee and Williams 2013), an attempt to assess the current strengths and weaknesses of the movement based on 16 months of in-depth interviews with 158 movement activists from around the country, was that organizations in the movement rely too much on “trial by fire” and don’t do enough systematic leadership development. In this context, the rigor and depth of City Life’s systematic leadership development seems particularly crucial.

Individuals also learn leadership skills through experience, simply by doing. In this sense, every City Life structure and event is a place for leadership development. Members who are on City Life’s board or on staff have uniquely rigorous experiences. Members get facilitation

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45 For a slightly different characterization of levels of leadership development see Williams (2013).
46 Sample Leadership Team agendas can be found in Appendix 2.
47 A sample Radical Organizing Course outline and an outline from one of the particular classes of that course can be found in Appendix 3.
experience in Leadership Team meetings and BTA meetings. They can canvass door-to-door and make phone calls weekly. At BTA meetings members play a “greeter” role and do intakes for new members, give testimony, and participate in skits. There are a host of roles to be played at City Life’s multi-week protests such as chant leader, emcee, police liaison, and media spokesperson. Members sharpen their understanding of the City Life organizing model by presenting it in BTA meetings and when City Life travels around the country sharing their model. Members represent City Life at coalition meetings, and going on local TV and radio. Members with particular legal knowledge act in an official capacity for City Life at the courthouse.

IDEOLOGY, LEADERSHIP, AND DEMOCRACY

This City Life model, which supports power within and power through, takes seriously ideology and consciousness on the one hand and leadership development on the other. Robert Fisher (1994) notes that Saul Alinsky argued that ideological organizations “were undemocratic because their organizers came with pre-conceived ideals, goals, and strategies; they did not let neighborhood people make decisions. To let the people decide, Alinsky advocated, no matter what they decide, is the essence of democracy. Imposing a progressive ideology on the neighborhood is counterproductive and unnecessary” (54-55). Neo-Alinskyist organizations have continued to adhere to this line. However, I argue that the vision of democracy as simply a de-contextualized, majority-wins vote is a superficial one. A deeper vision of democracy holds that it includes content as well as form and that in a deeply undemocratic world people’s preconceived ideologies are not something they’ve truly chosen, but usually reflect the existing configuration of social and political power and the ideas and interests of these powerful groups. By the 1950s, Alinsky’s own Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, through following the “democratic” will of its white membership, became a “racist and conservative neighborhood
protection organization” (Fisher 1994:62). The refusal to allow racism, patriarchy, or any other form of oppression as acceptable within an organization strengthens that group’s role in establishing a democratic society. The racism which became prevalent within the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council was not a reflection of any “inherent” beliefs of its members, but a reflection of the prevalence and power of racist ideology in a deeply racist society. As demonstrated in the last chapter, organizations can make their ideology explicit without forcing it upon its members. In a society where almost everyone is bombarded solely with conservative and liberal ideologies in their formative years and throughout their lives, radical political education can be conducted in a manner that expands people’s horizons and allows them greater choice. Rather than being “neutral,” organizational silence will simply reproduce dominant ideology. Organizers are always motivated by some ideology, and being explicit about that ideology is more democratic than hiding it. As Fisher notes, “organizers bring ideology, skills, experience, and perspective to their work; they owe it to the neighborhood people to share this with them openly and honestly. Not to do so will in the long run increase suspicion” (226). City Life’s explicitly radical ideology and intolerance of oppression and oppressive behavior makes its space safer and more democratic for its members and allows many the opportunity to develop a consciousness they otherwise would not have the option to develop.

Closely related to the question of ideology and democracy is the question of leadership and democracy. While I have already stressed the importance of objective skills and analysis, it is also important to ensure that structures of member control and member votes are not simply rubberstamps for decisions already made by staff. This doesn’t mean that staff should not come to members with already thought out and complex proposals, but it does mean that in these instances staff need to treat the process of explaining these proposals and getting feedback even
more seriously. In this light, it is important to stress that key decisions are made by Leadership Team members and the Executive Committee. Recent votes of the Leadership Team before and during my visit were in favor of having joint Leadership Team meetings with all Boston chapters every other meeting, creating the Executive Committee, having that summer’s Radical Organizing Conference, and trying out particular changes to the BTA meeting to encourage new member retention. Another example of a meaningful decision the Leadership Team made in the past was to override staff opinions and hold an eviction blockade (City Life/Vida Urbana 2012). It is not that staff and all members are on entirely equal footing. Staff members have key skills and thus will make a number of key decisions, and there are also differences between members in skills, in dedication to the group, and thus in who impacts certain decisions. Inequalities in commitment and skill are the result of an unequal world. However, the structures and trainings are present so that members who demonstrate skills, interest, and potential leadership can be trained to the level where they function as effective staff, or near-staff, as many have.

Both bottom-up control of the organization, or “power within,” and objective leadership development and organizational power and success, or “power through,” are essential features in City Life. Rather than bottom-control coming at the expense of the group’s overall direction, or effective strategy coming at the expense of popular control, leadership development, including political education, allows the two to coexist. The next, and final, chapter compares City Life/Vida Urbana’s radical organizing model to the two dominant community organizing models of the present, both of which are neo-Alinskyist. A number of organizational recommendations for City Life based on my study follows.

To review the nature of the Leadership Team and Executive committee see page 30 in Chapter 2.
Conclusion: The Strengths and Significance of City Life/Vida Urbana.

In order to understand the significance of City Life’s model, this chapter compares its radical organizing model to the two presently dominant center-left community organizing models, both of which are neo-Alinskyist. Both the Congregation Based Community Organizing (CBCO) and Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) models have deep roots in Alinsky’s organizing; they attempt to build as broad a base as possible by focusing on economic self-interest, by ignoring issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and by eschewing any political education or analysis that moves outside of the “common sense.” Neither model creates organic intellectuals, facilitates consciousness transformation, or builds a counter-hegemonic project.

However, both the CBCO and ACORN models have adapted to changing circumstances and differentiated themselves from Alinsky’s organizing in different ways. Traditional Alinskyism is defined by several key principles. It insists that people primarily act from individual self-interest and almost never out of altruism. The fundamental point of organizing is to win power, which means that the most militant tactics should be used to be most effective, that the professional organizer is the key to social change as the most knowledgeable actor, and that a base should be built by going through established community leaders and institutions to maximize participation. Democracy is essential, and can only be maintained if organizers and organizations remain non-ideological (which also ensures the broadest participation and
maximum power), and if organizations remain within small geographical areas like neighborhoods (though they may collaborate with others in social movements).

Both the ACORN and CBCO models have been able to spread nationally and develop a level of influence yet unmatched by more radical community organizing models. Both were formed in the early 1970s, when the growth of neo-Alinskyism was a reaction to the failures of Left organizing in the 1960s: the deeply divisive ideological practice of sectarian organizations and the lack of leadership, lack of organizational purpose, and lack of concrete accomplishments of SDS and (to a lesser extent) SNCC. Both ACORN and CBCOs addressed several of these issues with significant success by embracing accountable leadership, focusing on power and conflict, and prioritizing concrete victories. By comparing the ACORN, CBCO and City Life/Vida Urbana models, I demonstrate that these strengths of neo-Alinskyism can be a part of a radical organizing model that refuses to sacrifice long-term, transformative demands in order to win short-term victories. I also demonstrate that sustained, committed social movement participation comes from shared community and culture, morally righteous ideology, and a desire for collective and democratic power rather than individual self-interest.

THE ACORN MODEL

ACORN, formed by Wade Rathke as a result of his experience in the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), began in 1970 in Little Rock, Arkansas. ACORN kept the NWRO strategy of recruitment by going door-to-door, but Rathke felt that the single issue (welfare) and single base (mostly poor black people) of the NWRO was too constraining. Instead, ACORN sought to build as broad a base as possible by spanning issues and constituencies, which ACORN united through a common broad economic interest (Fisher 1994:147-48). ACORN chapters were often still rooted in low-income communities of color. Membership required small dues. While
local chapters met monthly, the organization was intently focused on militant direct action, the means by which concessions were extracted from private and public opponents, and a significant amount of direct action took place between the member meetings.

ACORN’s militant protest tactics, growth, and centralized national structure allowed it to reach a size and influence unmatched by any other single left-of-center community organization. For example, in 2004 ACORN won major concessions from H&R Block after a campaign against its predatory practices through two days of coordinated protests in over 50 cities (Fisher et al. 2013). At its peak in 2008 it had chapters in 110 different cities in 40 states, although as it grew it became more and more focused on electoral work (Fisher 1994:152).

