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The Limits of the Organizing Model

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In recent years, Jane McAlevey, the influential labour organizer and [labour studies](#) academic, has mounted a vigorous case for what she calls “**the organizing model**” of movement-building. The key features of the model, and the arguments she makes on its behalf, are drawn from reflection on her experiences over many years in trade union organizing. McAlevey is quite insistent, however, that this same model is the only model -- literally, the *only* one -- that can effectively contribute to movement building more broadly, that is, not just in trade union struggles, but in workers’ struggles against racism, colonialism, sexism, police violence, environmental destruction, and so on. She regards the organizing model, in short, as the exclusive and all purpose model for rebuilding all anti-systemic movements very generally.

What is striking and provocative in her claim is not so much the idea that the organizing model she proposes could *help* these movements, as part of a larger repertoire of movement-building approaches. That seems uncontroversial enough. What is provocative is her claim that *only* the organizing model can build real power for social movements, and everything else is bound to fail.

Of course, since some of the most high-profile social-movement upsurges of the past several years, including Idle No More, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and even the Arab Spring, were what she calls “mobilizations,” not organizing projects, her bold claim has the remarkable implication that none of these movements either *were* in fact effective, or even had the *possibility* of being effective, at building oppositional social power.

BLM, OWS, and INM: Real or Pretend Power?

McAlevey does not shy away from explicitly drawing out and defending this conclusion. When asked about Black Lives Matter and the early wave of anti-Trump protests in the early months of 2017, [she says](#): “All that *protest stuff* is good for *activists*, but if we are trying to expand the universe of people who identify with making progressive change, we ain’t close to the numbers we need.” On her website, [she adds](#) that “movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter lack an organized base, and therefore are unable to build the power to effect meaningful change.”

More provocatively still, in her book *No Shortcuts*, she makes it clear that she classifies the kind of power that is generated by these surging waves of street protest as instances of what she calls “pretend power,” which is to say, a dramaturgical or staged presentation of *apparent* influence. Pretend power contrasts with what she calls “actual power,” which is the tested capacity to extract reluctant concessions from even determined adversaries.

Mobilizations of pretend power, even on a large scale, as in the case of the anti-globalization movement of the early 2000s, [she says](#), accomplish little or nothing: “I used to go to more anti-globalization protests, direct actions and other things when I was young, but I just stopped.” Pulling no punches, she explains why: “It looks great, we congratulate ourselves when we have a huge direct action, but it adds up to nothing.”

This gloomy sense that mobilizations, even on the mass scale of “a huge direct action,” will inevitably “add up to nothing,” resonates with many people who have found themselves working through what has become an all too familiar cycle of protest upsurges, in which a rapid rise is followed by a relatively short-lived peak of activity, ending with an equally rapid decline and near total disappearance. The sense that spontaneous or self-activating protest upsurges, like Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter, may have a time-limited life-span of a couple of years before they lose their steam, leaving little ongoing or no movement infrastructure in their wake, has encouraged a fairly widespread mood of disenchantment with instances of mobilization that don't convert into organization-building more or less directly. Seeing how little these upsurges leave behind leads many people to consider, in reflecting on their own activity, that their tireless efforts to build the protests were, to some significant degree, wasted.

McAlevey has a diagnosis ready-made to appeal to this mood of disenchantment. The problem, she argues, is that the *model* being pursued by movement participants is deeply flawed.

McAlevey makes the point by sketching two models of movement building, the mobilizing model and the organizing model. (She contrasts these with a third model, less important either to her or to me, called the advocacy model, closely associated with staff-led NGOs relying on a passive donor base and/or foundation funding.) Since her depiction of the “mobilizing model” is so saturated with dismissiveness and polemical caricature, it would be pointless to recount what she says about it, but it is worth looking for a moment at McAlevey’s organizing model, to see what it would mean to generalize it and put it at the very centre of our movement-building efforts, in environmental, feminist, anti-racist and other movement building efforts in the broad workers movements.

