



POLITICS

Back of the Yards

Lessons from a Community Organizer on Building Political Power

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Image: Courtesy the [Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council](#)

On the Wednesday after November's presidential election, I found myself in the Back of the Yards area of Chicago's South Side. I was there to meet with Roman Catholic priest David Kelly. Father Kelly is executive director of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, which he runs out of a converted school building on Fifty-first and Elizabeth. He and his team feed the hungry and bring together the perpetrators and victims of gang gun violence in the community.

The Back of the Yards neighborhood—once a sprawling, spewing, foul-smelling collection of stockyards, polluted streams, tenements, and churches—was the original industrial area of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the largest network of community-based organization in the United States, of which I am co-director. The first IAF organization—started by its founder, Saul D. Alinsky, in 1939—was called the Back of the Yards Council. It included representatives of several of the sixteen Roman Catholic parishes that served a once-dense neighborhood of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, Czechs, and others. At that time, each ethnic group had its own ethnic Catholic—or occasionally Lutheran—church, attended services in its

own language, went to taverns filled with fellow countrymen, and sent their kids to schools packed primarily with people from their own ethnicity. Whole European villages were transplanted into a few blocks of Chicago's South Side, but they were right across the street from another transplanted village from another nation, with another language and other traditions. Often the villages, jammed together, carried their old hatreds and prejudices about one another into the Chicago streets. The work at the stockyards forced most of the groups together. So did the union that represented those workers, the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, which was also a major member of the Back of the Yards Council.

A critical precedent to the extreme political polarization of the present moment is the balkanization of neighborhoods during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I was in Back of the Yards in my capacity as a working organizer, doing the kind of direct organizing work that I began exploring more than forty years ago. Specifically I was looking for leaders and institutions that wanted to work with our Chicago-area IAF affiliate, United Power for Action and Justice. These days in Back of the Yards, there is not a Pole or Lithuanian to be found. Most of the old ethnic parishes have folded, their churches, schools, rectories, and convents long shuttered or demolished. The stockyards are long gone. The river runs clear now. There is no belching smoke, no stench. There is now something called the Back of the Yards Industrial Park, on West Forty-seventh Street, which, as I drove by, seemed filled with more trucks than workers. In fact, as Fr. Kelly points out, there are almost no institutions left in the neighborhood: no large churches of any faith, no major employer, no bustling shopping strip, no hospital, just a few struggling churches and schools among blocks filled with vacant lots and boarded-up homes. Arriving too early for my appointment, I drove up and down the empty blocks trying to imagine the teeming tenements of the early twentieth century. Back then, all the senses were either stimulated or assaulted, and the interweaving of institutions and social relationships was nearly complete. Church, workplace, union hall, bowling league, parks program, ward office—people met and clashed, negotiated and collaborated, prayed and played. All of that institutional density and relational intensity is gone.

In the IAF we say that organizing is always a process of disorganization and then reorganization. Here, all around Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, is a world that has been steadily disorganizing for decades. But where is the reorganizing?

While the current extreme polarization in American politics is a prevailing theme in political discussions and election postmortems, we often forget a critical precedent, the balkanization of neighborhoods such as Back of the Yards during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sanford D. Horwitt, in his fine biography of Alinsky, *Let Them Call Me Rebel* (1989), describes a time when “political identities seemed distinct and discrete.” To say the least. While modern critics hyperventilate about Alinsky’s radicalism, they misunderstand the nature of his innovation in citizen organizing. It had nothing to do with left-wing or progressive conformity. In fact, twenty-five years later, in the 1960s, Alinsky would rail against the ideological purity on the left and the left’s lack of appreciation of the lives and struggles of working people, many of whom were fighting and dying in Vietnam. The Back of the Yards Council was radically different because, as Horwitt writes, its “political identity . . . seemed varied, even muddled.”

Saul Alinsky liked to preach, “No permanent enemies, no permanent allies, only permanent interests.”

