

Class Matters in an Age of Empire: 'Fugitive Democracy' and "Fugitive Christianity" in the Quest for Justice

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Abstract. This paper seeks to make visible a key lynchpin of Empire—that of class exploitation—and to situate the reality of class within the multiple, interlocking oppressions of Empire. Further, it depicts how working-class people use collective power to resist Empire, through tools and strategies of faith-based organizing, similar to popular education methods, Citizenship Schools, and organizing effectively deployed during the civil rights era.

Many biblical scholars today suggest that scripture can be read as a history of faithful resistance against Empire.¹ For Walter Brueggemann, scripture is narrative witness to a God who is allied against Empire, who intervenes for the lowly ones, and who invites us to a future shaped like the *basileia* of God.² The theological symbol *basileia*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us, connotes a political vision that appealed to the oppositional imagination of people victimized by the Roman imperial system. It envisions a world free of hunger, poverty, oppression, and exploitation of the vulnerable, especially immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor.³ Biblically grounded faith compels us to disrupt Empire, in witness to an alternative vision.

An immediate challenge we face, however, lies in the difficulty of seeing and comprehending what's actually going on, for the very nature of Empire is to secure hegemony—the consent of the dominated—by supplying symbols, ideologies, values, and practices of cultural, socio-political, and economic life, such that conditions and causes of unequal power and privilege remain hidden, normalized, and taken for granted.

This paper seeks to make visible a key lynchpin of Empire, that of class exploitation, and to situate the reality of class within multiple, interlocking oppressions, i.e., the “matrix of domination” which is part and parcel of Empire.

¹Cf. Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 7. In this paper I use Empire as an extended metaphor to refer to the facts of how ruling-class elites in the U.S., comprised of capitalists along with elites in the military-industrial-congressional complex, use over-accumulated power and wealth to exercise hegemony over the masses of ordinary people in the U.S. and around the globe, doing so through military, political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and symbolic means, seen and unseen, direct and indirect, formal and informal. The major “pistons” that drive contemporary Empire include unrestrained neoliberal corporate capitalism, economic globalization, imperialism (including cultural and religious imperialism), and militarism (which has become the handmaiden to U.S. capitalist interests around the globe).

²Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 25.

³Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Critical Feminist Biblical Studies: Remembering the Struggles, Envisioning the Future,” in *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views*, ed. Mary E. Hunt, (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2010), 96.

My thesis is that if Christian religious educators are to help believers be faithful to their baptismal vocation, and their call to engage in public life and to restrain Empire, then we need a conceptual grasp of what class is, and how classism shapes (fractures!) our common life. In the worship liturgy of various denominations, candidates for baptism are asked: “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever form they present themselves?” In shaping educational ministry, the church would do well to keep asking what it takes to equip lay people to live out this baptismal vow, faithfully and effectively.⁴

Schools of Thought about Class

Class is a hotly contested sociological notion, and there are at least four broad approaches to conceptualizing it. One school focuses on the cultural dimensions of class, and on symbolic representations, such as “the respectable class” or “white trailer trash,” based on taste, preference, lifestyle, etc. Another approach uses the word class in an objective, *gradational* way. The standard image, as in Dennis Gilbert’s model, is of rungs on a ladder that correspond to the upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, lower, and underclass.⁵

The Weberian school conceptualizes class in *relational* terms.⁶ In Weber’s framework, a person’s class position is seen in terms of her or his relation to the market, while in Marx the focus is on the relation to the means of production. Weber generated a three-component framework—a complex interplay between class, status group, and power—for comprehending a person’s “life chances,” and for explaining the socio-economic stratification of society.⁷

A fourth school—foundational to the rest of this paper—is based in the Marxist conception that capitalist development in a society leads to the formation and polarization of two classes with fundamentally opposing interests, the capitalists (bourgeoisie) and the laborers (proletariat), as well as a third class (the petit bourgeoisie) whose interests straddle the other two.⁸ Capitalists own the businesses, corporations, factories, machinery, and all other materials necessary for the production of goods and services. Workers and laborers have only their own bodies and labor power, which they sell to owners for a fixed wage. Owners and employers use various means to ensure that labor creates much more value than what workers get compensated for; they then appropriate the “surplus value” of labor for their own exclusive advantage. Given