However, emphasizing “pragmatism” and attempting to build a “majoritarian” base, ACORN organized entirely on the idea of material self-interest, ignoring ideology, relationships, deep cultural work, and questions of race, gender, and sexuality. ACORN pursued an almost entirely quantitative and rationalistic approach, based heavily on the work of paid organizers with the central aim of continuously expanding its funding and membership. The emphasis was on mobilizing numerical totals and achieving immediate results rather than retaining members or building community, and high member turnover rates were taken as given (DeFilippis et al. 2010). One way of securing funding was through providing services, such as through ACORN Housing Corporation, which developed low-income housing and provided homeowner counseling services, and a non-profit tax preparation service that was the third largest of its kind in the country. ACORN also operated charter schools, two union locals, two radio stations, multiple publications, and an accounting, financial, and payroll services firm. On the legal front, ACORN won money from its opponents as part of their negotiated victories, including a $500 million settlement from a predatory lending servicer, and a settlement from H&R Block (Atlas
2010:64, 217-18). However, a large percentage of funding for local chapters had to be raised through time-consuming grassroots efforts. As a result of its heavy action orientation, the central emotions cultivated among members were those of anger and excitement, and its culture ended up being based on combativeness and confrontation. Organizers were paid low wages and expected to work long and hard hours. This meant that organizer positions were filled mainly by young, white, middle-class men and that these positions had extremely high turnover rates. The organization’s unending emphasis on direct action and quantitative growth translated into a consistent dismissal of relationship and community-building as non-instrumental elements of community organizing, and a greater emphasis placed on anger and confrontation to the exclusion of caring emotions. As a result, ACORN has been particularly critiqued as overly masculine (Swarts 2008).

ACORN’s large membership, unparalleled scope and funding (at its height with a budget of over $42 million without even including their service provision), ability to transcend the local, eagerness to participate in social movements, and militant direct action tactics allowed the organization to win impressive victories on both the national and local level, but registering over 1 million people to vote in the 2008 election drew the ire of the Right. Several manufactured scandals, along with a very real embezzlement scandal that was facilitated by the power at the top of the organization, forced ACORN to fold in 2010 (DeFilippis et al 2010). While ACORN is now defunct, some of its former chapters still exist today as independent entities and are powerful local organizations. Examples include New York Communities for Change (NYCC) and Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE).49

THE CBCO MODEL

49 Both of whom are members of the Right to the City Alliance
Saul Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940 as a means to spread Alinskyist organizing to localities across the country. After Saul Alinsky died in 1972 the IAF transitioned to become more professionalized, a national training center for community organizing, and a national coalition for community organizations (Swarts 2008:3-4). In 1973 an IAF organizer developed the current CBCO organizing model, and this model proliferated until the vast majority of IAF organizations, as well as many other community organizations in several other national coalitions, came to utilize it. The four biggest CBCO networks now include: 1) the IAF, which is made up of 57 organizations and was founded in 1972, 2) the PICO National Network, which is made up of 53 organizations and was founded in 1972, 3) the Gamaliel Foundation, which is made up of 45 organizations and was founded in 1968, and 4) the Direct Action Research and Training Center (DART), which is made up of 20 organizations and was founded in 1982.

CBCOs use church congregations rather than individual door knocking to build their bases, and each organization within each network may consist of between 10 and 100 congregations. Actions are held much less frequently than they are in the ACORN model, but many more individuals are mobilized per action. Rather than militant direct protest, CBCOs actions take the form of mass lobbying meetings (high turnouts at meetings scheduled with public officials or corporate power-holders to pressure them to a particular end). Rather than having a culture of conflict, CBCO members are united by a Christian culture and ethic of justice. As a result of being congregation-based, there is significant racial, class, and ideological diversity within CBCOs, much more than in ACORN (Swarts 2008). Like ACORN, the emphasis among CBCOs is on “pragmatism” and attempting to build a “majoritarian” base. Unlike ACORN, community, internal cultural work, and values are emphasized, though
questions of race, gender, or sexuality, or ideology moving outside of their members’ religious “common sense” is ignored. The idea that people are motivated by self-interest remains, but the definition of self-interest is expanded to include living out one’s held values. A broad shared ethic of justice within religion, particularly Christianity, along with a broad shared identity of faith, shared relationships, and shared religious rituals (such as praying) form the cultural basis for CBCOs work (Wood 2005; Swarts 2008).

This cultural work allows CBCOs to retain long-term and dedicated members more effectively than ACORN, and CBCOs also emphasize leadership development to a much greater degree. Swarts (2008) explains that within CBCOS, “there is wide access to leadership training, and organizers constantly seek new political leaders…CBCO places an unusual emphasis on training activists to research issues, policies, and political actors…to some extent, CBCO networks emphasize developing leadership capacity as an end in itself” (17-18). CBCOs are able to win redistributive gains for working class people on a municipal level. These gains include additional funding for public schools and after-school programs, additional funding for health programs, and safety measures such as stop signs and street lights (Swarts 2008:151-60).

However, organizing through churches is deeply constricting ideologically and culturally, and it is difficult to organize across congregations as a result of the racial, class, and ideological diversity. Swarts notes that “participants in the summer 2000 PICO training ranged from conservative Christians whose denominations refuse to ordain women to non-Christian Unitarian Universalists whose churches ordain gays and lesbians…one staffer guessed that up to half of the members in PICO churches were Republicans” (2008:6). Thus, the shared ethic of justice and the religious identity that CBCOs cultivate often remains basic and general. Furthermore, a religious basis for organizing severely limits how CBCOs’ base can be employed to win
victories. It precludes a vigorous conflict analysis and militant tactics that make this analysis useful and contributes to CBCO hostility to social movements. Swarts highlights that “one of CBCOs’ biggest challenges is teaching Christians to embrace and domesticate power. American Christianity has been associated with meekness and turning the other cheek…” (2008:12). This faith-based identity prevents members from protesting. Social justice is largely only strived for as it can be obtained through mass lobbying meetings that attempt to gain promises from public officials or powerful private actors. Swarts highlights that these meetings contain “a formality more typical of a shareholders meeting than a grassroots protest” (2008:6). Yet even these meetings cause internal disruption, as Swarts explains that “many CBCO participants disapprove of…even the ‘polite polarization’ of meetings” (2011:466). Words like “activist” and “movement” have deeply negative connotations.

In general and on a broad scale, however, the grassroots lobbying of CBCOs is a deeply ineffective strategy for producing meaningful gains for poor and working class people. Research has demonstrated that if 90% of poor Americans support a policy change, it is no more likely to happen than if 10% do. Even when median-income people support policy, its chance of becoming a law is nearly equivalent to a situation in which they strongly oppose it (Hacker and Pierson 2010). With unlimited campaign spending and the importance of advertising, money is infinitely more important than the opinions of poor and working class people. Lobbying is even less effective in the private sphere. Militant direct action succeeds where lobbying does not, because it forces concessions by directly disrupting the accumulation of economic and symbolic capital (legitimization), the goals of capital and the state. CBCOs’ lack of shared struggle also limits the solidarity within their internal culture. While CBCOs’ networks allow them to transcend their local area to some degree, the impact is weakened due to the inability to utilize
conflict tactics, the decentralized nature of their networks (especially compared to ACORN), and strong negative feelings towards social movements, which are regarded as disorganized, undemocratic, and unpragmatic (Swarts 2008). CBCOs’ very localized and limited action makes it difficult to win victories beyond the municipal level and with long-term impact.

CITY LIFE/VIDA URBANA COMPARED

Culture and Community

While City Life, like ACORN, is able to win impressive victories due to militant direct action, its culture moves beyond the hyper-masculine ACORN model through its feminine solidarity that embraces reciprocity, morality, care, family, and love without losing a commitment to direct action. Community is built through this culture as well as shared radical ideology, relationships, symbols and rituals, and care for members’ racial, gendered, and immigrant experiences. A focus on confrontational tactics, radical morality, solidarity, reciprocity, and intersectionality made possible by not being constrained by the boundaries of “common sense” of religion, but retaining the power of church-like community, symbols and rituals, and relationships, allows for a culture that improves upon the CBCO model. The result is a durable and dedicated membership rather than low investment and a high turnover rate, and, unlike CBCOs, a base that is still invigorated for the type of militant direct action that wins victories.

