

Sociology/PJS 111– **Making Social Change Happen: Grassroots Activism and Community Organizing**¹ Spring 2013

Mon., Wed. – 3:00 to 4:15

Prof. S. Ostrander (susan.ostrander@tufts.edu) - Office hours: Mon. & Wed. 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. *and* by appointment, Eaton 119

This course focuses on one of the most important and effective methods for creating social change: grassroots community organizing. The principles and practices of organizing can be used in various kinds of communities including those defined by geographical space and shared identity or interest, and in communities that are global as well as local.

The broad goals of this kind of organizing are social, economic, and political justice, and a stronger democracy. While organizing is used to advance conservative, liberal, or progressive goals, this class – and most of the literature on this topic – deals with progressive organizing. This means organizing by people who have historically been excluded or marginalized from participation in mainstream politics and who have lacked access to valued resources and equal opportunities.

Grassroots community organizing aims toward structural or systemic change meaning changing underlying conditions and circumstances in society that are the root causes of the injustice. As a book for this class says, “Social change is characterized by concrete alterations of an unequal social structure” (Pyles 2009:12). Often these root causes are found in established policies and practices of key societal institutions such as those dealing with health, education, employment, crime, violence, war and peace, the environment, voting and other means political participation, etc. Frequently “the system” (i.e. the established ways of doing things, the policies and practices) in these institutions marginalizes or excludes large groups of people, whether intentionally or not. Examples include how the healthcare system is set up to meet (or not meet) the health needs of the GLBT population, how the education system is set up to meet (or not) the educational needs of low income students, how housing is financed so that owning one’s own home is prohibitive for low income people, how secure and stable employment is accessible and available (or not) to most working people, how the political system fails to support democratic participation or limits participation to voting, how the military-industrial complex facilitates war and makes achieving peace difficult, how the legal system poses barriers to ending sexual violence, how various institutions pose obstacles to addressing climate change, etc. etc. (Add your own examples!)

Through organizing, the *people most affected* by the particular injustice or “problem” gain *power* to create the change *they* define as necessary. Organizers call these people “constituents” and they are the people to be organized. Social change organizing has 3 main broad goals or criteria for success:

- (a) improve the *actual day to day conditions* of people’s lives;

¹ This syllabus is long, and it contains most of what you need to know to stay on track with Soc. 111. **Keep up with it and follow it carefully**. Guest speaker dates are subject to change.

- (b) address the *underlying causes* of those conditions;
- (c) alter in small or large ways the *relations of power* so that the people previously excluded become part of making key decisions that affect their own lives. This may involve creating a new organization.

Your instructor's experience teaching this class suggests that it can be challenging for many students to become clear about the specific *kind* of social change sought through grassroots organizing. Clarity about this is essential to designing the organizing plan that is the main requirement for Soc. 111. *Systemic* change goes beyond "helping" individuals who are experiencing the problem by, e.g., providing services, counseling, and various kinds of education and training. These and other kinds of "help" are very important. They often do make the lives of some individuals better and may even save lives. However, more is needed to address the underlying reasons for why so many people need help in the first place, and that is what organizing does!

Creating systemic social change also requires much more than changes in thinking (attitudes, beliefs, mindset, etc.) or in raising awareness. It goes also beyond simply passing new laws. While these steps may be valuable *parts* of the process of organizing, they are *by no means sufficient* to constitute what for organizers is "real" social change. Looking back at the 3 criteria for successful organizing, can you see why this is so?

This approach to social change is also different from change led or brought about by "elites" or "experts" such as politicians, lawyers, media figures, educators, researchers, service-providers, foundation executives etc. In grassroots organizing, individuals like these if they are in positions of power and decision-making are often "targets" who are pressured by organizing groups to *agree* to making the desired change. Sympathetic elites or experts ("allies") may serve as valuable resources offering specialized knowledge, information, and monetary support; do research; offer legal, financial, managerial services etc. etc. While these kinds of social change agents may indeed create systemic change, in grassroots organizing, the leadership comes from the people most affected by the issue or problem (typically referred to as "constituents") not from these experts or elites. Organizing differs, also, then, from "advocacy" where someone besides the people most affected by an issue speaks "on their behalf" instead of organizing them to speak on their *own* behalf.