⁴ Further, the task of reducing classism provides an ideal basis for interfaith cooperation. Inasmuch as class exploitation is an injustice that cuts across gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation, age, and religious identity, and inasmuch as a vision of God as the “Utterly Just One” resonates across many faith traditions, there exists a broad common ground on which Christians may stand in the public square arm-in-arm with persons of diverse faith traditions, and work cooperatively to reduce injustice, restrain Empire, and seek the common good.

⁵ Dennis Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2008), 231.

⁶ Erik Olin Wright, “Social Class,” *Encyclopedia of Society Theory*, ed. George Ritzer (Sage Publications Online), <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Social%20Class%20--%20Sage.pdf> [accessed March 17, 2012], 2.

⁷ The work of Pierre Bourdieu is a variation of this school; he contributed the notion of class habitus, and the importance of access to various forms of “capital.” Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁸ David Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle Class Left* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 225.

the extreme degree to which capitalists “live off the labor of others while at the same time enjoying the social and political power that accrues by controlling the surplus product,” the relationship between capitalists and laborers, Marx argued, is inherently based on exploitation.⁹

In the neo-Marxian view, class is seen not in terms of income (or cultural lifestyle), but rather in terms of *vast differentials in power*—albeit power accrued precisely through eye-popping differentials in wealth and income. Michael Zweig thus declares, “When I talk about class, I am talking about power. Power at work, and power in the larger society. Economic power, and also political and cultural power.”¹⁰ This power operates to the tremendous benefit of an elite few and the tremendous burden of many others, especially the working-class.¹¹

Asymmetrical power arrangements in the workplace do not stay confined there. They leap out and shape all other institutions and practices of society; there is no neutral space. The asymmetries—of power and privilege, of social deference and respect, of voice and authority, of access to choices and options—get transferred from one setting to another, until all of society is colonized by classist relations. Classism extends into the realms of culture, media, economics, education, politics, and even religious and symbolic arenas.

The “New Class”

Contrary to the notion that the U.S. is a mostly middle-class society, Zweig demonstrates that the workforce is actually 62 percent working class, only 36 percent middle class, and 2 percent corporate elite or capitalist class.¹² The middle today consists primarily of a “new class” of non-capitalist professionals—sometimes called the Professional Managerial Class (PMC)—situated between the capitalists and the working class. It shares interests with each, but is not fully identifiable with either.¹³ The PMC enjoys class-related power derived from “ownership” of special knowledge.¹⁴ In this view, *capital*, *labor*, and *knowledge* are all three seen as basic and essential to the production of goods and services. Each component involves a distinctive class, based on ownership of one of these resources. Economist Chuck Barone explains, these

⁹ Croteau, *Politics*, 224.

¹⁰ Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 1.

¹¹ As a group, Zweig explains, the working-class is comprised of people over whom much power is exercised while they lack opportunity to exercise any significant degree of power. They are situated in their workplaces and in society such that they must constantly take orders, rarely with the right to give orders. They have little or no work autonomy, are seldom encouraged to exercise creativity and personal judgment in their work; have no officially recognized authority and expertise, are given few opportunities to develop their capabilities or pursue work-enhancing opportunities, and often have jobs that are dirty, demeaning, and dangerous.

¹² Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 29.

¹³ Croteau, “Politics,” 230. The name “Professional-Managerial Class” was first articulated by Barbara and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 5-45. Other names include “new middle class” and “new petty bourgeoisie.” While scholars agree that a non-capitalist class exists, there is an extensive debate on how to conceptualize its nature and significance within a Marxian framework. See Val Burris, “Class Structure and Political Ideology,” *Critical Sociology* 25, 2/3 <http://pages.uoregon.edu/vburris/class.pdf> [accessed March 17, 2012].

