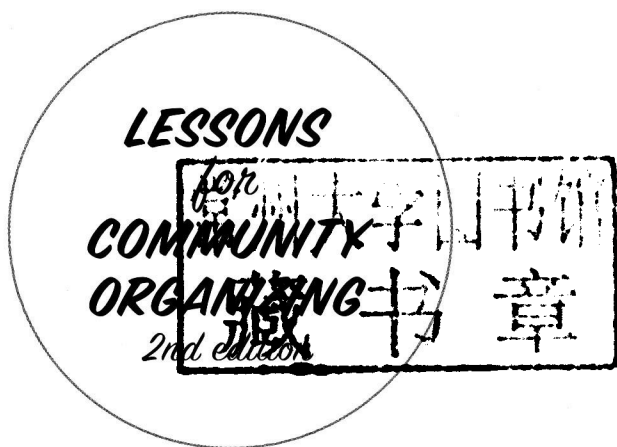


Eric Shragge

ACTIVISM

and

SOCIAL CHANGE



Eric Shragge



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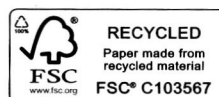
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Activism and Social Change

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am writing the introduction to the second edition of this book in September 2012. The last couple of years have been remarkable. Popular uprisings have challenged power across the globe, toppling long-standing regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. In Europe, government-imposed austerity has been met with occupations and street battles. The Occupy movement sprang up across North America last fall and winter. Closer to home in Quebec, the battle against tuition fee increases became the vehicle to challenge the neo-liberal direction of successive governments. More important were the massive demonstrations, estimated between 200,000 and 300,000 people, and the ability of students to shut down educational institutions for months and rally allies from unions, community organizations, and social movements. Street battles, mass arrests, and brutal police repression were nightly occurrences, culminating in legislation designed to limit the right to demonstrate, suspending the school term in striking universities and colleges, and forcing students back for an extra term in August. The legislation was defied by a demonstration of more than 200,000, and the student leaders deliberately broke the law by not providing their route. Some have said this was the largest act of collective civil disobedience in Canadian history. In neighbourhoods across the province, a “casserole” movement took to the streets, banging pots and

pans and defying the law. In my neighbourhood one evening, more than 200 people created a huge racket as they marched to the front of the Premier Jean Charest's home, while the police directed traffic. Popular assemblies have been organized to direct further protest activities. The government called an election and after a short campaign found itself in opposition with its leader losing his seat. The new minority government has delivered on its promise to freeze tuition and repeal the repressive legislation. The victory is a tribute to the power of mass movements, defiance of repression, and a capacity to mobilize a base. We celebrate this victory! In many ways the massive protests, local mobilization, and polarization became a proxy for the wider questions about the economic and social direction of Quebec. Large popular mobilizations like this are exceptions and do not last for long periods, but their impact is much longer if victories are won. The student movement is the only group in Quebec that has successfully fought governments' attempts to impose or raise user fees (tuition) as part of the larger policy agenda of service cuts and privatization. Will this movement be able to continue or will it dissipate as people return to their daily lives, jobs, and families while students are in classes making up for the long strike?

At a more personal level, in the School of Community and Public Affairs, where I taught for the past twelve years, students struck at both at the graduate and undergraduate levels, and there were virtually no classes for the last seven weeks of term. The graduate students, along with others, organized a demonstration in front of the condo of the acting university president, exposing his subsidized mortgage in a time when the university supported tuition increases as a response to inadequate government funding of higher education. It was my last term of teaching before my retirement. I did not want to leave without some kind of final student encounter; I organized an informal discussion open to anyone, which I called "What I learned from the strike." To begin the discussion, I talked about my experience in the Black Action Movement university strike when I was a student (see below) and the importance it had for me. Many issues were raised, including the importance of being part of the strike movement as a learning experience, the frustrations of mobilizing others, and the fears of personal "burnout." There was a mix of pride, optimism about the power of collective action, and stress because of the sleepless nights and the intensity of this period of organizing. The