Paid community organizers often assist grassroots constituents to organize effectively on their own behalf. One of our main texts for this course is a training manual for professional organizers. (As you may know, President Barack Obama began his career as a community organizer.) Some of the students who have taken this class are now pursuing careers as organizers. We will learn about some of the best known places such as the Highlander Center where civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks were trained. Most of you will probably not become professional organizers. For you, this class offers valuable knowledge and skills to create real social change as an active citizen in other careers, and/or as a member of various communities outside of paid work.

Sociology major learning objectives: This course meets the following learning objectives for Sociology majors <http://ase.tufts.edu/sociology/programsCoursesMajor.asp>

- the ability to examine social structures analytically and critically;
- an understanding of how social constructs such as gender, race, and class influence people's social positions and organize their daily lives;
- knowledge of how people change society by forming social movements and using the media;
- in-depth knowledge of a subfield in the discipline.

Course requirements and format: We begin the class with reading and discussion about what is meant by structural and institutional change and with examples of organizing "campaigns" which have sought to bring about this kind of change.

You are expected to attend class regularly, come to class having read and reflected on the reading, and participate thoughtfully in class discussions. Your major written assignment is a step-by-step organizing *plan* around some specifically defined social justice issue of your choice. Your plan will include how to: (a) build a grassroots constituency to work on the issue, (b) develop grassroots leaders to lead your effort, (c) define the specific social change goal you seek, and (d) design and implement an organizing strategy to achieve that change. The final paper from this plan counts for one third of your grade.

Two-thirds of your final grade is based on the numerical average of all your grades in each of the five 3 to 4-page written assignments (see below). For your final paper you have the opportunity to revise and integrate each of the shorter papers you have done for each step of your plan to frame one comprehensive organizing plan.

***Each written assignment in your plan builds on the previous one. Information discussed in class is essential to your doing these assignments. It will, therefore, be extremely difficult if not impossible to catch up if you miss classes or fall behind. Please see the instructor immediately if you are not clear about assignments or the reading or you are having any sort of difficulty in attending class or completing work on time.

Two required books are available for purchase in the university bookstore. Additional readings will be provided or can be accessed on line, see links below.

-Loretta Pyles. 2009. *Progressive Community Organizing: A Critical Approach for a Globalizing World*. N.Y.: Routledge.

-Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, Steve Max. 2010 (4th edition). *Organizing for Social Change*. Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press.

We will host several guest speakers, see films, and have small group discussions as well as full class ones

COURSE OUTLINE:

I.What will you learn here and how will you learn it? (Wed. Jan. 16)

*No class Mon. Jan. 21- Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

II. An introduction to community and to *systemic* social change from the point of view of progressive grassroots organizing: How is this similar and different from how you may have previously thought about social change?

Wed. Jan. 23 (Monday at Tufts) - Read Loretta Pyles, 2009. *Progressive Community Organizing*. Preface and chapter one "Introduction."

Look at: http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/09/enough_already_lets_drop_the_i-word_hate_speech.html (What do you think about this campaign? What other examples of this kind of media campaign do you know about? How is this similar and different to the kind of institutional/structural change that is our focus here?)

III. Why are you interested in and/or committed to social change? What motivates you to want to be a social change agent? (Consider your personal history, social identity and location, values, etc.) What are the *issues* you are most interested in?

Mon. Jan. 28 – Read Pyles, ch. 2 "The Self-Aware Organizer."

Discussion in class will include instructor's summary of a study of white racial justice activists as one example of a commitment to social change. Is what sociologist Mark R. Warren found about these individuals similar to your own commitment to various social change issues? (*Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*, 2012. Oxford University Press.)

IV. What does organizing for social change look like? What is some history about grassroots organizing in the U.S.?

Wed. Jan. 30 - VIDEO in class: "The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy." Read Randy Stoecker, "Community Organizing and Social Change," 2009. *Contexts* vol. 8, no. 1: 21-25 (handout); plus Bobo et al, Preface, chapters 1 and 2.

V. What are some main theories that guide organizing?

Mon. Feb. 4– Pyles, ch. 3 "Theories and Ideas for the Progressive Organizer"

VI. What are some different approaches to organizing?

Wed. Feb. 6– Pyles ch. 5 "Critical Organizing Frameworks"; and Akelsberg, "Communities, Resistance, and Women's Activism: Reflections on Democratic Theory" (from Martha A. Ackelsberg, 2010. *Resisting Citizenship: Feminist Essays on Politics, Community, and Democracy*. Routledge).

