Community organising and radical democracy

From praxis to theory and back again

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Community organising is a way of doing democratic politics distinct from electoral and radical protest politics yet has been largely overlooked in discourse studies and activist scholarship, particularly when compared to the attention paid to 'flashier' grassroots movements. We aim to contribute to rectifying this shortcoming by exploring the conceptual connections between community organising and the political discourse theory of radical democracy. Our theoretical argument is supplemented with an illustrative vignette-based exploration, drawing on the experiences of community alliances and their members within Citizens UK, the UK's community organising umbrella organization. We show that while radical democratic theory can help ground community organising practice and its dilemmas in a conceptually illuminating way, community organising practice, in turn, can help put some valuable 'flesh' onto what many consider to be the rather abstract pronouncements associated with radical democracy and its failure to elaborate what an agonistic politics looks like in practice.

Keywords: community organising, radical democracy, agonism, discourse theory, social movements, Citizens UK

Community Organising is a method of everyday democracy
Jonathan Cox, Deputy Director, Citizens UK 2022 Podcast

The prime task of democratic politics is… to "sublimate"… passions by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives
Mouffe 2013, 9

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1. Introduction

With its origins in the US depression era and civil rights movement, and promoted through the US Industrial Areas Foundation founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, community organising (CO) is now a well-established mode of doing politics, spawning new iterations as it adapts to new contexts world-wide (see Pyles 2009; Coles 2004). Established in 1989 and describing itself as "a people power alliance of diverse local communities working together for the common good", this paper draws on the experiences of Citizens UK,[1] whose most well-known campaign beginning in 2001 — the living wage campaign — resulted in the establishment of the Living Wage Foundation in 2011, which serves now as an independent standard bearer for fair and just pay in the UK.

Such successes have encouraged advocates to promote CO as an effective way of doing democratic politics, distinct from both parliamentary electoral politics and radical protest politics. 'Fiercely non-partisan' in their ethos, Citizens UK's CO[2] is committed to making concrete change happen that advances the cause of social justice, its advocates often sceptical and even critical of supposedly more 'radical' protest movements and activities. As Matthew Bolton (2017), its director since 2018, puts it in the subtitle of his book *How to Resist*, there is a need to "turn protest to power". Citing the widely reported months-long Occupy London movement in 2011–12, and mass Iraq anti-war protests of 2003, Bolton (2017, 15–17; 66–67; 78) points to the real need for more effective institution-based targeted actions.

At the same time, however, CO itself is criticised by activist researchers and scholars, who point to the dangers of relying too heavily on institution-based approaches. In the name of advancing what is 'realistically possible', critics suggest that CO risks having its efforts co-opted by the *status quo*, blunting whatever radical edge it purports to have invested in the social change it seeks. The Symbiosis Research Collective (2018, n. pag.) puts it like this: "At its core, the institution-based community organising model rests on winning reforms from the system as it is — but the system as it is is fundamentally broken". Such activist scholars argue that we should instead focus on building "genuine alternatives" that "prefigure"

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1. For more information, see https://www.citizensuk.org/about-us/ (accessed 07/01/2024).

2. In the interest of brevity, we use CO throughout the paper to refer to the Citizens UK approach to CO, without naming the organisation every time, unless otherwise specified. While Citizens UK has tended to draw inspiration from their neighbours across the Atlantic (Beck and Purcell 2013, Chapter 4), it is important to point out that there are different cultures and histories of community organising beyond the Anglo-American varieties (Beck and Purcell 2013, Chapters 6–9; Montero 2009).

the kind of society we want, comprising new "community-based, grassroots institutions, of participatory democracy and a solidarity economy" (ibid. 2018).

Opposing views about the value and significance of CO resonate with debates over tactics, strategy, and theories of change adopted by other movements with progressive ambitions. Gibson-Graham (2006), for example, critiques the essentialising tendencies of anti-capitalist positions that reduce our judgement of an action to a simplified revolution-versus-reform binary choice that ironically remains captive to a 'capitalocentric' perspective. Yet, despite raising issues relevant to such debates, it is striking that CO has been largely overlooked by critical political theorists, particularly if one compares it to the outsized attention paid to the Occupy, and other grass-roots social and populist movements (della Porta 2015; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2016). In this paper, therefore, we contribute to this literature by exploring the connection between CO and the political discourse theory (DT) of radical democracy (RD).