Ideology

City Life’s commitment to continuous radical political education contrasts sharply with the lesser emphasis placed on education by ACORN and CBCOs and their refusal to be ideological or move outside of the “common sense.” City Life seems to suggest that this education, rather than discouraging members, is central to creating long-term commitment and
dedication, particularly for members of oppressed groups, as it demonstrates the moral righteousness of participation and shows oppressed people that they are valued and that their struggles are central. The radical political education also facilitates long-term and committed participation by helping to construct a stronger collective identity through stronger differentiation and boundaries between City Life and those who oppose justice. Along with a community and culture of solidarity, it is this radical education that is able to unite groups of two different classes- homeowners (who may be landlords themselves) and tenants- to fight the banks. City Life’s example suggests that political education and leadership development are also central to developing organic intellectuals, who are themselves crucial for creating long-term and dedicated participation, particularly from oppressed groups. While ACORN spends minimal time developing its base, CBCOs focus more on developing some membership skills in practical organizing. Both ACORN and CBCOs usually hire college graduates from the outside, and both pursue little political education for the general membership, remaining inside the common sense of faith communities and the existing political and economic system.

Internal and External Power

City Life’s militant tactics and commitment to social movement participation, which it shares with ACORN, allows it to win victories of a size and scope beyond the possibilities allowed for by the more localized and less militant tactics and commitments of CBCOs (Fisher 1994). However, City Life’s commitment to political and leadership development means that, to a lesser extent than ACORN, this power does not have to be achieved by sacrificing grassroots democracy for the sake of organizers’ control. It also means that City Life is less reliant on paid staff than ACORN and CBCOs, which is essential for building the movement beyond the limits set out by the whims of foundations. City Life’s ability to retain and develop members and win
victories for those members shows that organizations and movements do not have to choose between winning relatively small, immediate gains for oppressed communities and building the radical movement needed to transform society and end capitalism and other oppressive systems of power.

While it is clear that neo-Alinskyist models currently have a wider scope in terms of funding, membership, and chapters than the radical model, I reject this as a decisive argument against the feasibility of transformative organizing. Firstly, there are radical community organizations all over the country, from the Miami Workers’ Center in Florida, to City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston, to Occupy Homes Minnesota in Minneapolis, to Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment (MORE) in St. Louis, to POWER in the Bay Area. Secondly, while ACORN and the CBCOs each built its national networks over several decades, transformative community organizing is just now growing as a national phenomenon and differentiating itself from the past Left community organizing efforts of the Communist Party, SDS, SNCC, and 1960s Left sectarian groups. The Right to the City Alliance and National Domestic Workers Alliance, both attempts to form powerful national coalitions driven by (though not exclusive to) radical community organizing, have only been in existence since 2008 and 2007 respectively (Goldberg 2010). Thirdly, while the Right to the City Alliance, National Domestic Workers Alliance, and City Life/Vida Urbana are more circumscribed in their access to funding than reformist groups, and their foundation funding is still central, this isn’t an insurmountable obstacle to generating enough revenue to operate effectively. Both the Right to the City Alliance and City Life/Vida Urbana have been funded by some of the wealthiest foundations in the world.

50 Interestingly, MORE is a former ACORN chapter.
At the same time, the problem of sustaining revenue streams outside of foundation funding is an ongoing question for these organizations, which hesitate to rely upon dues-paying of their already pressed memberships.

CONCLUSION

Most people come to City Life out of the desire to save their homes. However, all City Life organizers noted that saving one’s own home appears to have no impact on one becoming a long-term participant in the movement, or a negative impact when the home is saved through purely service rather than service-supported direct action. People stay in City Life due to the “incentives” of (1) community and a culture of solidarity, (2) radical moral ideology, and (3) the power members themselves have internally within and externally through the organization. These three organizational characteristics are produced through solidaristic cultural practices and community building, radical political education, the development of organic intellectuals, leadership development, bottom-up organizational structure, and militant and effective protest tactics. Through these mechanisms and “incentives” City Life is able to develop a radical organizing project notable for its ability both to build a substantial base in and win gains in the present and to build a significant, committed, and talented base for a long-term transformative movement. City Life therefore exemplifies a radical alternative to the neo-Alinskyist ACORN and CBCO community organizing models.

Therefore, I argue that effective radical organizing can simultaneously win immediate gains for oppressed communities and build the movement to transform systems of oppression. Organizing projects do not have to choose one or the other. Material self-interest is insufficient to create sustained movement participation. As emphasized by CBCO and City Life success

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51 The National Domestic Workers Alliance funding sources are unknown, but it has a larger budget than the Right to the City Alliance or City Life/Vida Urbana, also suggesting that they have access to funding from some of the wealthiest foundations.
relative to ACORN in terms of member retention, strong community, robust organizational
culture and identity, and moral righteousness are essential. This community, culture, and identity
will be strengthened, not weakened, through an intersectional analysis and anti-oppressive
practices. In a context where the ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility are so
powerful, a Freirean political education is essential for cultivating a more structural analysis and
feeling of moral righteousness among the base. Both objective elements— a critical analysis,
organizational power, and successful results (which are obtained through militant direct action)—
and subjective elements—participatory structures and practices, and organizers and leaders
connected to the base by their habitus—are essential. Leadership development of the base is
crucial so that these two elements can exist side by side.

The failure of particular attempts at radical community organizing in the 1960s does not
mean that radical organizing cannot be done. They did not fail because they were radical, but
because of other mistakes. The failure of sectarian organizing was due to its sectarianism, not its
radical ideological critique. SDS’s and SNCC’s shortcomings were their abandonment of the
idea of leadership and the importance of effective action to reach collectively desired goals in
favor of a romanticized notion of the inherent abilities of community members to decide
everything for themselves. City Life/Vida Urbana is a part of a rapidly growing trend of
transformative organizing, as exemplified by the recent emergence and growth of organizations
such as Domestic Workers United and Occupy our Homes on the local and regional levels and
the Right to the City Alliance and National Domestic Workers Alliance on the national level
(Goldberg 2010). The emerging transformative organizing movement has learned from and
improved on the shortcomings and strengths of past organizing efforts--Leftist, Alinskyist, and
neo-Alinskyist alike.
TOWARDS A COUNTER-HEGEMONY

Community is the everyday terrain on which ideology and common sense is formed, and thus where counter-hegemonic consciousness and movements are built. Transformative organizing is transformative not only for what it does to society, but what it does to the individual participating in it. The process of transformation that individuals go through by participating in this radical community organizing—from coming to an organization primarily out of material self-interest with the intention of receiving a limited service to staying for the long-term based on the ideology of radical collective justice and the joining of a community and culture of solidarity—must be described as a counter-hegemonic transformation. The case of City Life/Vida Urbana thus reveals several lessons about counter-hegemonic struggle. It demonstrates that a counter-hegemony works to transform both consciousness and habitus by combining new explicit views of the world with new embodied experiences that help produce and reproduce that worldview. Oppression must be addressed as felt and experienced in the routine of daily life; in order to transform hegemony we must go through common sense rather than around it. A counter-hegemony is not built by individuals and then “transmitted” to others, nor is it a matter of abstract thought or discourse. It is a collective product forged among a group through shared solidaristic analysis, culture, struggles, and victories (Resnick and Bix 2013). Organic intellectuals are crucial for this process and have both objective and subjective qualities. They have leadership skills and a theoretically powerful critical analysis, yet have experience and a habitus which allows them to relate this theory to the concrete lived experience of oppression and communicate this theory to others with this experience and habitus.
Organizational Recommendations

My strongest suggestion is for City Life to continue and develop its work with youth or young adults, an area of organizing emphasized by some other transformative community organizations such as POWER. Young people have historically been integral parts of movements for social change, and are often more open to radical ideology (STORM 2004). Helping to develop a younger generation of transformative organizers to carry on the struggle in the future is also crucial. Continuing to be an internship site for the City School’s Summer Leadership Program would be a positive step, as would be attempting to keep summer interns involved during their school year. City Life could make a greater effort to encourage members to bring their families (including children) and friends to meetings. Given Stryker’s (2000) emphasis on the importance of having relationships within movements for movement commitment, this could also help tie patents to the organization. Carolyn’s delight at having her child integrated into the movement, and the obvious commitment that it brings, would probably be reflective of many parents. While daycare is already provided, City Life could attempt to develop practices that more fully integrate children into the movement. For example, while their parents are participating in meetings, children might be encouraged to develop a skit about City Life. This skit could then be performed at meetings. An example of an organization that greatly integrates youth and adult family members into their organizing is Inner City Struggle in East Los Angeles.  

Another suggestion I have for binding members more strongly to the organization is formalization of a (sliding scale) dues-paying official membership conferring rights, benefits

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52 Inner City Struggle’s website: http://innercitystruggle.org/section/view/home
and/or responsibilities. This is a practice common to other, both transformative and neo-Alinskyist, base-building organizations as a way to help people feel ownership over and responsibility to an organization.