Mon. Feb. 11 - *Your professor will bring to class today several news articles from the past few years about grassroots organizing in relation to some specific social justice issue. Can you see from the articles the specific changes in societal conditions and circumstances being sought? We will break into small groups for part of this class to discuss what theories, approaches, and practices of organizing you can see there.

Optional: Find your own *news* article (not an opinion piece) that provides this kind of description. (Lexis Nexis is one good database for this.)

VII. How is organizing connected to social movements and what can organizers learn from social movements

Wed. Feb. 13 - Read Pyles ch. 4 “Learning from Social Movements”; and Bobo et al. Chap. 3 “Choosing an Issue.” *Begin work* on ASSIGNMENT ONE and bring your questions to class today!

*No class on Mon. Feb. 18. Tufts closed for Presidents’ Day.

Wed. Feb. 20 - ****ASSIGNMENT ONE** due at the beginning of class. In 3 or 4 double-spaced pages in 12 point font with one-inch margins, (a) *name the specific problem* (not as simple as it may initially seem!) which your organizing plan will address [NOTE: *not* something vague and general such as unequal education, high unemployment, poor healthcare, or air pollution. While you may *begin* thinking with this kind of general idea, your research (see below) should help you to come to a more specific naming of your chosen problem, one that can actually be addressed by an organizing plan. See Bobo et al. ch. 3.]: (b) describe who, i.e. what *groups, are most affected* by the problem (e.g. age, gender, race, income level, etc); (c) briefly summarize what is known about the *systemic causes* of the problem and the main *solutions have been recommended and/or tried* and with what *results*. You will do this in more detail in a later assignment, and you need not at this point identify the specific solution (issue) that your plan will bring about. That will come later for reasons we will discuss. LABEL EACH SECTION OF YOUR PAPER a, b, c.

You will need to do some research and/or use readings from other classes you have taken to complete this assignment successfully. Be careful not to only use information that comes from the websites of organizations that have a “stake” in putting a particular slant on the problem. Use instead respected news (not opinion) sources and/or published articles in social science journals from databases like Google Scholar or Sociological Abstracts. Provide a list of your sources using reference format in Pyles’ bibliography (p. 175...) Do not use footnotes for citations but rather where needed cite directly in the text (e.g. Pyles 2009:12).

Thurs. Feb. 21 (Monday at Tufts) – Class cancelled!

Mon. Feb. 25- GUEST SPEAKER: Liam Walsh-Millett, former student in this class, UNITE, organizing hotel workers. Optional VIDEO to see on your own: “Living Wage” about student organizing at Harvard University that improved the wages of janitorial workers.

VIII. Building your constituency and recruiting members, identifying and developing grassroots leaders, finding allies (coalitions and partners),

Wed. Feb. 27 – Pyles chap. 6, “Organizing People, Constituencies and Coalitions; and Bobo et al. ch. 9, 10, 11,16; Skim read ch. 20, 21, 22.

Mon. March 4 - ****ASSIGNMENT TWO** due in class. In 3 or 4 pages, write your plan for each of the 3 steps above in the organizing process. LABEL EACH SECTION OF

YOUR PAPER a, b, c and be sure to address each question! (a) How, specifically, will you recruit people to join you in working on the issue/problem you have identified? What exactly will you say, when, where and how to get them involved? Remember that your main recruitment is among people most affected by/experiencing the problem you have chosen! (b) How will you identify and develop grassroots leaders from the people you have recruited? What kind of training will you offer? What opportunities will there be for them to develop and practice their new skills? (c) What other groups or organizations might be willing to work with you, why do you think they would be good partners, how will you approach them, and what issues or problems could arise in your partnership?

X. Creating a structure for decision-making and finding resources

Wed. March 6– Pyles chap. 7, “Toward Empowering Organizations”; and Bobo et al. ch. 12, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25.

