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Power vs. Empowerment?
The cultural dilemmas of community organizing in Los Angeles' disadvantaged neighborhoods

While community-based organizations have spread in the last decades due to the privatization of the Welfare state and the devolution of social services towards civil society, we still know little about their civic outcomes for disadvantaged neighborhoods. While the neo-Tocquevillian paradigm has put the emphasis on the quantification of civic activity in the US, this ethnographic research explores the texture of civic engagement in two community organizations in Los Angeles. Sharing similar repertoires of action, goals of social justice for “oppressed communities” and adversarial mapping of the social world, these groups enact different styles of organizing. This research investigates how these groups deal with a central dilemma for social movements: while they aim at empowering low-income residents, their will to accumulate power and achieve policy change leads these organizations to rely increasingly on expertise and professionalization, and to spend most of their time focusing on numbers (of participants, signatures, phone calls, contacts, dollars, etc.) rather than on “grooming leaders.” The internal bonds and ties within the organizations and with the neighborhoods of intervention result however in different outcomes in terms of inclusion and empowerment of low-income residents. While in one case the strong internal bonds allow the nurturing of a form of civic autonomy for the participants, in the other, community organizing transforms its members into passive recipients of mobilization efforts and social services rather than active community members. This research therefore urges us to look at the quality of civic action, and not only at its frequency and breadth, when one wishes to investigate the transformational capacity of participation.

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