In this talk, I want to argue that, in spite of the many strengths of the organizing model, and the real plausibility of McAlevey’s claim that the model can be a potent asset in the context of trade union movement building, there are strong reasons to doubt the generalizability of the model to other workers’ movements, such as movements against police violence, movements for climate justice, movements against sexism and Islamophobia, and so on. The key barrier to generalizing from union activity to social movement building generally is that the organizing model requires, as one of its central principles, that organizing be restricted to what she calls “bounded constituencies,” such as individual workplaces, or specific houses of faith, like a church, a mosque or a synagogue. This, in turn, makes the organizing model structurally impervious to, that is, impenetrable by, decentred influxes of popular self-activity of the sort that unfold during spontaneous protest upsurges.

My basic claim is that no model of movement building that refuses even to attempt to integrate people who flow through movements during protest upsurges can be sufficient, on its own, as a basis for a broad anti-systemic movement-rebuilding strategy.

The rest of my talk makes this case in three steps:

- a. **First**, I recount the core features of the organizing model itself, highlighting the importance of bounded constituencies in the model.
- b. **Second**, I briefly note four features of the dynamics of social contagion as they play out in spontaneous or self-activating protest upsurges, which *both* make these upsurges a precious resource that we ought to try to capitalize on in our movement-rebuilding strategy, *and* make it impossible to do so within the confines of the organizing model, restricted as the latter is to what McAlevey calls the “target rich environment” of bounded constituencies.
- c. Finally, **third**, I sketch the elements of a competing, *self-mobilization model* that I think should supplement the organizing model, as part of a complex and differentiated approach to rebuilding anti-systemic workers’ movements.

Contours of the Organizing Model

OK, so what are the basic contours of McAlevey’s model? The first, and in my view the most important feature of the organizing model is that it operates always in what McAlevey calls a **bounded constituency**. A bounded constituency is a spatially confined location, where a substantial but not indefinitely expansive number of people come together and interact regularly, such they all could change their lives for the better if they were to use collective action to extract concessions from elites. The primary paradigm instance of a bounded constituency is a workplace. Other examples mentioned by McAlevey include a public school, a social housing complex, and a racially segregated neighbourhood.

What this is meant to exclude is what she calls **unbounded constituencies**, such as workers in general, or precarious workers, or women, or students, or migrant workers, or trans workers, and so on.

With this crucial point in mind, let me lay out the basics of the organizing model in seven basic points, which for simplicity I will describe -- somewhat superficially, I admit -- as if they were sequential steps.

- a. First, identify a **bounded constituency** of people, the members of which could be motivated to make some positive change in their lives via collective action.
- b. Second, identify the **natural leaders** within the bounded constituency and recruit them to the organizing process.
- c. Third, collectively begin to **map out the power structure** of the bounded constituency, and its relation to the wider community, to reveal sources of worker power, such as internal or

- external resources from which they can draw support or strength, such as money, influence, or disruptive capacity.
- d. Fourth, use the identified natural leaders to **recruit** an ever-widening circle of participants into the organizing effort, by tapping into their networks of influence, aiming always to **win over a majority** of members of the bounded constituency.
 - e. Fifth, conduct a series of ‘**structure tests**,’ such as getting a majority of members to sign a petition supporting some demand, in order to fine tune the identification of actual leaders and to gauge whether or not the support of a majority, ideally a supermajority, has been secured.
 - f. Sixth, once the majority or supermajority is formed, **build up the confidence** of members by getting them to take actions at gradually increasing levels of risk.
 - g. Finally, seventh, cap off the organizing project by launching a struggle -- classically, a *strike* -- that tries to **impose high enough costs on an adversary** that conceding to organizers’ demands becomes the only rational option.

This is the organizing model, in a nutshell. As far as it goes, I’m happy to embrace it. But whether it goes as far as McAlevee thinks it does is another matter. My concern is that it is structurally impervious to the influxes of large numbers that are typical of spontaneous protest upsurges.

Logic of Spontaneity

The word **spontaneity** entered the marxist lexicon by way of German idealism, [deriving ultimately from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*](#), where spontaneity (*Spontaneität*) is contrasted with **receptivity** (*Receptivität*). In effect, spontaneity is a synonym for another term popular with German Idealists, “**self-activity**” (*Selbsttätigkeit*). Here, “spontaneous” doesn’t mean unintelligible, random, or undertaken without forethought or encouragement. The *spontaneity* of workers who move into struggle during sudden upsurges of protest is contrasted with the *receptivity* of workers who take action in the manner of following instructions from organizers. (Luxemburg, scornful of worker receptivity, compares receptivity to soldiers following marching orders, a disastrous model for the workers’ movements to emulate, in her view.)