lessons that the students learned are the universal ones—in particular, how mass mobilization and collective action can challenge power. The experience we shared was a moment in the history of the popular movement in Quebec. Perhaps more important in the long term is the impact of the strike, and of the many demonstrations, confrontations with authorities, and other actions in the process of political learning. Two elements interact here—the first lesson is the understanding of power, how it operates, and in whose interests it works. Second, there is a question of who shares this interest and who will support and defend those with power. The student strike polarized Quebec society. The specific demands for a tuition freeze quickly became symbolic for the direction of the social and economic development of the society—in other words, neo-liberalism. Those opposed to this direction included the unions, the community sector, and the range of social movement organizations. The biggest difference was the large number of people who were not part of the “usual suspects,” yet took to the streets in demonstrations to support the students and oppose the repressive government legislation and ongoing police violence. Throughout the period, it became clear who was on what side—big business and the mainstream media all seemed to deplore the strike and related action while a large number of “red squares”—the symbol of the strike—became visible across the city. A related lesson is that all of the protests and confrontations make power relations clear and can force shifts in policy. At the end, it became clear that the Charest government could only move ahead with a new mandate, as his administration had lost credibility with so many across the province. Faced with mass demonstrations and disruptions in the downtown core of Montreal, the government’s recourse was either to increase repression, which had not been effective in quelling the unrest, or to show it had broad support through an election. Neither one worked.

A lasting lesson is that sustained action, mass mobilization, smart leadership, and building good relations with allies can force change. Underlying this victory is a lesson about building and sustaining a base, one that can be mobilized, and showing support for the campaign. The movement of students was decentralized. Strike mandates came from local associations through departmental assemblies, which debated the issues and made decisions about whether or not to participate in the strike. Without the local organization in colleges and universities across

the province, the day-to-day activities required to keep institutions and departments closed would not have happened and the mass mobilizations would not have had a base. It is clear that there is no shortcut; local work is essential. It is at this level that education and argumentation on the issues is best, that leadership emerges, and that mobilization happens. The success of the student movement happened at least in a large part because of local organizing. In the movement's most intense period, emotional and personal support, and finding the collective courage to enter into difficult confrontations, occurred through local networks. There is a key lesson here that connects with the book that follows. Without local organizing, agitating, educating, and leadership-building, broader change is impossible—but, without “the movement,” bigger campaigns, alliances, and coalition-building, local organizations cannot contribute to wider social change and can fall into insular activity, whether that is service provision or attempting very limited campaigns on very limited issues. The challenges are there and the goal of this book is to analyze and examine local work through the lens of community organizing.

INTRODUCTION: ASKING HARD QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Community organizing has been a central part of my life for more than forty years. On some days, I feel that I have reached an understanding of what it is and what can be accomplished through it; on others, the uncertainties are nagging. I have been involved in many different roles, campaigns, projects, and organizations. It would be easy to idealize these experiences and to argue that community organizing has made an important contribution to changing the fabric of North American society, but I am not a simple promoter. I have moved between periods of optimism and profound pessimism about the role of the community movement and what it has and can accomplish. “Accomplish” implies a normative stance. What do I mean by that? Perhaps this is the central question for this book. How does one judge what community organizing should be trying to do? Here the question of where one stands is crucial, since that dictates the types of questions and definitions one uses and what values and political traditions shape those questions and form one’s standpoint. This chapter acts as a launching pad for a reflection and a critical discussion of

community organizing. The book itself looks back and forward. It tries to capture the traditions and meanings of organizing practice, starting from my experiences and widening the lens. In this chapter, I will discuss my own development and experiences of practice. I have chosen to use autobiographical elements in this chapter in order to raise the questions and issues that shape the rest of the book. My own experiences reflect wider practices and focus on the years between the late 1960s and now. The examples that I draw upon will illustrate some of the diversity of these issues and related practices and will be a means of entering into the debates and lessons.

Although I spent thirty-nine years teaching in a university setting, I hope this book will depart from academic traditions. It begins with politics and practice, but draws on some useful academic sources. It will always come back to the politics of practice, referring to the key question on the role of community organizing in promoting and participating in the processes of progressive social change. I will avoid specific and narrow definitions of these terms for the moment. In general, I am drawing on the belief that the process that leads to social change begins when large numbers of people act in their own self-interest, and act collectively to promote economic and social justice. In the process of working for these ideals, it is necessary and indeed equally important to expand democratic opportunities and increase the control of people over the institutions that affect their lives. In other words, there are political and social ends that are defined by material gains and changing relations of power. Perhaps this is too idealistic a position for our pragmatic world of partnership and deal-making, but it is the starting point for me, and will act as a crude benchmark for later discussions.