There are good reasons for bringing CO and RD into dialogue with one another. As is evident in the epigraphs, advocates of CO describe its practice not simply as a form of doing politics but a form of doing *democratic* politics. Moreover, though discussions of CO tend to be more praxis than theory oriented as compared with RD, they share much common ground: both emphasize the role that contestation, conflict, and passion can and should play when engaging in democratic politics; both emphasize how persuasion relies on identifying what interests and identities are at stake; and both avoid taking on a blanket anti-institutionalist stance. Finally, RD's grounding in discourse theory enables us to make both substantive and methodological bridges between RD's understanding of interests and identities as constructed through acts of articulation, and CO's focus on processes of story-telling and sense-making. Despite these affinities between CO and RD, however, their relation remains ambiguous and underexplored. Against this backdrop we argue that not only can RD help frame CO practice and its dilemmas in an elucidatory way, but CO practice can also help to put some valuable 'flesh' onto what many consider to be the rather abstract pronouncements associated with RD. Indeed, through this 'turn to practice' and our engagement with horizontal activist practices, we can continue to refine DT's theoretical framework (De Cleen et al. 2021, 29).

The paper is structured as follows. After a brief overview of the main principles and character of CO practice, we consider how CO has been received in the political theory and activist research literature, arguing that a turn to DT and RD can help address some of the gaps and concerns identified in the literature. We suggest that our theoretical inquiry can receive support through an illustrative discourse-analytical exploration focused around the question of how political struggle is understood in a democratic polity. We argue, first, that DT and RD can

help better resolve some ambiguities related to the way CO apprehends partisanship; and second, that a more concrete engagement with CO practice can help us flesh out key aspects that are worth affirming as part of a more general RD theory, concerning the character of alliance building and sustenance. More specifically, we foreground the dynamic interaction between external and internal relations of the CO alliance, showing how confrontations with external powerholders can generate contingent effects that must be processed internally by alliance members in more — or less — agonistic ways. Crucially, CO offers us some clues about the kind of agonistic ethos called for by RD scholars, whose character and conditions often remain under-specified in their work (Schaap 2007, 69). We argue that DT enables us to explore and develop these affinities around partisanship and alliances, concluding with some reflections on the wider implications of our investigation.

2. Community organising: The Case of Citizens UK

The term 'community organising' is used to describe strategies and repertoires of collective action through which communities are mobilised to explore and act on issues of mutual concern. Community organisers from both sides of the Atlantic draw on the work of American activist and political organiser Marshall Ganz (2013) and his 'Challenge, Choice, and Change' model as a way to think about how and why CO participants tell stories about their campaign experiences. By relaying the challenges faced by community leaders, the choices they make, and the outcomes produced, participants use their personal stories and experiences to connect with others, to create bonds of alliance and community, to share good practice, and to communicate a sense of urgency. In doing so they forge links between stories of 'self', stories of 'us', and stories of 'what we do now'. As Ganz (2013, 2) puts it:

> By telling personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes, we become more mindful of our own moral resources and, at the same time, share our wisdom so as to inspire others. Because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.

Although Citizens UK draws inspiration from US-based CO texts and exemplars, it has developed a distinctive style of doing CO, summarised on its website (https://www.citizensuk.org) as a simple "method of everyday democracy" designed "for people who are angry with the ways things are and want to do something about it". Using what they call the 5-step method, organisers facilitate

community actions around a range of issues by bringing together a broad-based alliance of local organisations orchestrated to increase citizens' democratic leverage. The first step ('organising') involves identifying and building a team of people who are motivated to make social change happen and who will lead the process of alliance building. The second step ('listening') entails taking stock of the experiences and voices of the community through a mix of techniques, such as one-to-one meetings (121s), considered "the most important tool in community organising" (Bolton 2017, 54ff.), house meetings, and other listening exercises. Next, 'planning' involves putting issues into an order, breaking them down into actionable issues that are winnable, conducting power analyses that help identify relevant powerholders, decision makers, and anyone who exerts sway over them. Planning also includes the identification of potential alliance member institutions, cultivating relations with them, while also planning events designed to attract the attention of key powerholders. The fourth step ('acting') entails putting on an event which, however serious in character and intention, is often creatively designed to elicit a wide range of emotions. This involves getting members of the alliance institutions to turn out in big numbers to ensure the action is a show of 'people power' and to collectively channel and embody the emotions and issues informing the campaign. Actions are designed to provoke powerholders to take seriously the demands being made to them and to publicly agree to hold further talks. These actions — which are meticulously choreographed and rehearsed — take many forms, but one particularly popular one is the 'Accountability Assembly', which is set up to extract commitments relevant to CO campaigns from candidates running for political office (Warren et al. 2024). Once an action has brought the issue into public view and powerholders have agreed to discuss it further, the final step — also meticulously planned — kicks in: 'negotiating'.