City Life could also put a greater emphasis on orienting new members to the group. At a leadership meeting I attended while at City Life, the question of the orientation came up during a discussion of how City Life could make sure more people who show up to one meeting come back and get integrated into the group. Williams (2013) explains that POWER developed a new member orientation after hearing from new members that they spent many meetings unclear what was happening and why. He observes, “Creating structures like the new member orientation and communicating their functions help to demystify the organization and what it means to be an active member of POWER” (p. 13). The problem of new members being initially confused by group practices is likely an issue for City Life as well. City Life officially has a new member orientation before their BTA meetings. In practice, however, new people seem to not show up until or after the BTA meeting starts. If people do show up early, it appears to me that they’re more likely to get a quick description of the group instead of systematic orientation, since everyone is usually busy getting ready for the upcoming meeting. Without a proper orientation, City Life’s close-knit community might actually make it less likely that newer members feel integrated into the group. While experienced members are always quick to talk with new attendees and try to make them feel welcome, the fact that BTA practices are so ritualistic and so well known to older members might make new attendees feel like outsiders.

Suggestions for addressing the issue of retaining members after their first meeting ranged from making new member orientations more explicit and mandatory to resuming a discontinued practice in which City Life organizer Jim Brooks would do a breakout orientation session in the
middle of the meeting with all new people. The group decided that this latter practice might be resumed with the addition of several experienced member-leaders present to assist. Having other member-leaders present seems like a positive addition, as new attendees will feel more comfortable when first discussing the group with other people who were previously in their position. Another form of orientation might be a buddy system in which a new attendee is paired with an experienced member. The buddies could be given time to speak for a few minutes at the first meeting, which would provide the new member with an instant interpersonal relationship. The buddies could exchange contact information, so the new attendee could call the experienced member with any questions. In addition, the new attendee could receive follow up calls from someone they knew, volunteering to answer any questions and encouraging them to return to subsequent meetings. A buddy system would also provide important leadership development opportunities for more experienced members.

Ken, a member of City Life, suggested that there was additional potential for artistic cultural practices to strengthen community and solidarity—possibly including more collaboration with artistic allies such as the artist who helped City Life create its props and developed a puppet show with and about them. Smaller BTA branches might find it very helpful to incorporate music into meetings, perhaps as a regular meeting ritual. Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson members greatly enjoy singing several versus of “We Shall Not be Moved” every meeting. However, singing might be too unwieldy and time consuming for bigger groups and/or groups that have trouble keeping their meetings to the appropriate length. For example, members greatly enjoyed the skits that took place while I was there. Community might also be strengthened through pursing services along the lines of what POWER offered in 2006 when it used an open room in their office for a somatics (psychological health) practitioner to work with
members and staff who wanted help addressing trauma (Williams 2013). The spirit of this example might prove useful for thinking about City Life might be able to further support the combating of alienation and suffering among its members.

There are also several suggestions worth making in regards to political education and leadership development. Skits and other artistic projects are important tools for communicating, as well as creating participation in and interest in, political education. City Life is already working to the limit of its capacity, but it would be optimal for the organization to reproduce Radical Organizing Classes and even the Radical Organizing Conference regardless of whether any one staff member (or ideally any staff member) is available to organize them. Working towards this goal would itself be a significant process of political education and leadership development. Perhaps this could happen through the Leadership Team forming a Political Education committee that is responsible for working with staff to prepare and hold Radical Organizing Classes and Radical Organizing Conferences. This could also be one of the responsibilities of the already existing Executive Committee. I hope that all of these suggestions are helpful in some way to City Life/Vida Urbana’s effort to develop long-term members in the transformative organizing movement.
APPENDIX 1

City Life’s Bank Tenant Association & Tenant Organizing Meeting

AGENDA: June 11, 2013

Mission Statement: City Life/ Vida Urbana is committed to fighting for economic justice and racial, social and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systematic change and transform society.

**Attention!!!: Attorney numbers will now be given out from 6-7pm**

Please come on time and ask for a number to see an attorney. However, we do ask that you return to the meeting after.

1. Welcome/ Mission Statement
   Member (5 min – 6:30)

2. Pictures from Minimum Wage hearing
   Michael (5 min – 6:35)

3. New Member and Visitor Introductions & New Staff Announcement/Welcome
   John/Mary (25 min – 7:00)
   - We introduce the sword. Is this your first meeting? New members stand and briefly tell us your name and bank
   - Any other members can flag some new development in their case for discussion with organizers
   - Why it is important to sign in at the door and update your information with us
   - New member orientation is held at City Life on Tuesday and Thursday from 5-6pm

4. The Sword and Shield in action!!!
   Maria (25 min – 7:25)
   Northside BTA barbecue a big success last Wednesday (we should do that?) – 1
   Fanjul/Freddie update: Court with Olivé last Thursday – planning for a blockade?! - 5
   City Life marched in Pride parade on the weekend – 1
   Coming up: Report from Minimum Wage hearing today (Patti and Lyn testified) – 5
   Report from Minimum Wage hearing today (Patti and Lyn testified) – 5
   John Wyche new jazz night “Elevated” Juneteenth weekend – What is Juneteenth? - 3

5. YOU MAKE THE MOVEMENT WORK!!!!
   Carolyn/Ken (10 min – 7:35)
   A Healthy movement – Thanks in advance for your contribution
   Why do we do this? Take an envelope to become a member if you are giving $10 or more. Pass the basket.
   Contribute only if you can. If you need change, we'll make change after the meeting.
   Outreach: Phone calls- Mon – Fri anytime between 10am-6pm
   Volunteers: Food serving at next BTA meeting
   Canvass: Going out this week - Saturday
   Lawyers begin calling numbers. Break out group for City Realty fighters

6. Media literacy. What are we passing out today.
   Sue (5 min – 7:40)

7. Political discussion: The upcoming Radical Organizing Conference
   Cynthia/Antonio (30 min- 8:10)
   Tony Jones says “We’re radical. But why not. We’re under attack!” The next R.O.C.
   Next time: The Boston Mayoral race and the Right to the City Vote platform.

8. Evaluation and reflection
   (5 min – 8:15)
   Next meetings: JP, 6-18 and 6-25; E. Boston, (28 Paris St.) 6-12 and 6-19; Brockton (65 W. Elm St.) 6-12

   Articles/handouts available tonight:
   “Checks on way from lenders” Boston Globe, 6-5-13.
   “N.Y. suit says lenders violate foreclosure rules” Boston Globe 6-5-13
   “As Bradley Manning Trial Begins, Press Predictably Misses the Point” Rolling Stone, Matt Taibbi, 6-7-13
City Life’s Bank Tenant Association & Tenant Organizing Meeting

AGENDA: June 25, 2013

Mission Statement: City Life/ Vida Urbana is committed to fighting for economic justice and racial, social and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systematic change and transform society.

**Attention!!!**: Attorney numbers will now be given out from 6-7pm**

Please come on time and ask for a number to see an attorney. However, we do ask that you return to the meeting after.

1. Welcome/ Mission Statement
   Member (6:35 – 5 min)

2. Video of the vigil to defend Charlene and Claudette Juice. June 18.
   (6:40 – 5 min)

3. New Member and Visitor Introductions & New Staff Announcement
   John/Jim (6:45 – 15 min)
    We introduce the sword. Is this your first meeting? New members stand and briefly tell us your name and bank
    Any other members can flag some new development in their case for discussion with organizers
    Why it is important to sign in at the door and update your information with us
    New member orientation is held at City Life on Tuesday and Thursday from 5-6pm

4. The Sword and Shield in action!!
   Antonio (7:00 – 25 min)
   Reports:
   Min. Wage campaign – Patti Federico repping City Life in nat’l mtg June 25! (1)
   Statehouse hearing on just cause eviction for homeowners June 19 – Jule and Dominick testified (2)
   Four Corners COHIF training on code enforcement June 19 (AE, McB, and many others -2)
   Puppet theater in NYC over the weekend (Ken-3)
   Action for immigrant rights at Suffolk Detention Center. More actions coming (Andres, McB-3)
   Coming up: Fannie/Freddie – planning Brockton action July 11, Homes for All lawsuit to be filed July 9
   planning visit by Fannie/Freddie VP’s Sept. 7 or Sept. 14 (SM-3)
   City Realty/Inventors – Vigil for Yvette Jocelyn in Everett (4-6 pm; see flyer) (5)
   Support for Local 615 – security officers. June 26, Berklee Center, 4pm (2)
   Victory announcements?

5. YOU MAKE THE MOVEMENT WORK!!
   Carolyn L/Ken (7:25 – 10 min)
   A Healthy movement – Thanks in advance for your contribution
   Why do we do this? Take an envelope to become a member if you are giving $10 or more. Pass the basket.
   Contribute only if you can. If you need change, we’ll make change after the meeting.
   Outreach:
   Phone calls- Mon – Fri anytime between 10am-6pm
   Volunteers:
   Who can serve food at next BTA meeting?
   Canvass:
   This weekend
   J Bix study:
   Volunteers to be interviewed
   Focus Group:
   Help City Life improve our communications with our members
   Lawyers begin calling numbers.