Why did I decide to write the first edition of this book? There is an easy answer and more complex answer. The easy one is that I began this project on sabbatical leave from my job. Writing this book seemed like a good project to undertake during that period. The real and deeper answer is that I felt out of step with many of the practices and the beliefs found in community organizations when I began writing. This feeling was not recent; it had been building for many years. In many ways, my orientation is from an earlier period, shaped by the ideals of the 1960s and the political and social analyses and perspectives that grew out of that period, and so I subsequently learned more about the traditions of

the “Left.” I have witnessed the changes in the community movement since then. There are positive developments, but at the same time, there has been a loss of the movement’s critical edge and engagement in the wider struggle for economic and social justice. With the deterioration of social and economic conditions for many, community organizations have become part of the system—part of the problem, rather than a source of opposition to the forces that have reshaped the economy and social life. The book examines the changes, the forces that have led to its redefinition, and seeks a way to learn lessons from the past, critique the present, and find new paths on which to move forward.

I begin my discussion with some basic questions. Why community organizing, how did I get into it, what were the processes, and what has changed in practice over the years? For the sake of clarity, I will overstate my position and then nuance it later. Community organizing at its best creates sites and practices of opposition. Those interested in progressive social change, social justice, and so on were attracted to the community movement because it was a place to organize resistance to the system of global capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and other forms of socio-economic oppression and domination. They believed that the local community—the neighbourhood—was a place where people could meet to challenge those forces that oppressed them and, in the process, learn about the relationships between personal issues and the wider forces that shape them. Forms of collective action are the products of the meeting of the personal and the political. Clearly there is a lot more to all of this, but this is what is at the core of community organization. People may be interested in community for a variety of other reasons but for me the reason for participation in local activities is the potential to build strong opposition. I am not only talking about protest and confrontation, but the creation of democratic opportunities in which people can learn about their collective strengths and build social solidarity. In the community, there can be a variety of practices that may not seem oppositional but within them there are practices that question relations of power, build alternative visions, and shift power to those who usually do not have it. In other words, working in the community sector is a political opportunity—and one that can be taken and used to promote social change.

The second part of the response to the question of why I am involved with community organizing is more personal. I came from a secure,

middle-class home with professional parents who valued success in their children in traditional terms. How did I end up caring about these issues and over such a long period of time? It is no longer trendy to consider oneself as unambiguously on the left—the untraditional, libertarian left influenced by both Marxists and anarchists. There are not many out there with me and my viewpoint does not often find itself expressed in the corporate-dominated media. More to the point, I rarely see these perspectives and beliefs among those involved in most community organizations. Frankly, I'm often unsure of where people stand, perhaps as vague social democrats or as progressive pragmatics trying to make life a little more tolerable for those on the margins. How did I end up here? Many people from similar backgrounds were radical in their youth but there are few that have maintained their engagement over many years.

Where did the trip start? Perhaps it was exposure to a tradition of social justice through synagogue affiliation and related youth movements? I have clear memories of a presentation of a young man who went to participate in civil rights struggles in the early 1960s in the southern USA, and his discussion of the promotion of non-violence and the violence he experienced in return. I remember trying to convince a Hebrew school-teacher that, based on principles of justice in the Jewish traditions, being a communist was a more appropriate ideology than supporting capitalism. But I had little exposure in my home to the old left of the previous generation, except through a couple of friends of my parents. On the other hand, my parents reminded my brothers and me of our privilege relative to most others. My grandparents were immigrants and poverty was only a generation removed from us. Another factor perhaps was not fitting in well or feeling comfortable with the in crowd. By high school I was more intellectually intense and serious than most of my peers. It must have been something there that sparked my interest in the events of the 1960s, and encouraged me to see that there was something profound happening. By my third year at university (1968) the world was coming undone and my consciousness was forming. I quickly learned who was on which side, and I had begun to understand that there are no givens without challenge. I participated in a few protests at that time, and I began to learn that the radical challenge of the period had profound roots and ideas that were often lost as a result of the period's style.