¹⁴ Croteau, *Politics*, 232.

three classes “are structurally opposed to each other, creating a class system of power and authority, social domination and subordination, and economic exploitation.”¹⁵

Class, Capitalism, and Patriarchy

In capitalist societies, there is a mutually reinforcing partnership between capitalism, classism, and patriarchy. For Heidi Hartman, patriarchy means:

[A] set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have different places in patriarchy, they also are united in their shared relationship of dominance over women; they are dependent on one another to maintain that domination. . . . Those at the higher levels can ‘buy off’ those at the lower levels by offering them power over those still lower.¹⁶

Capitalist development creates places for a hierarchy of workers; gender and racial hierarchies determine who fills those places. “Patriarchy is not simply hierarchical organization, but hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places.”¹⁷ Workers end up on a gradient determined by particular intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and age. In this system, men have differential access to patriarchal benefits and power over women--even as women are subordinated and subjected to differing degrees of patriarchal power. But ultimately, patriarchal capitalism boomerangs on men, inasmuch as capitalists use women as unskilled, underpaid labor to undercut male workers.

Oppression is full of such contradictions, notes Patricia Hill Collins.¹⁸ With other feminists, she emphasizes that no one is purely the oppressor, or oppressed, but instead “each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of

¹⁵ Chuck Barone, “Extending Our Analysis of Class Oppression: Bringing Classism More Fully into the Race and Gender Picture.” Available at <http://users.dickinson.edu/~barone/ExtendClassRGC.PDF>, 13. [accessed March 12, 2012]. Some scholars maintain that the professional class today serves to reproduce the capitalist class and its exploitative relations with the working class. Political theorist Sheldon Wolin holds that universities have become co-partners with Superpower neoliberal capitalism, providing a feeder system into it, and subcontracting for it. Other scholars, however, favor the exact opposite, contending that professionals are largely antagonistic to capitalist interests. In any case, part of what it means to be “middle class” is to be caught in the midst of crossfire between the ruling elites and the working class masses, and to occupy an ambiguous and sometimes contradictory location. In terms of daily lived experience, working-class people, especially the working-poor, people of color, and immigrants, often feel exploited and excluded not only by capitalists (the one percent) but sometimes also by the professional managerial and knowledge class (the thirty-six percent). Scholars often neglect this point, and it is essentially obscured by the Occupy movement with its emphasis on the sharp dichotomy between the one percent and the 99 percent.

¹⁶ Heidi Hartman, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and the Subordination of Women,” in *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*, ed. Rhonda F. Levine (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 185-186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection,” in *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*, ed. Rhonda F. Levine (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 244.

oppression that frame our lives...”¹⁹ For example, she says, while we traditionally approach the institution of slavery through the analytical lens of racism, slavery also structured class and gender relations in complex, interrelated ways.

Collins asserts that even today the antebellum plantation can be used as a compelling metaphor for comprehending a variety of American social institutions, and their dynamics of oppression. Slavery was profoundly patriarchal, resting on white male authority and property rights, joining the political and economic within the institution of the family.²⁰ Control over white women’s sexuality was important because heirs were needed to inherit plantation property and wealth, even as control over black women’s sexuality ensured an ongoing supply of slaves. While blacks certainly experienced the harshest treatment— as mere chattel— under slavery, race, class, and gender interlocked to structure systemic relations of domination and subordination. Collins states:

So we have a very interesting chain of command on the plantation—the affluent White master as the reigning patriarch, his White wife helpmate to serve him, help him manage his property and bring up his heirs, his faithful servants whose production and reproduction were tied to the requirements of the capitalist political economy, and largely propertyless, working-class White men and women watching from afar.²¹

While it is important not to downplay the achievements of those who struggled for social change before us, the basic patterns of class, race, and gender relations which formed the “matrix of domination” in slavery essentially remain intact today. Collins, therefore, wonders whether many of us employed by American colleges and universities actually work on modern plantations. She queries:

Who controls your university’s political economy? Are elite White men overrepresented among the upper administrators and trustees controlling your university’s finances and policies? Are elite White men being joined by growing numbers of elite White women helpmates? What kinds of people are in your classrooms grooming the next generation who will occupy these and other decision-making positions? Who are the support staff

¹⁹ Ibid. Here, Collins alludes to the notion of *intersectionality*, which feminist scholars have long been at the vanguard of exploring. Leslie McCall explains intersectionality as a method of exploring "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations." Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30:3 (2005). <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/426800> [accessed March 17, 2012].