6. Media literacy.
   Sue/Mike (7:35 – 10 min)

7. Political discussion: Immigrant rights. Includes BAJE video
   Andres and McB (7:45 – 30 min)
   Next time: The Boston Mayoral race and the Right to the City Vote platform.

8. Evaluation and reflection
   Next meetings: JP, 7-2 and 7-9; E. Boston, (28 Park St.) 7-10; Brockton (65 W. Elm St.) 6-26 and 7-10
   (8:15 – 5 min)

Articles/handouts available tonight:
“What a wage is worth,” Boston Globe, 6-18-13
“The Reemergence of Housing Bubbles: Should We Be Worried,” Dean Baker, Project Syndicate, 6-13-13
City Life’s Bank Tenant Association & Tenant Organizing Meeting

AGENDA: July 2, 2013

Mission Statement: City Life/ Vida Urbana is committed to fighting for economic justice and racial, social and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systematic change and transform society.

**Attention!!!**: You can talk to an attorney or get a number to see one at 6 pm. If no court case talk to an organizer. **Please come on time and ask for a number to see an attorney. However, we do ask that you return to the meeting after.**

1. Welcome/ Mission Statement Member (6:35 – 5 min)

2. Vision statement!
   Think about the connections between this statement and the protests happening around the world. (6:40 – 5 min)

3. New Member and Visitor Introductions & New Staff Announcement Ray/Mary (6:45 – 15 min)
   ❖ We introduce the sword. Is this your first meeting? New members stand and briefly tell us your name and bank
   ❖ Any other members can flag some new development in their case for discussion with organizers
   ❖ Why it is important to sign in at the door and update your information with us
   ❖ New member orientation is held at City Life on Tuesday from 5-6pm

4. The Sword and Shield in action!!! Antonio (7:00 – 25 min)
   Reports:
   - Auction protests for Tamika Smith and Jeanette Ward-Carpenter (3)
   - Protest/vigil for Yvette Jocelyn – Northside BTA (Attendees-3)
   - Comite Latino meeting 6-27 (DF-2)
   - Birgit video of canvassing. What is Birgit doing?? (AE & Birgit-3)
   Coming up:
   - Tamika Smith auction protest Friday, July 5, 11 am (2)
   - City Realty/Investors – court vigils and possible other actions coming up (1 – see discussion)
   - Fannie/Freddie – Homes for All lawsuit to be filed July 9. We will support at our meeting. (2)
   - planning Brocton action July 18 to pressure Freddie Mac (1)
   - planning visit by Fannie/Freddie VP’s Sept. 7 or Sept. 14 (SM-1)
   - Public Broadcasting sending a documentary film crew to City Life July 16 meeting. Turnout! (1)
   Victory announcements. David Jules – a breakthrough? (SM-3)

5. YOU MAKE THE MOVEMENT WORK!!!! Carolyn/L/Ken (7:25 – 10 min)
   A Healthy movement – Thanks in advance for your contribution
   Why do we do this? Take an envelope to become a member if you are giving $10 or more. Pass the basket.
   Contribute only if you can. If you need change, we’ll make change after the meeting.
   Outreach: Phone calls- Mon – Fri anytime between 10am-6pm
   Volunteers: Who can serve food at next BTA meeting?
   J Bix study: Volunteers to be interviewed
   Lawyers begin calling numbers. Break out meeting for new members.

6. Media literacy. Sue (7:35 – 5 min)

7. Political discussion: City Realty and fighting the investors. Know your renters’ rights! Maria/Steve (7:40 – 30 min)
   Next time: The Boston Mayoral race and the Right to the City Vote platform.

8. Evaluation and reflection (8:10 – 5 min)
   Next meetings: JP, 7-9 and 7-16; E. Boston, (28 Paris St.) 7-10; Brockton (65 W. Elm St.) 7-10

   Articles/handouts available tonight:
   “After Two Months, Moral Monday Protests Swell to Largest Yet,” Common Dreams, Portside 6-25-13
   “US is a segregated joint on marijuana,” Boston Globe, 6-29-13
   “Déjà vu: Are we creating the next housing bubble?” Boston Globe 6-30-13
   “Citigroup to pay Fannie Mae $968m for peddling toxic loans,” Boston Globe, 7-2-13
City Life’s Bank Tenant Association & Tenant Organizing Meeting
AGENDA: July 9, 2013

**Mission Statement:** City Life/ Vida Urbana is committed to fighting for economic justice and racial, social and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systematic change and transform society.

**Attention!!!** You can talk to an attorney or get a number to see one at 6 pm. If no court case talk to an organizer.** Please come on time and ask for a number to see an attorney. However, we do ask that you return to the meeting after.

1. **Welcome/Mission Statement**
   - Our basic method
   - Member: Jim

2. **New Member and Visitor Introductions**
   - Ray/Mary: (6:45 – 20 min)
   - We introduce the sword. Is this your first meeting? New members stand and briefly tell us your name and bank
   - Any other members can flag some new development in their case for discussion with organizers
   - New Staff Announcement: Introducing Andres Del Castillo, new Northside organizer
   - News about Sue: sign the card
   - It is important to sign in at the door and update your information with us. That helps our funding!

3. **The Sword and Shield in action!!!**
   - Antonio: (7:00 – 5 min)
   - Reports: Auction protests for Tamika Smith. Bank took it back. Now we fight the bank! (1)
   - Fannie/Freddie action July 18 to pressure Freddie Mac
   - Nomination hearings for Mel Watt to replace Ed DeMarco
   - Planning visit by Fannie/Freddie VP’s Sept. 14
   - Public Broadcasting sending a documentary film crew to City Life July 16 meeting. Turnout! (1)
   - Rally to support raising the minimum wage July 24 (1)
   - Victory announcements. Norma Graham – she won, and she’s still thinking of us (2)

4. **Homes For All.** Lawsuit demands Fannie-Freddie contribute to Housing Trust Fund as promised. (7:05 – 30 min)
   - New chant!: Fannie Mae, Fannie Might, Fannie Will, IF WE FIGHT!
   - David Jules – a breakthrough?

   **Lawyers begin calling numbers. Break out meeting for new members.**

5. **YOU MAKE THE MOVEMENT WORK!!!!**
   - Carolyn L/Ken (7:35 – 10 min)
   - A Healthy movement – Thanks in advance for your contribution
   - Why do we do this? Take an envelope to become a member if you are giving $10 or more. Pass the basket.
   - Contribute only if you can. If you need change, we’ll make change after the meeting.
   - Outreach: Phone calls- Mon – Fri anytime between 10am-6pm
   - Volunteers: Who can serve food at next BTA meeting?
   - Canvassing: Saturday

6. **New City Life program.** What it is and what is isn’t. Initial questions. More next week. Steve (7:45 – 5 min)

7. **Political discussion:** Video clip from Brooklyn performance by Agitarte (and our Ken!) (7:50 – 20 min)

8. **Evaluation and reflection**
   - Next meetings: JP, 7-9 and 7-16; E. Boston, (28 Parke St.) 7-10; Brockton (65 W. Elm St.) 7-10

   **Articles/handouts available tonight:**
   - Press advisory from City Life for Homes For All Rally Tonight
APPENDIX 2

Review: Why We Have A Leadership Team. To look at:

**Training**
- Political discussion about the crisis and what's causing it
- Technical training in legal rights
- Organizing training in how to build a movement

**Help organize**
- Help staff build the bank tenant movement by reviewing things like:
  - Designing agendas – doing facilitation and presentation
  - How to do protests and actions
  - How we involve people. How we relate to other organizations and efforts
  - How we combine work on individual cases and changing the system.

**Bank Tenant Ass. Leadership Team – Agenda – 6-28-13 – 6:30-8:30 pm**

1. **Welcome.** Review of purpose of the meeting above. (10) 6:30
   **Introductions/check in.** During check-in, what word best describes your feelings about the movement Ground rules – Step up. Step back. WAIT (stands for “why am I talking?”). Chair acts for us all!