Alinsky liked to preach, “No permanent enemies, no permanent allies, only permanent interests.” The council was not ideological enough for some of union radicals, yet was not loyal enough for the poohbahs in the Cook County Democratic Party machine. It was not Catholic enough for the most conservative ethnic pastors. It was not white enough for many of the European immigrants. And it was not progressive enough for the occasional Hyde Park liberal who happened to pass through. Yet it thrived for several years and provided Alinsky (and those of us who followed) with a laboratory for testing key tools of effective organizing. People and institutions that disagreed profoundly on other matters could and did work together on common concerns. In the process they built mature and complex public relationships with one another—relationships not of total agreement, but of mutual recognition and grudging respect and occasional moments of shared success and joy.

Over time the union engagement faded. Without the incentive of seeking remedy for the pressing issues of wages and workplace conditions, the mingling of ethnic and African American members decreased. The council problematically became focused on preserving Back of the Yards as a largely white enclave against the influx of minority families fleeing rattrap tenements in ghettos to the east and south. But the instinct and the drive to build organizations that attract unlike members and forge (often contentious) alliances—between conservatives, moderates, and liberals—endured in the IAF to this day.

Over seventy-five years the process of community dissolution that took place in Back of the Yards has been mirrored in thousands of U.S. communities. Everywhere the tightly-knit worlds of a dozen or so blocks—where workplace, church, neighborhood, recreation, tavern, and political affiliation were all deeply entwined—have given way to exurban enclaves, long commutes, gathered congregations, matchmaker websites, and fitness clubs filled with customers who don't know one another. A world where local news was critically important and closely followed—often delivered by local publishers and reporters and passed along by word of mouth—has been replaced by the constant flow of real and fake news arriving through social media. A world of physically imposing and present institutions and organizations has morphed into a culture of global economic dynamics and fitful national mobilizations built around charismatic figures.

I grew up in one of the thousands of American neighborhoods like Back of the Yards—West Garfield Park, about ten miles north and west of Fr. Kelly's Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation—so I know about the downsides and dangers of the world that has been lost. It could be incredibly claustrophobic. It treated people who were different—someone who liked to read, someone who was black, someone who decided not to marry and have kids, someone who didn't attend Mass—coldly and at times cruelly. It protected its institutions even when they failed catastrophically.

Great cities and great countries are made and shaped and driven by a critical mass of existing and new institutions.

When our grade school, Our Lady of the Angels, caught fire on a cold gray day in December 1958, killing ninety-two students and three nuns, there was a national outpouring of grief and sympathy. Fire safety laws and practices, long resisted by those who ran area schools, were finally upgraded. But the city's establishment—the Catholic mayor who started every day with Mass, the largely Catholic fire department that lacked ladders tall enough to reach the kids killed on the upper floor of the school, the legal establishment that depended on the Democratic machine for its living and that did not want to offend the archdiocese—made sure that even minimal blame would never reach the mayor or the cardinal. It took seven long years for a panel of judges to distribute modest settlements to families of children who were killed or terribly injured. The “hearings” to decide these settlements often took less than three minutes.

Eight years later, in 1966, an African American friend from another high school invited me to a Bears game. He and his father and uncle came to pick me up. My mother invited everyone in for coffee and cake before we left. My dad was nervous, never having welcomed a black person into our home, but was a gracious host. After the game, my parents had a meal waiting for all of us. That night, a cross was burned on our front lawn.

What was not clear to me then was that the Democratic machine that ran the ward and doled out patronage jobs and small contracts to a few of the families in our neighborhood was secretly cooperating with real estate interests, mortgage brokers, and redlining banks to profit from the wholesale movement of white families out of the area and black families in. The profits from this churn greased the insides of the machine. The costs of this churn haunted both the white families who sold low and the black families who bought high for generations. This pattern—a political party partnering with powerful insiders at the expense of its most loyal followers—was refined and modernized by both parties over the decades and “worked,” more or less, for both parties, until the last election.