In contrast to protester receptivity, which follows a logic of **growth by addition**, the spontaneity of protest upsurges follows a logic of **growth by social contagion**. The dynamics of this logic of social contagion can be summed up in a schematic, broadly intuitive way, in terms of four features:

- a. First, social contagion is **sporadic**, rather than continuous and uninterrupted.
- b. Second, a social contagion’s emergence is **sudden**, rather than gradual.
- c. Third, social contagion unfolds in a relatively **unforeseen**, rather than in a pre-planned manner.
- d. Fourth, social contagion is **self-organizing**, rather than orchestrated by organizers.

(It is probably worth including a warning, here, against the danger of being seduced by **the organizer’s fallacy**, the belief that, because a protest involving masses of people was *organized*, it must be the case that the *cause* of the mass participation in the protest was the prowess and diligence of the organizing activity itself, as if it were a unilateral achievement, like deploying pawns in a chess game, an activity in which the organizers are imagined to be unilateral protagonists. In the most extreme expressions of the organizer’s fallacy, some people suppose that they have generated a mass movement by deploying on twitter a carefully crafted #hashtag.)

It’s a familiar fact about spontaneous protest upsurges, when they follow this logic of contagious enthusiasm, that they generate, or rather consist of, dramatic influxes into movements of people, activity, and passion, and that they tend to generate **broad social ferment**, in the sense of expansive and high-profile public controversy and debate (over matters normally ignored or marginalized in mainstream media and official politics, like police violence or poverty or the social harmfulness of the financial industry). I shall treat it as axiomatic -- in part because today I don’t have the time to substantiate this intuition with detailed arguments -- that this array of features makes spontaneous upsurges a rare and precious resource with which to build social movements, *on the condition that the surge of self-activity can be harnessed and integrated before it dissipates*.

If so, it should count against the organizing model that it closes off movement builders from engaging in a substantial way with these influxes of people and energy. Because these upsurges happen outside of the bounded constituencies targeted by the organizing model, namely, because they originate in

spatially diffuse and socially differentiated sectors of broad working class (George Jackson's "99%"), rather than originating in a specific workplace or church, say, the organizing model has no way to engage with them. An upsurge like Black Lives Matter, for instance, does not allow for winning over a majority of people in the *unbounded* constituency, because it is indefinitely expansive; it doesn't allow for structure tests, because there is no way to engage with everyone in the constituency; and there is no way to map the power structure of the constituency, because it is too expansive and indeterminate. The model just doesn't apply to such scenarios.

As a result, what the model prescribes, what it celebrates and trains organizers to do, is to *ignore* these upsurges. That is why McAlevee is so content to be dismissive of upsurges of movement activity that most leftists regard with much more seriousness.

This raises the question, however: what is the alternative to the organizing model? Now, McAlevee claims that the main alternative to her model is what she calls *the mobilizing model*, a model that she describes in the most unflattering terms. But I will offer a different account of a model of movement-building that takes mobilization seriously, which I will call **the self-mobilization model**.

A Self-Mobilization Model

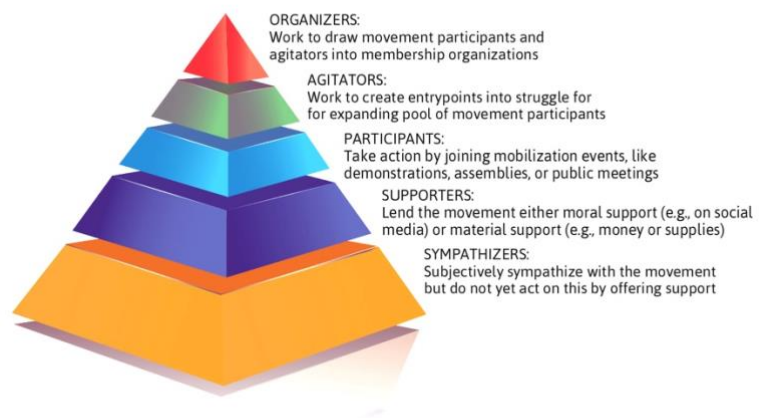
The model begins with an acknowledgement that, when upsurges of popular spontaneity or self-activity occur, a movement-building strategy should try to consolidate the influxes of people, energy and social ferment that these upsurges generate