2. **Welcome to Andres, new Northside organizer**
   (5) 6:40

3. **Decisions: developing Leadership Team meetings & building a movement**
   **Approved** – Leadership Teams will meet one Friday a month separately to plan local stuff
   One Sat. a month with other teams to plan common themes (bring this idea to other BTA LT’s)
   One Saturday every 3-4 months, other non-CLVU NEW ROAD chapters invited
   Also, every other Friday during the day – Lead Organizers plus 1 member-leader
   **Approved** – created 3-person elected “executive committeee” to make decisions w/ staff between meetings – first Ex. Team will be Brandon, Lovely, Heather
   **Approved** – support for another Radical Organizing Conf. Aug. 10 featuring Ear to the Ground Project
   (10) 6:45

4. **Radical Organizing Conference August 10. What’s this about?**
   Suppose “Moral Mondays” becomes the next Occupy. Are we ready?
   Radical Organizing conference planning meetings: July 8, 6 pm. Also July 19, August 2
   Radical Organizing conference discussion group for Leadership Team members, same dates, 7 pm
   (20) 6:55

5. **Fannie-Freddie. A swirl of activity.**
   Nomination hearings begin for Mel Watt. What are the issues?
   Ongoing on the ground resistance on hot cases: Boston: Suero, Hendricks, Sealls
   Northside did vigil at Juicce’s June 18 (Olive spoke)
   Brockton: planning multi-site vigil July 11
   Lawsuit to be filed July 9. Plan to use July 9 meeting as support meeting for lawsuit.
   Lawsuit directs Fannie and Freddie to turn over portion of profits to National Housing Trust
   Major regional meeting coming with Fannie-Freddie through RJC. Proposed Sept. 7
   Proposed: Take F-F VPs on a tour of their property in Boston, vacant and occupied
   Proposed: Ongoing vigil/action of F-F fighters and supporters outside negotiations site
   Possible press conference with Sen. Warren
   Victory by David Jules shows power
   (30) 7:15

6. **Retaining new members.** New members often come once and not again.
   How can we set up the BTA meeting to retain a higher number of new members
   (25) 7:45

7. **Evaluation.** Next meeting would be July 12. Next chair should be member of Ex Cmte.
   Proposed meetings coming up. Friday – July 12, SATURDAY – July 27 (joint meeting)
   (5) 8:10

8. **Meeting ends**
   8:15
Review: Why We Have A Leadership Team. To look at:

**Training**
- Political discussion about the crisis and what’s causing it
- Technical training in legal rights
- Organizing training in how to build a movement

**Help organize**
- Help staff build the bank tenant movement by reviewing things like:
  - Designing agendas – doing facilitation and presentation
  - How to do protests and actions
  - How we involve people. How we relate to other organizations and efforts
  - How we combine work on individual cases and changing the system.

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**Bank Tenant Ass. Leadership Team – Agenda – 7-12-13 – 6:30-8:30 pm**

1. **Welcome.** Review of purpose of the meeting above. (10) 6:30
   - Introductions/check in. During check-in, what word best describes your feelings about the movement
   - Ground rules – Step up. Step back. WAIT (stands for “why am I talking?”). Chair acts for us all!

   - Minimum wage rally July 24, in Boston and Brockton. (10) 6:40

3. **Decisions: developing Leadership Team meetings & building a movement** (25) 6:50
   - **Approved** – Leadership Teams will meet one Friday a month separately to plan local stuff
   - One Sat. a month with other teams to plan common themes (bring this idea to other BTA LT’s)
   - One Saturday every 3-4 months, other non-CLVU NEW ROAD chapters invited
   - The NEXT meeting of the Leadership Team will be a joint meeting on Saturday, July 27, 10 am to 2/3pm
   - Possible topics for discussion
   - a) Why build a common movement? One exciting development and one difficult problem from each BTA.
   - b) The movement is even bigger than foreclosure. The next Radical Organizing Conference.
   - c) How can we do it all? Training volunteer staff (Displacement Defenders).
   - e) Forming committees across BTA’s. For instance, a Haitian Kreyol Committee?
   - f) Next joint meeting: The Sword, the Shield… the Offer? Working with BCC or other banks.

4. **From crisis to changing the system! How does it all fit together?** (25) 7:15
   - The crisis of capitalism grows deeper. It creates havoc in our lives.
   - People with housing and foreclosure related “cases” come to City Life.
   - We turn many of those “cases” into “struggles”, battles that build a movement.
   - We combine many of those struggles into “campaigns”, which enhance the struggles’ effect.
   - The struggles and campaigns generate new fighters and new leaders. The struggle is a school!
   - New leaders get trained – at meetings, in Rad. Org. Courses, at the Radical Organizing Conferences
   - Trained leaders from different campaigns form a movement of movements. The Aug. 10 ROC.
   - This happens in many cities, a national social change movement develops – Liberation!

5. **Radical Organizing Conference August 10. What’s this about?** (15) 7:40
   - Leading up to the conference – planning meetings, discussion groups.
   - What happens at the conference? Steve and NTanya coming in. Reception at CLVU Aug. 9?

6. **Retaining new members.** New members often come once and not again. (25) 7:55
   - We developed a long list of possible steps.
   - Decided to implement new member breakout again. How did that go the last two BTA mtgs?

7. **Evaluation.** Next meeting SATURDAY, July 27. (10) 8:20
   - Ex. Cmte, members will organize facilitation for joint meeting.

8. **Meeting ends** 8:30
APPENDIX 3

Radical organizing methods – Fall, 2012
Course outline

This course is designed to review basic elements of radical organizing methods. Participants will be encouraged to take the course with the idea of teaching the various pieces or “modules”. We expect that material covered will be presented by some participants at BTA meetings during October and November. In other words, this course is designed to create more teachers of radical organizing methods.

Session 1 – Oct. 5 – The coming election and why American democracy doesn’t serve the needs of the 99%.

Module 1. City Life has periodically posed the question, “If we live in a democracy, why do we have to organize?” This session will start by looking at the difference between democracy and democratic rights, then move toward consideration of the limitations of American democracy, including limitations connected to structure and money. There will be a couple of short readings looking at our democracy.

“Here’s who is buying America’s democracy” Hightower Lowdown
“Just try voting here: 11 of America’s worst places to cast a ballot (or try)” Abramsky, Mother Jones
“Big government isn’t the problem. Big money is.” Robert Reich, The Nation
“Fleeing the angry whites.” Party, Consortium News

Module 2. We will discuss the coming election. What is at stake? Does Obama’s presidency and candidacy service the needs of the 99%? Why or why not? If it does not, do we have a stake in the election? We will look at the attached article

The 2012 Elections Have Little To Do With Obama’s Record - Which Is Why We Are Voting For Him
The 2012 election will be one of the most polarized and critical elections in recent history by Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Carl Davidson

Module 3. What do we make of Romney’s assertion that 47% of the population is dependent on the government and that he doesn’t have to worry about them (us?). What’s wrong with this view? The 1% are portrayed by the right as “job creators”; they already pay more in taxes because they earn more. What’s wrong with this view? We’ll engage in some friendly debate.

“Sponsor of Pennsylvania’s Voter ID Law Says 47% Shouldn’t Get to Vote” Alternet 9-20-12


There will be a number of newspaper articles on these issues, especially regarding the attack on the standard of living of the working class, communities of color, and women. See below. We will include an article by Lebowitz about why workers allow this to continue:

“What keeps capitalism going?” Michael Lebowitz, Monthly Review
We will also include articles critical of Obama and Warren – we should be able to respond

“Thanks, Obama, but wealth is not theft.” Jeff Jacoby, Boston Globe 5-6-12
“An Economics Lesson for Warren,” Tom Keane, Boston Globe 11-12-11

Module 1. We will do an exercise showing the difference between how incomes grew during the 30 years after World War II and how incomes have grown or stagnated during the last 30 years. Income inequality has been widening. Why is this? Why does it matter?
Participants will be provided the tools of this module, which are produced by United for Fair Economy

“Off-the-charts Income Gains for Super Rich” Zachary Roth, The Lookout 4-8-11
"We're City Lifers"

“Stunning Income Inequality Data of the Day” Campaign for America’s Future 5-3-12
“CEO’s to workers; More for Me, less for You” Holly Sklar, Common Dreams 7-5-11
“Study shows racial wealth gap grows wider” Pam Fessler, NPR 7-26-11
“What we know about wealth” Michael Norton, Right Now
“Class conflict awareness rose significantly from 2009 to 2011: Report” Huffington Post 1-11-12

Module 2. How are wages set under capitalism? What is the reserve army of labor and how is it used to keep wages low? How does the working class respond to this dilemma? How does the ruling class respond to our response?

Exercise on setting wages. We’ll do this exercise and we’ll go over how to do it.

Module 3. “Supply and demand” is often repeated as a “mantra”. What does it mean? What is the “invisible hand”? What’s wrong with this theory?

