

1-1-1986

## Roots to Power: A Manual for Frassroots Organizing

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### Recommended Citation

Chaiklin, Harris (1986) "Roots to Power: A Manual for Frassroots Organizing," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 20.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol4/iss1/20>

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**Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing**, by Lee Staples. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984, 176 pp., \$29.95 hardcover, \$8.95 paperback.

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The message in Lee Staples' *Roots to Power* is in the subtitle: *A Manual for Grassroots Organizing*. His organizing model emphasizes the individual and direct participation. He contrasts this with Alinsky's approach of building organizational coalitions. Here an individual achieves an identity in the larger organization through membership in an existing group. While the distinction is made, it is not pursued. What is emphasized is that in both models the organizing principles are the same, though there are differences in tactics and required skills. The importance of the distinction lies in political philosophy: one who believes in participatory democracy is less likely to make compromises and tradeoffs to achieve goals than one who believes in coalition.

Direct organizing has had a rocky road since the days of the War on Poverty. Cloward and Piven, in an interesting introduction, say that local organizations have a high failure rate and seldom directly influence national affairs. Nevertheless they believe in them. They reject calls for building national organizations. Local organizations which are supposed to have influenced centralized power include labor during the depression, the Southern civil rights movement, Islamic peasants, Polish workers, and Druse tribesmen. The first two of these were, in fact, remarkable examples of Alinsky-style coalitions. Polish workers have been crushed by a ruthless and centralized authoritarian government. Islamic peasants represent fanaticism on the loose, and Druse tribesmen in Lebanon, and to some extent Syria, will become a client of anyone who will help them achieve their goals of dominating those around them. These examples say more about the politics of Cloward and Piven than about participatory democracy and local organizing.

*Roots to Power*, despite occasional slips, is not a political tract. Staples is an experienced organizer whose current interest is an organization called ACORN—Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. The manual consists of chapters on understanding an organizing philosophy, putting an organizing model into place, selecting issues and strategy, putting it into action, and paying attention to the do's and don'ts of organizing.

While it is called a manual, there is a clear recognition that what must be understood are principles. All the tips and advice do not provide an automatic solution to any community problem. Solution of community problems depends on the application of the principles, tips, and advice by a creative intelligence. The emphasis in the book on thought, rationality, and research reflect how far neighborhood organizers have come from the days when anyone over 30 was considered untrustworthy.

There is nothing remarkable in the material presented. It is practical and the presentation is clear and concise. One is told such things as: ask for the big favor first, and don't talk too long when people are ready to sign up and pay dues. Material like this is available in other books on organizing, how to run meetings, and salesmanship. Old ways die hard and occasionally there are jarring references to such things as getting the "enemy" to the bargaining table or the claim that neighborhood people can do better research than Ph.Ds. The chapter on "Do's and Don'ts" is divided into sections and consists of a series of short articles by Staples' associates. A lot of this, as well as some other parts of the book, are reprints or rewrites of other materials. Since the original publications did not have a wide distribution, it is a service to draw them all together and make them available in book form.

The book has serious deficiencies in style, format, and production. In an effort to avoid "sexist" language neologisms are used: "s/he" for she or he, "hsr" for his or her, and "hmr" for him or her. There are paragraphs where I thought I was reading Yugoslavian.

The index could have been better. If it is intended to be a manual, a clearly organized and labeled outline of where to find techniques on specific procedures would have helped. The book is cheaply produced. If you leave it on your desk the cover curls up, and if you put it on the shelf on a warm day it sticks to the book next to it. The binding is of such poor quality that I am not sure it will survive another reading.

In the end, this book serves the purpose for which it was put together. It gathers a lot of useful principles and tips about how to build and run an organization. If it were better organized and sturdier, I would say that it should be on the shelf of any group concerned with accomplishing community goals. It is not a textbook because it doesn't lead readers to think for themselves, but it might be useful as supplementary reading for practice courses or for those who want to think about the social philosophy of this approach to direct neighborhood organizing.

While I question the social philosophy that drives this book, and see the content as prosaic, there is something else to be said about Staples, ACORN, and the people connected with it: They have dealt with issues that sociology tends not to study. They have a phrase: "Don't knock it, do it." One can well read this book, not to find something new about organizing, but to think about the issues ACORN has chosen to involve itself with and to ask why others don't follow suit.