



***Occupation organizer: A critical history of community organizer in America*, by Clément Petitjean**

Chicago, Haymarket Press, 2023

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BOOK REVIEW

Occupation organizer: A critical history of community organizer in America, by Clément Petitjean, Chicago, Haymarket Press, 2023

Petitjean, associate professor of American Studies at the Sorbonne, writes as a French scholar gazing into the peculiar world of U.S. activism, where some radicals draw paychecks for their political labor. *Occupation Organizer* is his careful excavation of what it means to be a paid organizer and what opportunities professionalization has opened—and foreclosed. Over the book's seven chapters, Petitjean asks: What is the history of the profession? What “work tasks” (p. 3) define it, and why are organizers so insistent that they are professionals with expertise that lay activists do not have? To answer these questions, Petitjean traces to the present day the legacy of two major figures: Saul Alinsky, the “grandfather” of community organizing, and Ella Baker, the civil rights leader.

Chapters 2–4 tell the story of Alinsky, the “political entrepreneur” (p. 62), who, beginning in the 1950s, published books that popularized community organizing as a method for change. Alinsky saw community organizing as the task of bringing ordinary people together to redress neighborhood problems, from school segregation to slum housing. The organizer's duty was not to dictate a political agenda but to embed themselves in local communities, identify “natural” leaders, build organizational structures, and recede to let people decide for themselves what issues to confront. The organizer could help orchestrate campaigns to address injustice, but they should operate in the background while neighborhood residents took the reins.

Petitjean finds two facts notable. The first is that Alinsky defined organizing as an explicitly non-ideological project. “We're just technicians trying to organize people” (p. 112), he quotes Alinsky as saying. Second, Alinsky, who was trained as a social worker, insisted to his death that organizing was the work of professionals who held rarefied knowledge about how to build mass organizations. Both facts lead Petitjean to conclude that Alinsky's vision for community organizing is a rather moderate one, not so different from management consulting. He uses the metaphor of a political *crème brûlée*. Alinsky's organizing may present with a hard, crisp radical layer—a message of mobilizing the poor and confronting power—but beneath lies a soft liberal interior—a focus on neighborhood participation and organization-building, not social critique or upheaval.

Chapter 5 turns to Ella Baker, about whom Petitjean is less cynical. Baker came out of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1950s South, where she had trained young Black activists to go door-to-door to register Black people to vote, in defiance of Jim Crow laws. She called this “spadework.” Baker's organizers operated underground, at great personal risk, and with the understanding that the key to persuasion was “not oratory talents or ideological articulation, but relational . . . the ability to cross social boundaries, talk to strangers and listen to their personal stories” (p. 137). Only once organizers had built trust and lasting relationships could they ask people to do something as extraordinarily brave as drive down to the courthouse to put their names on voter lists.

A standout part of the book comes at the end of Chapter 5, when Petitjean considers where the two traditions overlap. Baker's spadework fought Jim Crow, while Alinsky eschewed specific political stances. Alinsky called on organizers to build new organizations, while Baker plugged her organizers into “a movement to transform society from the bottom up” (p. 168). On other counts, though, these lineages were similarly rooted in “ethnographic immersion in a community, connecting people to find out what could drive participation . . . the ability to step back to let the people speak . . . and the constant focus on concrete situations and solutions” (p. 168). Both traditions elevated organizing as a practice rooted in social relationships, not ideological directives.

Chapter 6 details how, by the 1970s, organizers trained under Alinsky and Baker joined forces to formalize organizing as a profession. Seeking to preserve the militant spirit of the


1960s while offering more stability to its practitioners, they established training curricula, employment standards, and institutional networks. This move toward professionalization allowed organizers to earn a living, sustain their work, and scale up their efforts. The craft, in other words, became a job.

At the start of the book, Petitjean promises a critique, not a hagiography, but, in the end, his account of professionalization is redeeming. In Chapter 7, he underscores the tensions that paid organizers face. They burn out frequently. They hold a monopoly over organizing knowledge that needs democratizing. And they continue to evade pre-set commitments in favor of letting “the people” decide, even when a heavier hand could be useful, if not morally necessary. Nonetheless, the professionalization of community organizing has been key to the craft’s survival. Today in the U.S., despite a conservative tilt, community organizing secures its place in the division of political labor, alongside electoral politics, union organizing, street protests, and philanthropy. It is political work that, at its most modest, increases civic participation and, at its boldest, feeds into larger social movements. Petitjean concludes that the tensions he has uncovered do not negate the utility of staff-intensive organizing models, where organizers are recruited, trained, paid, and deployed *qua* workers. The optimism underlying the conclusion calls into question why, just chapters earlier, Petitjean would have belittled Alinsky’s community organizing as a form of management consulting.

This inconsistency notwithstanding, the book allows community organizers and those who care about the craft to hold up a mirror and scrutinize their own legacies. In whose image do organizers exist today? Do they like what they see? Ideally, the book should be read as a precursor to Eric Blanc’s *We are the Union* (2025), which invites similar introspection around staff-intensive union organizing. *Occupation Organizer*’s intellectual promise is to sweep away the dust and lay bare what is often covered, especially in more romantic accounts of organizing and organizers. Organizing may culminate in mass political action, but its day-to-day work is painfully slow and hyperlocal. Organizers may refer to themselves as sparks that set off movements, but, day-to-day, they are also workers, grinding through tasks. Organizing may have radical goals, but its daily practice is objectively technical. Should all of this change? Petitjean makes no prescriptions. He raises questions. As organizers might say, the rest is up to “the people” to take on.

Reference

Blanc, E. (2025). *We are the union: How worker-to-worker organizing is revitalizing labor and winning big*. University of California Press.

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