I fell into organizing partly by accident and partly as a product of the time. I did an undergraduate degree at McGill University between 1965 and 1969. I lived through a period when universities exploded with student activism. I was only peripherally involved in that period but was part of a group of Jewish students that challenged the priorities of that community and got a hearing by threatening to disrupt a Passover service at a rich Westmount synagogue. I was also in a group in the Genetics Department that demanded student representation on departmental committees. But, looking back, I think that for me the images of the period were probably greater than the social understanding and knowledge I gained. I remember a picture of a male student with long, dishevelled hair and a beard seated in a university board of governors member's chair during an occupation. I remember the snowballs thrown by engineering students at a large group (of which I was one) protesting the firing of a left-wing activist political science teacher. By the late 1960s, the campus was theatre. People were organizing both on and off it. The key campaign was against the United States' war against the people in Vietnam. On campus, we demanded an extension of democracy with parity of students on university committees and decision-making bodies. We argued that universities had to be part of a critical reflection on the injustices in society, and therefore be part of the opposition to corporate capitalism.

I felt pulled by the excitement of the period, the sense of optimism that social change and justice were possible. We believed as a generation that we would make a major contribution to that process. During that time, I was involved in the Jewish community, and I worked at a synagogue and the YM-YWHA as a youth worker as well with teens at a summer camp. By 1968, I had decided that I wanted a career in social work. It wasn't a difficult decision; my grades in my genetics courses were only okay and I did not think that chasing fruit flies around a laboratory or doing genetic counselling would keep me interested for very long. Besides, the world was changing out there and I wanted to be a part of it. I knew very little about social work but I thought that it would allow me to make some positive social contributions. So off I went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to become a social worker. I was naive, had a strong sense of right and wrong, and firm opinions about social justice, but I was a political illiterate. I had no sense of the traditions of the left that would play such an important part of my life. My education in the biological sciences

at McGill left me with little in the way of tools for social analysis. But somehow the challenges to authority, the questioning of the legitimacy of the social order, got through and shaped my identity. I began to see myself as a radical, to use the jargon of the period. I don't think I knew what that meant, except that it was a visceral antagonism to the major social and economic institutions. If asked at the time, I don't think that I would have placed myself on the left. To me that meant either social democrats and/or pro-Soviet Union communists. Neither had any appeal—they still don't, but more on that later!

My political formation and definition as an activist really began in the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan. I entered immediately after my undergraduate degree, leaving to live away from home long-term for the first time. My previous experiences did not prepare me for the two years that followed. My first field placement was in an inner-city school; as well, I volunteered with both the tenants' union to support a large successful rent strike and with a centre for street kids; and during the summer, with a few others, I participated in a recruiting drive for a welfare rights organization. I met people who legitimated, for me, both the necessity for radical social change and my desire to be part of it. It was not always easy. I felt intimidated by more experienced and knowledgeable activists. But it got better as I began to find a place. I became more confident about my own identity as a radical, someone who was trying to find a way to live a life that incorporated social change activities as a central component. I wanted to pursue a career as a community organizer and I decided that mainstream social work was not for me. I was fortunate because it was a period in which community organizing had legitimacy in the profession.

As part of this reflection I want to recall images of that period that convey its spirit. This will not be a process of glorification of the past, but rather an attempt to describe my experiences. My memory has become selective over time, but, keeping in mind that the goal of this exercise is to understand the present, these lessons, images, and ideas will all help. Some of these images remain with me today as powerful reminders of those early experiences. I remember some of the welfare recipients, their strength to not only survive but to challenge the oppression of poverty in the USA. I remember one woman in particular with scars from suicide attempts on her wrists; she was a leader who, along with her Black

friend, held sit-ins in the churches of Ann Arbor demanding reparations for the church's support of slavery. Courage was necessary. The year before I had arrived for graduate school, the local sheriff had called out the dogs to attack a peaceful demonstration of welfare mothers. There was a risk involved, but this was how we understood what we referred to then as "Amerika." I remember one story from my field placement in an inner-city school in Detroit. A Black youngster eight or ten years old told me about hiding under his bed while tanks drove down his street. The polarization in the society was real—White kids busted for drugs, the Black Panthers facing the police who had declared war on them, some young men going to jail or fleeing to avoid the draft, and an anti-authoritarian youth culture that did not know its left from its right. One of the first and most important lessons I learned was that I was an outsider, despite what I believed and the solidarity I could offer. I was not poor, I was White, privileged, educated, and I had many potential life choices. As I became more active over the years that followed, I learned that trust was something that had to be earned. It came with time, respect, and a willingness to listen and to act in support and not to take over. At the same time, there should always be a tension in the relationship. We may bring skills, knowledge, and a useful status to a group or a struggle, but at the same time we have to know our place; the reason we are there is to help build a democratic option where people can have control and a voice. This was an early and key lesson for me.