Steve’s criticisms about the “law” of supply and demand – from Radical Organizing Conf 3-17-12

Module 4. Speculation. Even if you assume that normal capitalist activity is exploitation (see the modules above), speculation and speculative bubbles take a step beyond this exploitation. What are speculative bubbles? How has capitalism become “financialized?” How did this lead to the banking crisis.


Session 3 – Nov. 2 – Organize! Our response is radical organizing

There will be readings in this session on radical organizing, including City Life’s view of radical organizing, a paper showing 3 examples of radical analysis and how that led to radical organizing, our radical organizing call, a paper on 3 examples of anti-foreclosure organizing, and a paper by Robert Fisher on radical organizing.

Module 1. What is organizing? We will do an exercise comparing it to other activities, including providing services, doing advocacy, lobbying for policy change, and doing community development. Participants will be provided with the material for leading this discussion.

Module 2. What is radical organizing? City Life describes itself as a base-building group. What does that mean? How do we combine services, advocacy and organizing in order to organize those directly affected? Is being radical kind of like being liberal on steroids?

Module 3. What is a worldview? What is City Life’s worldview? How does our worldview link to commonly held values among the publics? What are examples of those values – how do some benefit us and others undermine our struggle? How do we “frame” our struggle in a way that connects to commonly held values that are in line with our worldview? We will do an exercise on worldview, values, and frame.

Module 4. Leadership Development. How does City Life organizing address (or fail to address) 4 elements of leadership development – (a) skill development, (b) understanding, forming and using radical analysis, (c) mastering organizing methods and campaign development, (d) creating space for discussions of spirituality and morality.

“How markets do moral damage” Boston Globe 5-27-12

Session 4 – Nov. 16 – going to scale. How do we build a movement that challenges capitalism, and pillars of capitalism such as white supremacy and male supremacy?

Articles relevant to both modules will be offered:
“Consciousness and Morality in the Struggle” Meacham unprinted paper January 2010
"Where we've been, where we're at, where we're going" City Life paper
"Bring them and it will be built" City Life paper
"New folks on the historic bloc – workers centers and municipal socialism" Liss and Staples
"Workers Ownership for the 21st century?" Laura Flanders
"There is no substitute for Organizing: How unions might help win future battles"
The left project in Boston – paper by Meacham and Peters

Module 1. What is a "left group?" What is the history of the left in America? What does a left
group demand? The natural demand of the left has been socialism as alternative to capitalism. What
are different definitions of socialism or other anti-capitalist ideas?

Module 2. A left group usually has a high level of unity. A base building group, even a radical
one like City Life, invites anyone who wants to fight. How should a left group relate respectfully to a
base-building group? Why are both needed to build a radical movement? We will look at an article
about Syriza, the new Greek radical movement, as an example.

OR
Looking at racial oppression. What is the link to class oppression in capitalism?

We have looked at the 99%-1% frame, which is a class frame. We want to speak to differences
within the 99% in order to build the broadest possible front. A very prominent difference within the
99% is race. We will present as readings a number of theoretical articles on racial oppression, both
oppression of African Americans and the special form it takes through the fight around immigration.

Module 1. What is the origin of racial oppression and white supremacy in the US? What is the
difference between racism as individual prejudice and institutional racism? Is there "white privilege" –
if so, how does the white working class react? What is the relationship between institutional racism and
class oppression within capitalism? What is the way forward? Does City Life handle this correctly?
"The Road not taken" Chapter from The Shaping of Black America
"The Cost of Privilege" chart from a book by that name
"Tracking the Miner's Canary" Lani Guinier, Race and Power, Summer 2002
"Seize the Initiative, Take back the Cities" Black Commentator 7-29-04
"Globalization and Racialization" Manning Marable, 8-13-04
"Visualizing a Neo-Rainbow" Bill Fletcher and Danny Glover, The Nation 2-14-05
Ten Point Plan of the Black Panther Party

Module 2. We are all immigrants except native Americans. As Byron Rushing commented, the
only people who came here fully documented were slaves — so much for documentation. What is the
goal of the ruling class when it comes to immigration? How does that fit into the idea of the reserve
army of labor? What should our position be? What is the way forward? Does City Life handle this
correctly?
"Indentured Servants in America, NY Times 3-12-07
"Undocumented immigrants paid 11.2 billion in taxes last year; GE paid zero" NY Daily News 4-20-11
"How US Policies Fueled Mexico's great migration" Nation 1-4-12
"Farmer's vote could decide Mexico's fate" San Francisco Chronicle 6-25-06
"Immigrants face opposing gunmen of US Policy" Meacham, JP Gazette 5-26-06
"US farmer using prison labor" Christian Science Monitor 8-22-07
"Anti-immigrant in Blackface" Black Commentator
"Harder Times" Monthly Review July 2006
### Meeting 6.25-13 - Race oppression and capitalism

#### Articles for City Life course

This class has a number of “theoretical” articles. The topic calls for our exploring the relationship between oppression based on race, oppression based on class, and how US capitalism functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date and Source</th>
<th>Issues involved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Road Not Taken</td>
<td>Chapter in <em>The Shaping of Black America</em></td>
<td>Describes how the creation of white supremacy was a conscious decision to preserve profit</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Cost of Privilege</td>
<td>From a book by that name</td>
<td>Statistics on white privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tracking the miner’s canary</td>
<td>Race and Power Summer, 2002</td>
<td>Lani Guinier talks about how the experience of people of color should be a miner’s canary, a warning of what is to come for all working class folks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seize the Initiative; Take the Cities</td>
<td>Black Commentator 7—29-04</td>
<td>The battle for the City is a front line of the war with the rich. And we can win it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization and Raialization</td>
<td>ZNet 8-13-04</td>
<td>The current structure of power rests on mass unemployment, incarceration, and disenfranchisement of people of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizing a Neo-Rainbow</td>
<td>Nation 2-14-05</td>
<td>Keep one foot inside and one foot outside electoral politics to make change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten Point Plan</td>
<td>Black Panther Party</td>
<td>Why wouldn’t anyone agree with this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How radical organizing and multiple oppressions affects our work</td>
<td>Meacham draft</td>
<td>Draft discussion of City Life’s organizing practice with regard to multiple oppressions – race, class, gender, sexual preference</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Detailed outline of Session 7 – session on race: organizing Brockton BTA leadership

What we’ve covered so far
1. How are wages set under capitalism? Why does commonly produced wealth go to the 1%
   Exercise of the quintiles. Exercise of those with jobs and one unemployed.
   The concept of the Reserve Army of Labor
2. Video of wealth gap in America. Video of global wealth gap
3. Immigration and the reserve army of labor. The story of Robin Hood.
   Robin Hood and the minimum wage.
   The implications of the minimum wage for market ideology,
4. If we live in a democracy why do we have to organize?
   The role of money, structure, media, private power in undermining democracy.
   A capital general strike.
5. SaOLD exercise – housing, employment, health care – done together
   CLVU worldview? What is common sense in the street? How use framing to have elements of
   common sense support worldview?

Review “derived” and “inherent” ideology

Session 7 – Institutional racism. Its origins and its role today.
   First experience with racism – against yourself or others?
   Has street-level, racist attitudes gotten better?
   What is institutional racism? Has institutional racism gotten better?
   Does racism cause oppression or vice versa.
   Ideas about institutional racism
      History of Bacon’s rebellion.
      The cost of privilege
      The miner’s canary
      Defend the Cities
      Racialized class oppression

What’s next?
  ✤ Preparation discussion for the Radical Organizing Conference Aug. 10
  ✤ Displacement Defenders Training
  ✤ Brockton BTA Leadership Team

"We’re City Lifers"
Saturday, August 10, 2013
9:30 to 5:00 at SEIU/1199, 150 Mt. Vernon St. in Dorchester, MA
Near the JFK stop on the Red Line • Handicap accessible • Childcare provided • Coffee/Snacks/Lunch served • Spanish interpretation available • $10 donation suggested

Radical Organizing Conference, 2013 presents:

Boston LeftRoots

A one-day conference for Boston-area activists:

• who are interested in building a more unified, left-oriented “movement of movements”

• and who have participated in a study group to discuss “More Than We Imagined” at www.eartofthegroundproject.org

What will we do on August 10th?

• participate in a plenary, get report-backs from study groups, and hear from the authors of “More than We Imagined” -- NTanya Lee and Steve Williams

• join with others to come up with some steps for our movement so that we can grow to be greater than the sum of our parts, stronger, and more unified.
Study Guide for More Than We Imagined
(See the full report at www.eartothegroundproject.org)
In preparation for the Radical Organizing Conference, August 10, 2013

Meet the authors

NTanya Lee spent her teenage years organizing her peers against Ronald Reagan’s military aggression and attacks on poor families. She organized for racial and gender justice as a college student, and started the first LGBT student of color organization on campus. In NY and Michigan, she organized progressive alliances between working-class Black and Latino community organizations and white-led LGBT groups to fight a wave of anti-gay initiatives pushed by the Religious Right. For eleven years she worked with Coleman Advocates, which builds the power of Black and Latino families to win education, housing and budget justice in San Francisco.