Although the intersectional point of view does not deny that specific groups experience oppression more harshly than others, or that in certain contexts one specific vector may be more visible and salient than others, this does not minimize the contention that race, class, gender, and other categories are *simultaneously* operative in structuring socio-economic and power relations in any and all societal settings. Collins herself is among the first feminist scholars to posit and explore how race, class, and gender are analytically distinct systems that nevertheless intersect in highly complex ways to produce asymmetrical relations of power and privilege, what she calls a “matrix of domination,” and which some scholars refer to as “vectors of oppression and privilege.”

²⁰ Collins, “Toward a New Vision,” 247.

²¹ Ibid., 248.

that produce the mass mailings, order the supplies, fix the leaky pipes? Do African Americans, Hispanics, or other people of color form the majority of the invisible workers who feed you, wash your dishes, and clean up your offices and libraries after everyone else has gone home?²²

One key difference between the actual antebellum slave plantations and the plantation-like social institutions today lies in the power of the ruling class--the patriarchal corporate capitalists--to keep their hegemony invisible, relying on more diffuse and unconscious ways that oppressive relations are enacted and reproduced.²³

Justice as Recognition, Redistribution, Representation

Given that class oppression operates in three interrelated spheres—cultural, economic, and political—and also intersects in distinct ways with gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, our conception of social justice must help us address this very complex interplay. I find the model proposed by feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser to be particularly helpful in this regard. Within a single, comprehensive framework, her approach to justice integrates concern for *redistribution* in the economic sphere, *recognition* in the socio-cultural sphere, and parity of *representation* in the political sphere.²⁴

Our deep dilemma is that theological and political attention centered on identity, otherness, difference, recognition, and respect stands in tension with politics and theology centered on socio-economic injustice, poverty, class exploitation, and disempowerment. These two sets of issues, Fraser explains, focus on two broadly conceived, analytically distinct forms of injustice. One is cultural and symbolic injustice rooted in cultural (and religious) imperialism, misrecognition, and disrespect of diverse others. The other is socio-economic injustice, rooted in economic-political ²⁵systems and structures, and in vast differentials of power, privilege, and wealth.

²² Ibid.

²³ In contrast to overtly repressive regimes around the globe, in a society such as the U.S. the operation of oppression and domination is largely unconscious, tacit, and hidden by design. This happens through the manipulation of value and symbol systems whereby status quo social, cultural, economic, and political arrangements are made to seem desirable, natural, and beneficial to every social class. They are not seen clearly as obviously artificial constructs designed simply and solely for the benefit of the elite ruling class.

²⁴ Accordingly, Fraser uses the term “politics of redistribution” to refer to strategies aimed to remedy class exploitation and economic injustice, “politics of recognition” for strategies designed to remedy forms of cultural imperialism and religious injustice, and “politics of representation” to underscore the importance of parity of participation among diverse identity groups in the public sphere and all societal institutions. For a summary of her position, see Martha Palacio Avendaño, “Interview with Nancy Fraser: Justice as Redistribution, Recognition and Representation,” *Barcelona Metropolis* (March-June 2009): <http://www.barcelonametropolis.cat/en/page.asp?id=21&ui=181> [accessed March 17, 2012].