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So you will not find me waxing nostalgic about the good old days. And yet I wonder what else was lost when all of those communities, all of those institutions, all of those dense webs of public relationships were lost. The habit of relating to people, including people you may not like or who may not like you—in physical space, over years and decades—is a public skill. It requires judgment, patience, courage, and a sense of the larger stakes. It forces people to decide when and how to act, or not act, when it is clear that avoidance or flight are not options. For instance, my mother swore that she would find the person who had burned that cross and confront him publicly. It took her years. But she eventually identified a kid who had been there that night and forced him to fess up. Then she found the fellow who lit the match and let him know how she felt about it. He was startled and ashamed. What happens when people are not conditioned or obligated to *contend* with one another and with their institutions in this way, when knotty problems can neither be deflected nor dismissed?



In Chicago our present-day Republican and Democratic parties evolved as the age of multiple local institutions and relative stability gave way to an age of dynamics and constant mobility. The Cook County Democratic Party perfected its mastery of electoral engineering and permanent incumbency just a few blocks north of Back of the Yards, in Bridgeport. Earlier in the century the party prided itself on its ability to deliver—a trashcan, a city job, a clean street—to its loyalists. But by 1955 a shift had occurred; Thomas Dyja writes in *The Third Coast* (2013) that the machine “no longer made any pretense of helping ‘regular guys’ work the system; the Machine *was* the system, and its purpose was to rake in money, create jobs, and keep blacks in their place yet still voting Democratic.” Whether this shift was unconscious or deliberate, its leaders had absorbed the fact that they did not really need to preserve working-class neighborhoods or improve the lot of those in poorer areas to retain their stranglehold on City Hall and Springfield. Neighborhood after neighborhood segregated even more deeply as contract sellers stripped the emerging African American working class of every last cent of savings and equity. The Poles and Lithuanians along Fifty-first Street moved west toward Midway Airport and out to the first ring of suburbs, selling low and buying high. The Croats, Irish, and Italians in West Garfield Park packed up and headed in the 1960s to the Chicago neighborhood of Austin, then to the inner ring of Cook County suburbs or out to DuPage County (the populous suburban county directly west of Chicago) in the decades that followed. For many this was no free-will trek in search of the American Dream; this was a forced march, with families hemorrhaging money with each successive move and leaving their communities, churches, and lifelong connections behind.

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This growing disconnect between neighborhood stability and electoral supremacy condemned neighborhood after neighborhood and city after city to dramatic, structural decline. In Chicago the white ethnic—and more recently the African American—working class voted with their feet: nearly a million fewer people now reside in the city than did when its population peaked at 3.6 million in 1950. The same trend has repeated in Detroit, Milwaukee, Gary, Cleveland, Baltimore, and elsewhere. The list of cities dominated by Democrats and doomed to deterioration is very long. Despite this the current loose alignment called the Democratic Party rode to glory in 2008 and 2012, helmed by a charismatic leader trained by machine politics and advised by campaign operatives trained in Cook County tactics and operations.

What is left of the modern Republican Party emerged in a very different way during this same period. Contrary to its gerontocratic reputation, the average Republican representative is actually younger than his or her Democrat counterpart by about five years. And these members did not typically grow up anywhere like Back of the Yards. They mostly were born and raised in suburbs and exurbs. In fact they are products of what William Schneider called “the suburban century” in his remarkable 1992 *Atlantic Monthly* piece “The Suburban Century Begins.”

Paul Ryan, who is forty-six years old, grew up forty miles from Madison, Wisconsin. Jim Jordan, fifty-two, grew up fifty miles from Columbus, Ohio. Mike Mulvaney, forty-nine, grew up in a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. Michele Bachmann, sixty, has spent much of her life in the suburbs of Minneapolis–Saint Paul. The list goes on and on. These leaders are products of sprawling, seemingly ever-expanding communities. Late nineteenth-century inner suburbs were designed and promoted as clean, prosperous, spacious enclaves for the wealthy and later for the comfortably middle class (as well as their service workers). The suburbs of the early and mid-twentieth century were something different, although they played off many of these same promises, gutting cities by enticing working families and companies with promises of yards, lower taxes, and less regulation—not to mention escape from encroachment by blacks. Then other, newer suburbs lured the same companies and families even further out with better offers. In the process, as in the shrinking cities, the construction, legal, real estate, and mortgage brokerage work just kept growing. The result was a sense of perpetual boom. As a result, a quality shared by these younger Republican political players, all weaned in such suburbs, is that they were born on third base but have gone through life believing they hit a triple.

