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Don't Moan; Organise. Book Review: Walls, D. (2015) Community Organising

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‘Don't moan; organise!’ - or so the old community work adage of my youth used to go – and that's exactly what this highly readable book by David Walls, ‘Community Organising’, focuses upon. Written by someone with a history in both academia and community activism, this book, in eight fascinating chapters, tells the story of how ‘community organising’ in the USA grew from neighbourhood-based attempts at improving working and social conditions for residents and workers, to regional and national networks of community-based organisations intent on influencing power on a much wider level. It chronicles the development of such organisations, from those rooted in the labour unions and in particular in Church congregations to those less geographically-based in the civil rights, feminist, environmentalist and anti-globalisation movements. Changing forms of community and changing issues in turn affected community organising.

The main focus of the book is the contribution to ‘community organising’ in the USA (and elsewhere) of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IFA), from the 1930s-1960s to the present day. It critically analyses the specific ideas associated with this approach to social change, looking at some of the rules/methods/tools of Alinskyian ‘community organising’. Using a range of case studies charting the growth of different organisations and social movements it shows how Alinsky's approach and method have been duplicated and modified, in response to changing contexts and circumstances. The final chapter asks, ‘What next?’, and looks at contemporary and possible future developments in the story, as ‘community organising’ turns increasingly to electoral engagement and international networking.

Whatever the arguments for and against Alinskyian 'community organising' it's clear that there is much to be learned by local communities from such ideas. It may be that at times other approaches such as the less confrontational community self-help initiatives of Putnam (2000) or the community awareness raising and empowerment ideas of Freire (1973) may be of more relevant and practical use. However, it is also clear that community organising has a time and a place in the toolbox for ending marginalisation and inequality. As such, Community Organising should be recommended reading to anyone engaged in community activism and social change and to University students interested in learning about community, and the development of political social and economic policy.

David Walls (2015) Community Organising, Cambridge, Polity Press
184pp. Hardback: ISBN-13:978-0-7456-6319-7,