Other images of the time: the Black Action Movement strike that shut down the university for more than a week demanding increased Black admissions and support. I remember getting up at five in the morning to picket at the university heating plant because the union had said that if there were a picket line it would not cross it. Heavy, wet snow, rain, and slush over our shoes did not deter us. It was an important lesson for me—understanding the necessity of links between organized labour and social movements. Also, I learned about the power of numbers to disrupt and shut institutions and to win concessions because of the process. The times were exciting. For me, it was the beginning of a political process believing that opposition to the established powers and values was necessary. The solidarity between people was growing and the playing out of social conflict was at a high. These were not experiences that were unique and I was in no way central to the process. I remained on the margins, did

my bit, and learned profound lessons. But it was the beginning. I knew that there was something in community organizing that could link my emerging political orientation with a way to express it. Those were the times when all seemed possible. With the right combination of commitment and moral fibre, we could accomplish anything.

Over the years that followed, I have found many ways to stay involved. I will describe a few of these and examine some of the questions that they raised and the lessons that I learned from them. I have chosen the following for discussion: neighbourhood organizing, peace movement activities, and a return to the former. I will examine other practical experiences in the chapters that follow. Below, I will present a critical reflection—a type of examination that has shaped much of scholarship and one that grows from experiences in the field and an analysis of that practice.

NEIGHBOURHOOD ORGANIZING

In 1974, I was hired by the School of Social Work at McGill University. My job was classified as a field instructor, mandated to develop field placements for students in the community and to supervise their work. The school had already developed a placement with a small recreation association in a working-class area. Residents were housed in three-floor walk-up apartment buildings hastily built after the Second World War which, although privately owned, were subsidized through long-term, low-interest mortgages provided through a federal government housing program. I think the small group that ran the recreation association and those at the School of Social Work would have been happier if I had put in place a tutorial service and an after-school program for kids. I was, however, strongly influenced by Saul Alinsky, an American community organizer, as well as the New Left (more on these later), and I wanted to organize people to take on issues that affected their lives, such as housing and neighbourhood conditions. Besides, I had to supervise six students who were keen to try something different. So we embarked on a period of intense door-knocking, speaking to as many residents as we could. Students were paired and assigned to a street. The issues identified were typical: lack of repairs in apartments, unsafe conditions in the alleys, and so on. We brought small groups together, meeting in peoples' homes or

in the recreation centre, which was a small basement apartment. We got people to move into action; we won some concessions and made a bit of a name for ourselves. The first landlord we took on was a prominent physician. In order to get him to negotiate, tenants picketed his house in an upper-class neighbourhood and walked into his clinic. These events were covered in the media, and they finally brought him to the negotiating table with his lawyer in tow. He agreed to the demands of the tenants but subsequently sold his property. These types of activities created tension with those in charge of the recreation centre, whose leaders felt they were connected to the government of the city and indirectly to the mayor at the time, Jean Drapeau. However, despite their opposition, there was enough support to create an independent neighbourhood organization that was called POWER (Peoples' Organization of Westhaven Elmhurst Residents).

I was fortunate to be able to affiliate with Parallel Institute, an organizing centre in Pointe St. Charles, which was a working-class district with a tradition of activism. The organizing staff at Parallel had recently broadened their orientation from welfare rights to one based on neighbourhood organizing. For several years the work that my students and I did was linked to the work of that institute as it established organizations in other working-class communities. All of these organizing drives achieved concrete gains, improving housing, municipal services, and other conditions. In addition, organizers identified local leaders and trained them to play public and active roles in the development of the organizations. The structures were based on committees formed on city blocks and these were joined together to form the larger group. However, all of the organizers and some of the leaders recognized the limits of local work. A couple of campaigns were run based on common issues such as the city of Montreal's refusal to post and enforce twenty-mile-per-hour traffic zones, and the lack of beat police. These were relatively successful and a coalition of local organizations forced the city to make concessions. Disruptive tactics, such as the occupation of a city-owned restaurant, and confrontations with high-ranking officials were key actions in these campaigns. Their power came from the mobilization of large numbers of people. This was an important aspect of the work, a central principle, one that has been forgotten by many community workers and their organizations today.