While Obama’s White House team grew up in a culture of scarcity and urban shrinkage—which it alternately denied, deflected, and spun into political gold—the House Republican gang inherited a long wave of relative prosperity and steady growth, from which it has also obviously profited. Neither party has ever honestly contended with the daunting challenge of creating new work and new wealth, now that the growth engine has ground to a halt. Neither has ever tackled the dangerous decline of our basic national infrastructure. Neither has studied or started new enterprises without financial wizardry and in service of large-scale living-wage job generation. The leaders of both parties, in short, are predatory takers, not creative makers, as Rana Foroohar has brilliantly described in *Makers and Takers* (2016). For half a century, both crews kept floating, obliviously upward, in their separate bubbles.

The machine no longer made any pretense of helping ‘regular guys’ work the system; the machine was the system.

On November 9 both bubbles burst. On the Democratic side, many of the urban and near-suburban voters who gave Barack Obama two opportunities to take their concerns seriously stayed home. The continuing decline, combined with the stunning violence of the past summer in city after city, eroded whatever chance the party had of maintaining control of the White House.

On the Republican side, the breezy disregard in the primaries for the struggles of the barely working and non-working by all but one of the candidates led to a result that shocked the still-fair-haired congressional class as much as the national election stunned the old-line Democratic cartel.



Right after Trump’s election, an Italian reporter called to ask for my reaction. He said that he had interviewed many Americans and all said they were frightened for the future of their country and particularly concerned for their children. What, he wondered, did I think about that? The question angered me at first: “Why weren’t these same people frightened four years ago, or eight years ago, or sixteen years ago? All that time, kids have been shot down in our streets, poisoned by lead in their drinking water and windowsills, trapped in dangerous neighborhoods and crumbling schools, and deported in record numbers. Why are they so frightened *now*?” I shot back.

If I had thought longer, I would instead have quoted Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (now in Ukraine), whose saying was paraphrased to me by a young New York rabbi a few days after the election: “All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to freak yourself out.” People on the right spent eight years freaking themselves out, buying guns at an unprecedented rate, predicting Armageddon after every Obama move. Now it is people on the left doing the same. They have not yet stopped to reflect on why they long accepted the dreadful conditions that they now, finally, suddenly, dramatically, consider unacceptable.

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tackled the dangerous decline of our basic national infrastructure.

Instead of freaking out, I urge the left to reflect on the fate that has befallen our nation's institutions. When people ask me what makes a great city, they expect me to say something about a visionary mayor or a wave of new immigrants or the growth of cutting-edge technology and world-class knowledge workers. What I point to instead is institutions: great cities and great countries are made and shaped and driven by a critical mass of existing and new institutions. The example I use—the counterpoint to the Back of the Yards decline—is the rebuilding and repopulating since 1990 of East Brooklyn and a number of other New York neighborhoods that were equally bad.

After President Gerald Ford's infamous 1975 public rebuke of New York City's request for financial help—immortalized in the *Daily News* headline, “Ford to City: Drop Dead”—an unlikely collection of individuals and institutions came together. These included the public service union led by Victor Gotbaum and the investment firm headed by Felix Rohatyn, along with young and focused government figures such as Donna Shalala, as well as Peter C. Goldmark, who was serving as budget director for the tough-minded Democratic machine governor Hugh Carey. As in Back of the Yards, these people disagreed and clashed on many issues, but were able to find common ground around the survival of New York. In the decades that followed, ad hoc clusters of very different and often differing institutions came together or worked on parallel tracks to tackle and resolve three fundamental challenges, all considered intractable by most observers: the rebuilding of the abandoned and devastated neighborhoods of East Brooklyn, the South Bronx, upper and lower Manhattan, and other areas with more than 350,000 new and renovated homes and apartments; the refinancing and upgrading of a collapsing transit system; and the stabilization and reversal of the rate of violent crime. A fourth challenge—the improvement of the city's education system in part through the addition of 400 smaller public schools and 250 public charter schools—is still a work in progress. Our organizations in East Brooklyn and the South Bronx were just two of as many as a dozen significant third-sector organizations that worked with an initially reluctant mayor, Ed Koch, and a housing department that retooled itself to help meet the housing needs of the more than one million people who have poured into the city over the past twenty years. Some of these organizations, such as ours, were deeply grounded in local congregations and communities; others were arms of the corporate community; still others specialized in housing finance and technical assistance. One hears a great deal about how the mayors—Koch, David Dinkins, Rudy Giuliani, Michael Bloomberg, and now Bill de Blasio—