²⁵ Fraser herself seeks to resolve the tension between these sets of concerns by demonstrating that although cultural imperialism (politics of recognition) and economic deprivation (politics of redistribution) are analytically distinct realities they nevertheless are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Both are forms of injustice rooted in policies and practices that systematically disadvantage and oppress some groups vis-à-vis others, resulting in a vicious cycle of cultural (including religious), economic, and political subordination and exclusion. She proposes a shift in what we mean by the notion of “misrecognition” in the first place. To be misrecognized, she suggests, is to be denied the status of a full and equal partner in the public sphere, and denied parity of participation and voice in the decision-

Mainstream Multiculturalism

The conventional response to addressing the contested “politics of recognition” has been mainstream multiculturalism, with emphasis on inclusion. This approach treats class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion as dimensions of personal and group identity to be recognized and respected. But E. San Juan and certain other scholars worry that the specifically Marxist insight into class as structured relations of exploitation, domination, and subordination are rendered superfluous when class is subsumed into a matrix of race, gender, and class seen and celebrated as personal and group identity.²⁶ The multicultural celebration of diversity overlooks the fact that these categories are best understood as socio-political constructs which structure, institutionalize, and reproduce relations of domination and subordination, and which compound class exploitation.²⁷

Further, a narrowed focus on identity politics siphons off energies needed to cultivate working-class solidarity. Today we need a strategy whose starting point is class exploitation seen as an injustice to be remedied, but which also stays attuned to the suffering imposed by racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and the like. Only on this basis will working-class people be able to find common ground, and organize themselves across the divides of diverse identity groups. Disrespect for difference is not the fundamental problem besetting the working-class poor in the U.S. and around the globe. The basic problem is abusive exploitation, relations of domination and subordination, and absurdly vast differentials of power. We must go beyond *affirmative* responses of inclusion, and develop *transformative* strategies that address underlying structural conditions, and that demystify and deconstruct the “pistons” of the American Empire.²⁸

A Hopeful Way Forward: Not Occupy—But *Organize!*

In his monumental *Ethics*, published posthumously, Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that Christian life is public, to be lived out in reference to the basic sectors of society, which he calls “mandates,” including labor, economics, politics, government, family, and the church.²⁹ These sectors are to be conjoined, he explained, in relations of mutual collaboration, mutual limitation,

making of societal institutions, including the political and economic spheres. Accordingly, overcoming misrecognition requires using collective power to challenge public policies and practices that make life hard on working families, instead of essentializing, valorizing, and reifying group identity, and inadvertently pressuring people to conform to a given group culture. This perspective provides hopeful grounds for groups to unite across divides of ethnicity, race, and religion, and develop a sense of working-class consciousness and solidarity.

²⁶ E. San Juan, Jr. “Marxism and the Race/Class Problematic: A Re-Articulation,” <http://clogic.eserver.org/2003/sanjuan.html> [accessed March 17, 2012].

²⁷ In his book, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, Walter Benn Michaels similarly decries the fact that in our celebration of diversity as a value in American cultural imagination we have displaced an urgently needed emphasis on reducing economic inequality.

²⁸ Here I’m referring to unrestrained neoliberal corporate capitalism, unmoderated economic globalization, imperialism (including cultural and religious), and militaristic expansionism masquerading as homeland defense. What these hold in common is over-accumulated, unaccountable power in the hands of elites who rule the world on the backs of the working-class masses.

²⁹ These are roughly equivalent to what U.S. identifies as the three sectors of society: the private sector (labor, business, the market); the public sector (government, at all levels), and the civil or third sector.

and mutual accountability, so that no single institution or sector is absolute, but each is fully accountable to the others. In short, they are to be held in creative tension “with, for, and against one another.”³⁰ But today, the balance of power necessary for ensuring mutual limitation and accountability is frighteningly skewed. There is so much power and wealth concentrated in the hands of so few elites that we grope for adequate terminology to depict what is going on.³¹

Transnational mega-corporations and elite capitalists have amassed such inordinate power and wealth they are now able to circumvent the state, while their interests have also been fused with it. Political theorist Sheldon Wolin suggests that the U.S. has morphed into a new and strange kind of political hybrid, where economic power and state power are conjoined and virtually unbridled in the wielding of unaccountable power.³²

What some people call Empire, Wolin calls Superpower “bent upon reconstituting the existing system so as to permanently favor a ruling class of the wealthy, the well-connected and the corporate, while leaving the poorer citizens with a sense of helplessness and political despair.”³³ Superpower eviscerates the ideal of democracy, which Wolin argues is not a static form of government or static set of bureaucratic apparatuses run by the state, but rather a dynamic and fluid set of processes and practices at the local level.

