

## Reflections on Community Organizing and Ballroom Dancing

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Community organizing like ballroom dancing is a conscious and creative undertaking. Its main nemeses are irrelevance and atrophy. The organizer must be like the dance instructor who does not view dancing as a routine work but as an act of creation and celebration. Today's organizers have been molded in a particular ideological crucible which demands one vision and line of action. The effects of this totalization of perspectives are so well-entrenched that new ideas are immediately suspect. If organizers are committed to effect societal change, they need to develop a world view that does not pretend to exhaust description and analysis. The challenge of reeducating them involves not only introducing them to other theories or modes of social analysis and paradigms of development but also finding out how old concepts could now lead to new actions. Organizers have simply begun to rediscover voices of history drowned out by louder ones. These voices are reasserting themselves in the current discourse. The revisitation of the humanities, especially the study of representations, could be an attempt to recapture such voices. After all, imagination allows us to see the moment and beyond.

The shared tradition of community organizing work in the Philippines has spanned over 25 years. Community organizing (CO) is a process of constant innovation and creation based on lessons from actual experience. Whatever the situation may be, the necessity of organizing people for power remains. The many changes and possibilities do not only offer fresh encouragement and potentials for organizing but also confront community organizers with complex challenges.

Through the years, CO has had considerable achievements in empowering communities and has contributed to the cumulative development of people's movements and coalitions that achieve both social and political power.

More importantly, CO discovers and develops the power that lies in ordinary people, of "the poor and the powerless" which like oil or water may be found deep inside the earth. It might take a while and a lot of persistent effort to release but it is there. This is combined with the fundamental faith of CO that ordinary people have the capacity to better their lives within existing structures and to participate in transforming these structures.

Empowerment, like art, has many different expressions and methods because it is a process of releasing the potential and creativity of people. The people's path to empowerment is a long and winding road. With the best of intentions and skills, we make mistakes and suffer defeats.

Lastly, community organizing like ballroom dancing (or if you want to go local, the "baile sa baryo") is a conscious and creative undertaking. Thus, the organizer must be like the dance instructor (DI) who does not look at dancing as a routinary work but as an act of creation and celebration.

For those of us who struggle and hope for change, we should know when and how to celebrate. The 20th anniversary of Community Organizing for People Empowerment (COPE) and the invitation to look at and listen to what it is doing is definitely such an occasion!

### **Organizers Need to Reimagine the World**

The object, Marx had declared, is to change the world and not merely to interpret it. The famous lines have assumed a mantric hum so pervasive that it is almost as commonplace as the Confucian golden rule. The boldness of the declaration, which lies on the insistence on praxis as ultimate discourse, has inspired generations of revolutionaries.

However, to borrow Michel Foucault's language, the only valid tribute to thought such as Marx's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And so let us begin with the long standing presumption of many Marxist practitioners that there is only one correct reading of the world and its history/ourstory. What if we turn this premise downside up. Consider: precisely because there is no single correct view of the world, but many correct views, to change the world becomes the only true challenge. Marx's call to action read against the plurality of the world and its history/ourstory assumes a profoundly timely meaning.

Organizing is a conscious creative undertaking, the main nemeses of which are irrelevance and atrophy. To be an organizer is not merely the inevitable fate of those who live in dangerous times. Organizers do not plunge blindly into the masses' arms. There was choice and free will in the leap. There was the moment of passion, of imagining of things as they should be. A potter proceeds with the deftness of her hands, the knowledge of the exact heat for a particular clay. Simultaneously, she maintains a complex mental correlation of earth, water, fire, pressure,

shapes and textures. She is able to twist and press, rotate and mold while constantly fashioning and refashioning the subject of her work. The organizer is just as creative as the potter.

Today, we have countless "Ming reproductionists" but too few workshop potters. We have hundreds of demolition teams but very few carpenters. Today's generation of organizers have been pounded and molded in a particular ideological crucible which demands one vision, one line of march. The effects of this totalization of perspectives are so well entrenched that new or "alien-sounding" ideas are immediately suspect. The depths of redundancy has reached scrape bottom for organizers who now feel burdened by the demands of organizing. They now see it as work, as routinary steps they could breeze through half awake. The act of creation has become boring.

Organizers committed to changing the world need to develop "a perspective of the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis" (H. White). Agents of change need to be reminded constantly that the world changes in ways that challenge their fundamental view of it. This lesson has been hammered only too painfully by the reversals suffered by radical praxis and thought in the last 50 years. A rigid, inflexible view of the world has been known also to kill the spirit. First, it takes away humor and then, it is imagination's turn at the block.

The challenge of re-educating organizers involve not only introducing them to other theories or modes of social analysis and paradigms of developments. We need to take a step backward and assume that organizers have in them interpretative codes or a "mind set" tempered by their particular praxis and theoretical idiosyncrasies. It is this mind set that tells the subject whether a particular idea is friendly or not.

The challenge is: how to create a space within the particular mainframe that is the organizer's mind so that new messages could be received. This human mind-mainframe analogy may be potentially dangerous but, nevertheless, it approximates the main point which is to find out how organizers will be able to appropriate what appears to be "new" concepts. The Left crisis in praxis and theory which we are experiencing/witnessing have long commenced and "old" ideas feel new because only recently have we been moved by it to new actions and new patterns of thought. The challenge boils down to finding out how old messages, texts and concepts which steered no one before could now lead to new actions.



We have correctly, though ironically, pointed out the role of the humanities in forming the human in the organizer. Nobody will contest the capacity of human creations (be they colossal structures like the Banaue rice terraces and the Great Wall of China or minute and intricate antique hand weavings, soulful recantations of the world's origins by indigenous tribes or the prodigious symphonies of a young Mozart) to humble people and to inspire them to create.

The dialectics between the individual and the world prescribes that we look at history, which we are trying to comprehend and to make, as not being merely "out there" but already "in us" as well (La Capra). It is hardly an accident that wizened organizers of the 60s who have lived through the austere and spartan lifestyle of the Maoist Cultural Revolution are now starting to think back to their libertarian and humanitarian beginnings. They have not been compromised by wavering commitment. They have simply begun to rediscover voices of history which have been drowned out by louder and perhaps, more seductive voices. Repudiated in the past as irrelevant, counterrevolutionary or bourgeois ideas, these voices are reasserting themselves in the current discourse. The revisitation of the humanities could be an attempt to recapture such voices.

However, we do not want our staff development programs to degenerate into a traipse in a wild sunflower field. So often have college "humanities" been reduced to an allegorical trip in the local museum. Reimagining the world is not a hobby or an activity one indulges in on the side. For organizers, it is and should be a full-time activity. As acquired discipline, it is important as being able to define the correct political tactic at a given juncture. Only a willful, tyrannical intelligence, as H. White would say, would consider that political exactness and organizational acumen are superior to sensitivity and imagination. Imagination allows us to see the moment and beyond.

We are not only after "softening" the rough edges of organizers. The study of representations is an occasion for them to see and reflect on the world and its history by entering the inner workings of its symbolic representations. The study of representations also provides an opportunity to challenge the organizers' strongly held views of the world. For instance, the discussion on the problematic structure-superstructure relationship and culture-as-reflection theory could be one important facet of this venturing into the world of representations. There are many contesting voices but, at the very least, we can agree that the study of representations should provide the space for these many voices to be heard. ❁