

Toward a Theory of Social Organizing

(Extended Abstract)

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While scholars of, and participants in, social movements, electoral politics, and organized labor are deeply engaged in contrasting different theories of how political actors *should* organize—vertically or horizontally? Around electoral goals or mass movements? Within or across identity groups? By leveraging the power of an existing base of support or first converting many more people to the cause?—less has been recently written about what social organizing *is*. This paper aims to answer that question. Methodologically, I approach that task as one of engineering a concept of organizing that 1) includes paradigm cases while 2) not massively overgenerating, 3) not trivializing the connection between organizing and political effectiveness, and 4) not begging the question in favor of any substantive political position about what sort of organizing is best. The hope is to end up with a politically neutral but metaphysically substantive concept of organizing that can allow debates about how, and even whether, to organize to proceed with greater clarity.

Intuitively, social organizing involves bringing about some kind of collectivity among people, and it's natural to suppose that the kind of collectivity concerned might be one of those that has received a lot of attention from social metaphysicians and others over the last few decades, such as corporate group-hood (i.e. groups like clubs and organizations, not like women and left-handed people) or collective intentionality. My negative claim in this paper is that social organizing needn't create a group, at least not a group as theorized in any recent account, and also needn't bring about any sort of collective practical intentionality.

We shouldn't say that organizing always brings about a new or more complex group, because this excludes cases of internal organizing. Internal organizing characteristically shuffles who in an organization fills which functional roles, without necessarily altering membership or the functional structure itself. This means that internal organizing doesn't create a new group, at least not according to any account that individuates groups by membership, or according to Katherine Ritchie's (2013, 2015, 2020) structuralist account of groups.

We shouldn't say that organizing always creates a new shared intention because there are paradigmatic instances of organizing in which the members of a system don't have intentional states in common in the way required by the

influential characterizations of shared intention associated with Michael Bratman (1993)—who requires that every individual intend that they, the collective, phi—or Margaret Gilbert (1989, 2014)—who requires that every individual have at least at one point openly committed to phi-ing. While accounts of full-on collective agency (e.g. List and Pettit 2011, Tollefson 2015) typically don’t require all individual constituents to commonly have any particular intentional states in the way that one-off shared intention does, we likewise shouldn’t say that organizing always brings about a new collective agent, because this will mean that systems that already constitute collective agents aren’t susceptible to further organizing, thereby running up against cases like internal organizing.

In short, a theory of organizing doesn’t fall immediately or trivially out of work in either the group ontology or collective intentionality literatures; rather, it requires us to think carefully about other, less theorized, varieties of collectivity.

My positive claim in this paper is roughly that social organizing is a matter of making individuals’ actions undertaken as means to a particular goal better complement one another, allowing more of them to be indispensable parts of the causal story of how that goal comes to be achieved. I lay this view out in more detail by characterizing a construct I call “agential efficiency”.

Agential efficiency is not the same thing as mere effectiveness, in the same way that a car being fuel efficient is separable from it in fact getting to its destination. Imagine a set of three individuals such that each member has G as a goal. Now consider a scenario in which G is satisfied as a result of the individuals’ G-directed activity— that is, as a result of actions that any individual in the set undertook as an intentional means to achieving G. The agents in this set were, therefore, effective with respect to G. But what we might further ask is whether this collection of individuals was efficient – more specifically, whether it was efficient with respect to its constituent members’ G-directed actions. A more precise way of asking this is to ask what proportion of constituents’ G-directed actions were causally relevant to G’s taking place.

Perhaps what we see is that many of the steps toward G were overdetermined; two different individuals were needlessly replicating each other’s work along the way, for instance. Or perhaps we see that actually the vast majority of the G-directed actions taken by the individuals of the collection ended up irrelevant to the accomplishment of G. In such cases we may judge that although the collection was effective, it wasn’t economical with its constituents’ exercises of agency— it was agentially inefficient. In broad strokes, a system is more agentially efficient with respect to some goal, G, when a higher proportion of its constituents’ G-directed actions form part of the causal chain that brings about G in the nearest world in which G takes place. And my view is that social organizing requires an intervention that increases a system’s agential efficiency with respect to some goal. The formation of groups and collectively intentional configurations, I point out, is often a very good means by which to increase agential efficiency. But in my view, a satisfactory account will connect organizing directly to increased agential efficiency, rather than to these contingent means by which to achieve it.