After a bleak account of what is going on, Wolin wonders whether there are countervailing sites where citizens may stake out political space in which to develop a counter-paradigm. For him, the answer is yes; it lies in an emphasis on the local. Our best hope for reviving democracy and overcoming class exploitation, he believes, lies in ordinary working-class folks coming together locally to deliberate, and learn how to exercise their collective power to restrain Superpower.³⁴

Wolin insists that authentic participatory democracy is “fugitive democracy” because it is something that breaks out in unexpected places among unexpected people—beyond the control of the state. It happens when ordinary people collectively resist injustices imposed by the regime of Superpower. Democratic citizens are fugitives *for* justice, not *from* justice. By the same token, if there is ever going to be consequential, public practice of Christian faith, it is going to have to be ‘fugitive Christianity,’ the praxis of faith that explodes beyond the grip of the status quo bureaucracy of the institutional church, which tends to domesticate everything in sight, as it is more concerned with shoring up sagging membership rolls than with the transformation of society, or with the situation of the working-class majority. ‘Fugitive Christianity’ is the praxis

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 287.

³¹ Among the terms being employed are Empire, Superpower, plutocracy, corporatocracy, kleptocracy, oligarchy, Second Gilded Age, hereditary aristocracy, and plantation.

³² Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2010), *passim*.

³³ Sheldon S. Wolin, “Inverted Totalitarianism,” *The Nation* (May 19, 2003): <http://www.thenation.com/article/inverted-totalitarianism> [accessed January 18, 2012].

³⁴ Wolin qualifies this contention, however: “Democratic experience begins at the local level, but a democratic citizenry should not accept city limits as its political horizon. A principal reason is that the modern citizenry has needs which exceed local resources (e.g. enforcement of environmental standards) and can be addressed only by means of state power.” *Democracy Incorporated*, 291.

of the ‘least likely’ who discover their own self-dignity, claim their own political voice, and exercise their own God-given power and freedom.

It is precisely a vision of ‘fugitive faith’ and locally engaged politics among the ‘least likely’ that Jeffrey Stout explores in *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*.³⁵ He narrates a story of something much more stunning, effective, transformative, and long-standing than the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, something taking place under the public radar screen, namely *faith-based community organizing*.³⁶

This tradition descends from the work of Saul Alinsky in the mid-1930s in the Chicago area where the meatpacking industry notoriously exploited ethnic working-class immigrants.³⁷ Alinsky realized that only by recruiting *institutional* members (local churches, temples, schools, unions, etc.) and organizing them into stable ongoing organizations, would exploited workers and their families ever be able to generate collective power sufficient enough to offset and restrain the over-amassed power of the industrial capitalists.

The foremost purpose of faith-based organizing groups today is to provide working-class people and their allies a vehicle through which they can mobilize the collective power needed to hold elected officials and “big business” accountable to the common good, and especially to the needs and concerns of the working poor.³⁸ Organizing groups see themselves as “universities of hope” which use Freirean-style popular education methods to teach working-class people the arts

³⁵ Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁶ Actually, today the preferred nomenclature is *broad-based* organizing, instead of *community* organizing. This phrase signals that efforts are rooted in, but also transcend, local neighborhoods and local communities, bringing people together across lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, geography, immigrant status, and religion.

³⁷ Known as “Back of the Yards,” this area of abject squalor, poverty, danger, and oppression was immortalized in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*