It further assumes that, to consolidate and integrate these influxes, movement-building cannot restrict itself to engaging with bounded constituencies like workplaces or houses of faith, or even neighbourhoods, but must be receptive to the way people self-mobilize via **assembled constituencies**, which are neither permanent and spatially localized like bounded constituencies, nor indefinitely expansive like unbounded constituencies. An assembled constituency, which forms around a movement like Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park Revolt, and so on, is a temporary, spatially diffuse collectivity forged spontaneously (that is, by self-activity) through common struggle.

The model further recognizes the differentiated, pyramid-like structure of these assembled constituencies (see the pyramid graphic), which have a widest layer at the base, consisting of a **pool of sympathizers**, who wish the movement well, but do not try to support it actively; a somewhat narrower **pool of supporters**, who lend moral or material support, without actually participating in movement activities; above this, there is a narrower group, the **pool of participants**, who attend events and actions or public meetings; closer to the top of the pyramid, there is a still narrower group, the **pool of agitators**, people who work to create entry points into movement activity and avenues of integration into the movement, so that as many supporters and sympathizers are drawn into participation as possible; at the top of the pyramid-like structure is the **pool of organizers**, who try to draw agitators and participants into permanent *social movement organizations* working on the issues at the centre of the mobilization.

In light of this picture, the self-mobilization model of movement building tries, in advance of upsurges of popular spontaneity, to build movement infrastructure with **graduated commitment-requirements** at the entry points. By that I mean that people can be engaged at multiple levels, not only at levels that presuppose willingness to make a substantial commitment or take on substantial risk (as in the organizing model). People are always welcome to engage, even if their commitment levels are very low. At the same time, they are also welcome to engage at high levels of commitment, too. Basically, the model prioritizes the construction and maintenance of permanent "invitations" encouraging sympathizers to become supporters, supporters to become participants, participants to become agitators, agitators to become organizers.

The model further involves creating **accessible avenues of integration**, at every level of engagement. This means that the



movement offers flexible, differentiated forms of sustained connection with the movement, suited to multiple levels of engagement: people can join a social media network, they can subscribe to a newsletter, or get involved in a working group, or receive training in political skills, join a reading group, or -- importantly -- they can connect with and join a membership organization working on issues related to the mobilization. The point is, though, that they do not have to go to an organizing meeting or join a membership organization as the price of entry into the movement.

Next, the self-mobilization model tries to generate a sequence, ideally an **escalating sequence of empowering experiences** in the political efficacy through collective action, allowing people to learn in practice how popular mobilization can exercise power by means of disruption, and generate social ferment and debate around issues that may have long been ignored.

Finally, a crucial, but particularly difficult part of the self-mobilization model is that it requires that, even when the sporadic upsurge dissipates, the orientation of receptivity toward popular spontaneity, must be maintained, and the **infrastructure of movement-receptivity** has to be kept alive and open.

This “self-organization model” is certainly less well-developed, and probably less useful and important than McAlevey’s organizing model. I am very far from wanting to make the kind of bold and emphatic claims for the self-mobilization model that she makes for the organizing model. (On the contrary, I insist on a pluralistic and flexible approach to strategy, for reasons rooted in the logic of strategic interaction very generally, not just in this case.) Even so, I do want to insist that some such alternative to organizing, which takes sudden, broad-based, decentered upsurges of popular protest activity seriously as a precious resource from which movement-building work can draw strength, vitality, and crucially, *scale*.

On this last point, I couldn’t agree more with McAlevey’s insistence that today’s movements suffer, above all, from a disastrous failure to establish and maintain the capacity to operate on the scale needed to threaten intransigent elites and unresponsive systems of power. Where we disagree, obviously, is that I see protest upsurges as a crucial opportunity to, as she sometimes puts it, “scale up” our movements so that we can win.