have played major roles in this dramatic revisioning of the city. Many of the individuals who led the effort, however, have never had their names appear in the papers, yet have been unsung shapers of the city's ongoing revival.

I recently attended the “going home” service at Mt. Sinai Church of God in Christ on Herkimer Street, Brooklyn, for one of those leaders, Bishop E. L. White, who in 1980 helped found East Brooklyn Congregations, an IAF affiliate. Then-Reverend White was the pastor of a small church, St. James Holiness Church in Brownsville, Brooklyn. It was located on a side street in an area that had once housed gravestone yards for the Jewish residents, described hauntingly by Alfred Kazin in his book *A Walker in the City* (1951). In 1980 the blocks around Rev. White's church were dangerous, buildings abandoned, vacant lots filled with discarded tires and trash, gunfire a common sound. White was a full-time transit worker, part-time pastor, and persistent in the organizing of congregations and other associations that would become East Brooklyn Congregations. Working with other pastors and lay people from denominations that differed profoundly on theology and practice, Rev. White convinced them to bracket those concerns so they could together focus on a scheme to demolish hundreds of derelict building; see to the placement of thousands of new street and traffic signs; push for higher standards of cleanliness and quality in local bodegas; and, eventually, construct thousands of affordable homes, the Nehemiah homes, which the organization built with the help of abatements from the city.

What about younger Americans, many of whom have little or no positive experience with institutions, whose limited political life is dominated by the social media?

One of the other founding leaders of EBC, Carmelia Goffe, passed away a few days after Bishop White. Like White, Goffe had been a transit worker, assigned to a tower in the subway system in spite of her chronic asthma. In 1980, when I first met her, she was living in an unheated flat with her three young sons on one of the most dangerous streets in East Brooklyn. She and fellow leaders were writing the grants that would provide some of the initial funding for the fledgling organization. She saved enough money to buy a Nehemiah home in Brownsville, where she raised her family and remained a leader in her community for thirty-six years.

Eighteen months ago she spoke at an assembly of five hundred homeowners, reflecting on the death of Ed Chambers, Alinsky's successor as executive director of the IAF.

Pastor [John] Heinemeier, Bishop White, and Fr. [John] Powis came together. Their first meeting was in a run-down tenement building on Dumont Avenue. A dark, dank, dilapidated place that reflected what was going on in our neighborhood. Mr. Chambers, a professional organizer from the IAF, said to us: ‘When you get yourselves organized and raise the money to get your organization started, call me back.’ I don’t believe Mr. Chambers thought it could be done. For that matter, I don’t think *we* thought it could be done. But a fire had been lit under us that made us come together—blacks, Hispanics, whites, Catholics, Protestants, and others. It was unprecedented. We held house meetings, one-on-ones, and we raised \$150,000 in dues. We called Ed Chambers back and told him we were ready to start East Brooklyn Congregations.

Goffe and Bishop White, like the early members of the Back of the Yards Council, did not become household names. But they saved East Brooklyn and helped save New York City as surely as any mayor or governor or banker or union leader did.

I confess that the funeral gathering at Mt. Sinai Church of God in Christ was on the older side. The deacons in their dark suits and the deaconesses in their white dresses were of my generation, most in their sixties. So, what about younger Americans, many of whom have little or no positive experience with institutions, whose limited political life is dominated by the social media that defines much of their lives?