³⁸ One of the most important contributions of the faith-based organizing tradition to the wider church is its attention to *power*—what it is, how to generate it, and how to exercise it cooperatively and justly. It is precisely a theological understanding of power that leads me to disagree with the claim of a fellow practical theologian that “love is the primary cargo of the Christian life.” Underlying this statement may be the naiveté and overall discomfort and ambivalence about power which many Christians have. In his classic text, *Love, Power, and Justice*, Paul Tillich posits their ontological unity and irreducible relationship. He makes the point that love without power is mere sentiment, and power without love and without justice is tyranny. “Love is the foundation, not the negation, of power,” Tillich insists. Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 49. Theologically speaking, “love, power, and justice are united in God and they are united in the new creation of God in the world” (115). When Christians vow, at their baptism, to accept the power which God gives “to resist evil, injustice, and oppression,” the reference is not to something ethereal and other-worldly. As Tillich declares, “spiritual power is the not the denial of power dynamics” (120). Spiritual power is the grounding and centering of power, even in its political dimensions, in the reality of God. If love, power, and justice are one in God, then the more centered we are, individually and communally, in the life of God, the more integrated these realities will be for us, and the more they will qualify our own character, and the character of our mission and ministry in the world. Only when grounded in communion with God can the ambiguities and fractures of love, power, and justice be reduced and reunited. For two books which reflect theologically and biblically on power and its role in faith-based organizing, see, Robert C. Linthicum, *Building a People of Power: Equipping Churches To Transform Their Communities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005); Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2003).

of public engagement, grounded in their respective faith commitments.³⁹ These groups are today's closest counterpart to Citizenship Schools during the civil rights era, which aimed "to create involved citizens, not just voters."⁴⁰

Stout argues that the ever-increasing imbalance of power between ruling elites and working-class people is the principle cause of democracy's current ills, which "can be set straight only if broad-based [interfaith] organizing is scaled up significantly, only if it extends its reach much more widely throughout American society than it has to date."⁴¹ The good news is that beyond the fading limelight of Occupy, effective resistance against Empire is already being enacted at the grassroots. Stunning transformations and reversals of injustice are happening in urban, suburban, and rural areas across the nation, thanks to faith-based organizing. It is time that we not only occupy places where working-class people are being exploited, but also add our solidarity to their efforts in organizing--reaching toward *basileia*, the community of Shalom promised by God.

³⁹ An empirical evaluation of eight years of work on the part of broad-based organizing groups in a variety of locations reached five conclusions. First, broad-based organizing groups are effective in holding government and corporate sectors accountable, and in winning concrete policy changes for working-class people, predominantly of color, that improve their communities. Second, they alter the relations of power at the most basic level of influencing resource allocation. Third, they recruit, train, and develop strong citizen leaders through mentoring, and through processes that are highly relational, participatory, and deliberative. Fourth, they increase civic participation at the local level and sometimes regional level, especially through holding public accountability sessions with elected officials. Fifth, they build stable and financially viable organizations which are accountable to the communities in which they are located. Jeannie Appleman, "Evaluation Study of Institution-Based Organizing for the Discount Foundation." Available at <http://www.afj.org/for-nonprofits-foundations/reco/resources/evaluation-study-of-institution-based-organizing-appleman.pdf> [accessed March 17, 2012].

⁴⁰ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 75. To further elaborate, although there are distinct differences, even so, contemporary Alinsky-style organizing groups and civil rights era Citizenship Schools share a broad range of common convictions that: "...the oppressed themselves, collectively, already have much of the knowledge needed to produce change" (Payne, 70); popular education can deepen the capacity for both individual and collective efficacy and agency; one crucial key to societal transformation is unleashing the efficacy, agency, and voice of those most affected by a social injustice (Payne, 68); local 'communities of practice' are rich in subjugated knowledge and discourse which needs to be publicly proclaimed; expressing one's own daily lived reality is the beginning of connecting the personal to the political (Payne, 74); creative leadership is present in any community—especially among the 'least likely'—and simply awaits discovery and development (Payne, 75); in the local arena, women are more likely to be politically responsive and active than men--but less likely to receive public accolades, be elected to the official positions, or be historically remembered for contributions (Payne, 166); poor people have both the God-given right and capacity to have say-so in society; oppressed people have a right to help *define* the problems as well as to help solve them; oppressed people can provide their own grassroots leadership instead of having to rely on lone ranger charismatic figures; privileged allies should never do for oppressed people what they can do for themselves; merely dramatizing injustice is not enough to effect social change--business as usual must be disrupted (Payne,78); as people work collectively to effect social transformation, they themselves undergo personal transformation.

⁴¹ Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 286.