

Abstract: Toward a Theory of Social Organizing

Megan Hyska

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This paper lays some groundwork for a theory of what it is to organize people. While scholars of, and participants in, social movements, electoral politics, and organized labor are deeply engaged in contrasting different theories of how we should organize, and while social ontologists are deeply engaged in characterizing the targets and products of such organizing (e.g. social groups and movements of varying kinds), less has been written recently about what organizing itself is.

It might be supposed that a theory of organizing would fall straightforwardly out of an account of what it is to be an organized group. If, for instance, you think that such a group is constituted by a structure of individuals connected by certain (functional) relations (e.g. Ritchie 2013, 2015, 2020; Fine 2020) then surely organizing is just whatever brings it about that individuals bear these relations to one another. Certainly this is part of what organizing is. However, note that if we leave the account there, there would be no principled way of describing some group-types as more organized than others. This in turn means that there will be no principled way of describing a movement, group, or other social system as becoming better organized over time. Nor will it do to briskly equate greater organization to a greater number of nodes in the structure, or a greater diversity of relations, since both of these are compatible with alterations to the system that are intuitively described as making it less organized. A theory capable of generating comparative organization judgments is needed in order to accommodate the way that social movement theorists, for instance, talk about organization as a gradient.

Given that it is natural to think about organizing as enabling more ambitious collective actions, one might alternatively think that a theory of organizing would fall out of an account of group agency. Organizing, one might think, is whatever brings new collective agents into existence, or somehow augments the agency of an existing collective agent. Such a view must of course be able to say what it is to augment group agency. But the more fundamental issue is that some systems paradigmatically described as organized, like social movements, are often populated by a heterogeneous range of individuals and constituent groups, who do not always engage in the sort of extensive tactical coordination, deliberation, forming of views about one another's intentional states, or swearing of reciprocal commitments that theories of collective agency often demand (e.g. List and Pettit 2011).

By drawing attention to the space between theories of group ontology and agency and a theory of organizing, I hope to make clearer what the desiderata on a successful theory of organizing will be.