Let me quote from a letter I received from a young person who came to Chicago three years ago to participate in an internship program sponsored by Episcopal Charities and Community Services. He grew up in a relatively wealthy family in northern California and then began to travel the country. Here is what Ian wrote:

"I grew up with a theoretical understanding of society and why it’s important. However my family situation always felt isolated from this ‘thing’ called community. Upon graduating from college, I felt drawn towards a ‘free’ life filled with idealistic values like poverty and wandering. The thing is, I was all wrong about ‘freedom.’ In Chicago, I came to understand that freedom is being part of the world and that one cannot belong to this world without institutions.

That all being said, employment is not the only kind of institution I want to be a part of. Here in Oakland, I joined a church. . . . However, the process of becoming part of this faith community has been difficult for me. I think I have been conditioned with the very ‘millennial’ ideal that any social group one belongs to must be perfect. There is such an emphasis in my generation on having ‘best friends’ and being around people who have your exact worldview. This mentality is quite possible in college, but misses the point in the real world. I learned in Chicago that ‘best friends’ are a part of a private life, not necessarily a public

one. Finding a little corner of society where everybody agrees with me is not a good goal to have. This church is not perfect, but it is a means to being a part of this neighborhood and this city as a whole. It is a public life. I have made it a goal to go to every event this church has (i.e., Bible studies/community dinners) and actually become part of it.

Just down the street from my house is a park where all the kids from the neighborhood play soccer and basketball. It occurred to me that this public park is absolutely a social institution. The guys who play there do not go to school or church (for the most part), and the courts are where they feel like they belong. . . . I have started going down to the park just to get exercise, but I want to start treating it like an institution. Through playing soccer with these guys, at a physical location that belongs to us all, I can be a part of this neighborhood. Physical 'belonging' to a geographical location is becoming a lost art in this digitally connected world.

Since leaving Chicago, I have started to articulate my dreams for the future through institutions I can be part of. . . . I have noticed that the more I belong to communities, the more energy I have. With isolation—no matter how 'spiritual' or idealistic it may be—comes lethargy."

Ian, at age twenty-five, has begun to learn the critical lesson of Bishop White, seventy-eight at the end of his life, and Goffe, sixty-eight at the end of her life—not to mention of Fr. Kelly, who is still very much with us. How many more young men and women learn this lesson will depend on them. Although it is too soon to tell, there are signs that some younger Americans are revisiting the question of what it takes to build an institution. After the election, **a group of former congressional staffers** stopped freaking out fairly quickly and put together **a practical guide** for themselves and other young progressives. They produced what we in organizing would call a beginning power analysis of the Tea Party. They took the time to learn how the Tea Party evolved as an institution and what strategies and tactics were used to build power and generate impact. The guide emphasizes that the Tea Party was “small, focused, and dedicated . . . almost purely defensive.” You don’t have to be young or progressive to recognize a group of people thinking practically and institutionally, not emotionally or ideologically. These former staffers have witnessed firsthand the effectiveness of another set of very different organizers and leaders. They have already rejected a tendency in American thought that goes at least as far back as Emerson and Thoreau, namely, a devotion to the “infinite of the private man.” In *Walden* (1854), Thoreau whined, “But, wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society.” Institutions might lack the luster of apps, networks, and theatrical mobilizations, but, when well built, they offer their members the opportunity to build real power and generate profound and lasting impact.

Institutions are messy, if not dirty. But rejecting them comes with a very high price.

Whether future generations relearn the habits of institution-building also depends on the willingness of adults, such as those Ian met in Chicago, to agitate them. Many people are understandably put off by the limitations—the moderation, the generational time frame—of institutional life. Institutions are messy, if not dirty. But that rejection comes with a very high price: a loss of power, a loss of stability, a vulnerability to all kinds of attractive substitutes that flare up and fade out just as quickly, and an inability to extend or improve upon a living faith in community or party or country.

This is the work—the revitalization of our existing institutions and the creation of a next generation of new institutions—that will make or break the American experiment going forward.

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