Mon. March 11 - ** ASSIGNMENT THREE due in class. In 3 or 4 pages, lay out the organizational/administrative and decision-making structure you will build to address your issue/problem, as well as sources for monies to support your work. Address specifically the issues raised in Bobo et al, labeling as before each section a, b,c etc.: (a) What kind of staff will your organization have if any? (b) Will you incorporate as an independent 501c3 or as a 501c4 (and why), or will you choose another organization to be your fiscal sponsor, and, if so, what other organization and why? (c) Who will be the decision-makers in your group (e.g. what will be the role of all members, board of directors, staff in making decisions about goals, strategy, etc.?) (d) Who will be on your board of directors, and how and by whom will they be chosen? (e) How will decisions be made, e.g. consensus, modified consensus, vote, etc.? (f) How and from where you will raise monies to support your work, e.g. membership dues, foundation and/or government grants, individual contributions etc.?

XI. Refining and framing your issue

Wed. March 13 - Pyles chap. 8 “Language Matters, Issue Framing and Communication”; Smock, ch. 6; Bobo et al, review ch. 3 on “Choosing an Issue,” read ch. 6 *(“Framing the Issue”), 17.

**Spring Break March 17 to 24.

XII. Building and maintaining solidarity among your constituency

Mon. March 25– Pyles ch. 10 “Toward Solidarity”

Wed. March 27- GUEST SPEAKER: Warren Goldstein-Gelb, Executive Director of a Somerville immigrant rights organization. <http://www.welcomeproject.org/>

Mon. April 1 - ASSIGNMENT FOUR due in class - *Based on library/on-line research* you conduct on your own, summarize in about 3 pages what resource “experts” have found about the systemic root causes of your issue or problem. (Staff at Tisch Library may be useful to you in locating this information.) CITE ALL OF YOUR SOURCES COMPLETELY AND CAREFULLY. Include all of the following: author, date of

publication, title of article or book, where article published or (if a book) name of publisher. You need not include the actual database where you found this source. If your source is the website of an organization, be very careful to choose reputable research organizations (e.g. government sources, foundations, research centers at universities, etc.) Be cautious about information from organizational websites that “have a stake” in *their* own point of view about a problem and what they think is *the* correct solution to that problem, that is, use these sources but include a caveat

Then in a 4th page or so, consider one or more *specific and achievable* changes in relation to your issue/problem that could create real improvement in people’s lives, address root causes of the “problem” they are experiencing, and change the relations of power so that they have some on-going established role in future key decisions on this and other issues that affect their lives. These are the criteria by which the social change you have chosen as a goal will be evaluated so be sure to keep them in mind!

XIII. Identifying the specific change your and your constituents will aim to achieve, and designing strategies, tactics, and actions to achieve it

Wed. April 3– Pyles ch. 9, “Tactics for Change”; Bobo, Kendall, and Max ch. 4, 5, 7, 8, 14, 15.

Mon. April 8 – GUEST SPEAKER: To Be Announced.

Wed. April 10 - ****ASSIGNMENT FIVE-** In about 3 or 4 pages, first, identify clearly in a sentence or two the *specific* social change you and your group will achieve, keeping in mind the 3 criteria from Assignment Four. Then lay out the overall strategy and the main specific actions (“tactics”) you and your group will conduct to reach the social change goal you have set. Recall Bobo’s definitions of strategy as “the overall design for building the power to compel someone [the target] to give your organization what it wants”; and tactics as “the individual steps in carrying out a strategy.” This will require you to identify the “target,” and to draw *specifically* on examples of strategies and tactics from Bobo et al (see chapters assigned for April 3). Multiple tactics may be necessary.

****No class Mon. April 15 – Patriot’s Day**

XIV. Connecting your organizing issue to broader and long-term change

Wed. April 17 – Pyles ch. 12 “Global Justice”; Bobo et al ch. 26. Akelsberg, “Democracy and (In)equality: Community Activism and Democracy in a Time of Retrenchment” (from Akelsberg, 2010, see above).

Mon. April 22 – Student presentations

Wed. April 24 – Student presentations

Mon. April 29 – Evaluation and Review

Your **final comprehensive organizing plan** combining revised versions of all sections from assignment two to seven is due no later than **Monday, May 6** by 4 p.m. in Professor Ostrander’s mailbox in Eaton 102. The plan should be about 18 pages in length, with appropriate citing of sources. Hard copy only accepted.