Steve Williams gained experience organizing against poverty and homelessness with the Philadelphia Union of the Homeless and the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness. In 1997, Steve co-founded POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights), a community-based organization of low-income and working class tenants, transit riders and workers. Steve has been an active volunteer in various local, national and international social movements through his involvement with the World Social Forum process, Grassroots Global Justice, the Right to the City, San Francisco Rising and Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM).

What is “More Than We Imagined”?
“More Than We Imagined” is the final report of a year-long project called Ear to the Ground, co-directed by Steve Williams & NTanya Lee. Over nine months, more than 150 social justice organizers in 30 communities across the country were asked to reflect on the nature of this moment of history, their assessment of social justice forces, & what “the movement” should do to respond to the unique challenges & opportunities of this period.

What do we mean by “Left”?
In this report, the term “the Left” refers to people and political formations that seek to end systematic oppression such as capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and white supremacy.

Add discussion question: Would you add/subtract anything to this definition? If so, what?

Excerpt #1: An overall assessment (p. 14):
Across demographic categories, regional differences and issue sectors, there was a near-consensus about the basic balance of forces in the United States today: the Right remains ideologically dominant and politically powerful; the capitalist class continues to exert power manipulating the economic crisis to benefit their own interests rather than the interests of the 99%; and the Left is small, fragmented and weak by comparison. Participants shared several
examples of how the Right continues to shape the political environment, including the behavior of Democratic Party elected officials and insiders.

Discussion Question #1: What do you think of the authors' assessment above? What could the Left do now so that 5-10 years from now, the balance of power in the U.S. would be more in our favor?

Excerpt #2: Strengths and Weaknesses
Two of our most prominent strengths (p. 16):
1. 50% of participants noted that thousands of local, grassroots organizations and trade unions are organizing key constituencies of working class and communities of color. This level of organization did not exist fifteen years ago. These organizations identify and develop tens of thousands of grassroots community and worker leaders, training hundreds of movement organizers every year. Together, they wage campaigns and build power providing the organizational basis for communities across the country to resist attacks from the right, corporations and neoliberal forces.

2. 33% of participants shared the view that alliances of local organizations have begun to mature and are beginning to build bridges in promising ways. While some cautioned about the need to continue to focus on building local organizations, there was a widely shared optimism about the movement-building potential of grassroots networks and alliances like Grassroots Global Justice; National Domestic Worker Alliance; the Right to the City Alliance; Jobs with Justice; National Day Laborers Organizing Network; Alliance for a Just Society; and others. Unlike traditional national “grassroots” groups, these alliances harness the collective power of local organizations and establish important vehicles where these constituencies can exert power at a national and international level. Participants also pointed to exciting developments where these networks are building ongoing partnerships with long-standing networks like National People’s Action, the PICO National Network and the AFL-CIO.

There was biggest concern about these weaknesses (p. 17):
4. 60% said that our current organizational forms are insufficient. Trade unionists and community organizers all spoke to the limitations of existing organizational forms to address the structural nature of the current crisis alone.

5. 50% said the movement is fragmented. Across every demographic category, participants expressed frustration that our organizations and activists are so deeply isolated by geography, issue sector, identity or type of work. Many expressed confusion as to why attempts to forge national unity and coordination have been unsuccessful.

Discussion Question #2: Bouncing off of the above assessment of strengths and weaknesses on a national level, what are the 2-3 greatest strengths you see in our movements in Boston? And what are the 2-3 greatest weaknesses?

Excerpt #3: Interpersonal Issues and Movement Culture (p. 22):
When responding to the question “What should the movement feel like?” nearly every participant lit up. Virtually everyone fantasized about a movement that is inspiring and feels like ‘a true community’; many went so far as to say that it should be fun. Sadly, most said that their experience in movement work rarely reflects that vision. Participants acknowledged that the work of achieving social justice will be hard work, but not one participant said that the movement’s overall culture sustains them. Many participants said that they remain active despite the movement’s culture rather than because of it, or because of their particular organization’s efforts to challenge movement norms. The culture of our movement, while situated within the larger context of U.S. society, should aspire to do better than making hard work harder.

Some key problems with movement culture include:

- we think small; we self-marginalize
- racism and sexism within organizations and across organizations
- we are content to “fight the good fight” as opposed to figure out how to win
- we have a hard time with healthy dialog, debate and disagreement

“We have to take ourselves out of the boxes we are trained to be in and that the harshness of our experiences have locked us into. And then… We need to be real, honest, transparent and accountable in a meaningful way to each other. Right now we just aren’t able to give real feedback, reflect, deal with the tensions and BS that come up amongst groups and individuals, stuff that’s happened in the past that we haven’t quite gotten over, or differences between struggles or campaigns.” – Khalida Smalls (p. 24)

Discussion Question #3: Consider the problems that activists brought up about Movement Culture and/or the quote by Khalida Smalls. Do these problems resonate with you in your work? If these issues or similar issues exist in your work, brainstorm some ways we could make Boston’s movement culture healthier.

Excerpt #4: A Final Note (pp. 38-39):
It was an unimaginable joy to work on this project. We learned so much, and were inspired by the wisdom and work of so many people across this country.

We were also challenged. So many people said that this project filled what they saw as an important void in our movement. Each of those comments raised the stakes for us, and we hope that the product is useful as we all try to figure out the way forward for our movement.

One lesson that we take away from this project is the importance of resourcing cross-sectoral movement work. It was chance that we both left our positions at the same time and decided to collaborate on this project. At every stage, the work was more extensive than we had planned. It required dedicated attention to make sure that this phase of the project was completed. But building the movement of movements is too important to leave to chance.

We are convinced that the work of laying a solid foundation must be advanced. It needs to be attended to and supported by all individuals, organizations and sectors in the movement.
As this phase of the Ear to the Ground comes to a close, we have decided to prioritize one particular area of the work—to create a vehicle for leftists engaged in social movements to come together, to answer the hard questions of the day, while building community with one another. We're calling this project LeftRoots, and with comrades in the Bay Area and across the country, we hope to contribute to something that we think is absolutely critical—reigniting an engaged and engaging Left.

Throughout hundreds of years, the Left has played critical roles in the development of social movements in the United States and around the world. From the labor movement to the civil rights movement to the peace and anti-war movement, strong social movements have been strengthened by organized groupings of Leftists. For many reasons, including state repression and shifting world conditions, the Left in the United States has been unable, over the last few decades, to make the important contributions that are so essential to popular struggles against greed, corruption, environmental degradation, poverty, war and violations of human rights.

We believe that one of the most central challenges facing social movements is the absence of a strong Left, and we think that the conditions exist for a re-emergence of an engaged and engaging one. We believe that we can help to build a new kind of Left for our times, rooted in on-the-ground social movements; a Left that is compelling, relevant, rigorous, and visionary. This is partially true because so many of the participants we interviewed identified their politics as Left, but so many also mentioned feeling lost about how they might develop as a Leftist. So many of us are deeply rooted in the communities and sectors that have a vested interest in building a powerful movement of movements. For too long, we've been isolated. And yet, we keep plugging away, building the capacity of ordinary people to take control of our own destiny.

Together, we want to answer the hard questions, anchor our day-to-day organizing in a coherent set of ideas, and sharpen our collective capacity to do what it will really take in this country to win a better life for all of us. While we take the initial steps towards forming LeftRoots, we also hope that other such efforts take root.

We've all been practicing in our backyards, and it's now time to form a team. The last year demonstrates to us that this new team of Leftists engaged in social movement struggles is both necessary and possible given the large number of us out there.

Whether or not you're building the Left, we assume that you are reading this report because you are committed to building a world of peace, global justice, ecological sustainability and liberatory democracy. In whatever capacity you decide to invest your important insights and efforts, we look forward to working with you to build the movement of movements that all of humanity and the planet so desperately need and deserve.

Discussion Question #4: After reading the authors’ Final Note — or focusing on the paragraphs in italics — what is response to the idea of starting a version of “LeftRoots” in Boston? What would we need to have in place, who would need to be at the table, what would be the best conditions for getting something like this off the ground?
REFERENCES


Fisher, Robert, Yuseph Katiya, Christopher Reid, and Eric Shragge. 2013. “‘We Are Radical’: The Right to the City Alliance and the Future of Community Organizing.” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 40(1):157-82.