As members of a campaign cycle through this five-step process, each stage is understood to embody a cooperative, respectful, and inclusive form of social activism. The five steps are then repeated with more people and institutions, new issues identified, or old ones revisited and revised, new actions planned, and so on. We will explore the way the CO tenets outlined above play out and are understood in practice, and how political discourse-inspired theories of RD can not only shed light on understanding its practices, but also learn from them. Before doing so, however, it is essential to map out how political theorists have so far engaged with CO, while also pointing to some promising crossovers between CO and RD.

3. Community organising in critical political theory and in relation to radical democracy

Although limited attention has been paid to the methods and activities of CO in the field of critical political theory as a whole, there has been a more concerted effort to engage with CO in its democratic theory and activist literature strands. Andrew Sabl (2002a; 2002b), for example, notes how Tocqueville's understanding of 'association' is clearly reflected in CO practices that bring individuals of diverse backgrounds together. Bretherton (2015,143) similarly likens Saul Alinksy's conception of self-interest to that of Tocqueville's, because they both locate self-interest at the level of the group, not the individual, emphasising the social and collective dimensions of interest and identity. Importantly, Bretherton (2015) also notes the positive valence that CO actors attach to emotions such as anger. Contrary to those scholars critical of CO who see such passions as a threat to Habermasian ideals of rational communication (Brady, Schoeneman, and Sawyer 2015), Bretherton (2015,124) affirms the value of emotions in making collective action possible and meaningful. Finally, as mentioned, in the more activist-oriented literatures we can find worries expressed that CO's tendency to focus on making progressive social change happen through local actions often comes at the cost of overlooking macro-structural issues (Greene 2022; Lynd 2015).

We can already see how, in engaging with CO, these strands of critical political theory touch on at least three important domains that invite further interrogation and exploration, concerning interest and identity, the role of emotion and passion in its modes of engagement, and the character of its aims and achievements in making social change happen. First, although most political theory scholars recognise the social dimension and value of interests and identities, they do not have the conceptual tools to elucidate *how* they are forged discursively in CO practice through collective forms of action. Second, while most scholars embrace emotions as legitimate aspects of CO's mode of engagement, their theoretical conceptualisation, including the way passions relate to different forms of political society (more or less conflictual, more or less vibrant), remains under-explored and under-developed. Finally, although the activist-oriented literature thematises the worry that powerful institutions in society co-opt CO actions, such scholarship often leaves unproblematised the essentialist presuppositions embedded in its conceptions of structure.

From this reflection on political theory-inspired scholarship and activist-leftist critiques of CO praxis, it follows that there is a need to develop further the theoretical framing of CO; and we suggest that RD can contribute to this endeavour, especially as the latter's assumptions, concepts, and orientation appear well-suited to addressing puzzles associated with each of the three domains noted

above. Our efforts can thus be seen as a response to Bunyan's (2016, 500) call to 'marry' Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's "analysis of radical democratic politics from the left with the practice and theory of community organising".

Writing in 1985, Laclau and Mouffe contended that a neoliberal capitalist and individualist paradigm had established itself as hegemonic and that much critical thought was ill-equipped to respond to this development theoretically and strategically. Grasping the emerging significance of new social movements built around peace, ecology, sexuality and minority rights, among others, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, Chapter 4) landed on radical democracy as an idea and practice that could respond to this challenge. The notion of radicality here, however, was not attached irreducibly to the idea of a particular conception of justice or ideal society (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, XVII–VXIII; 189–190). Instead, it signalled the urgent need to transform as many forms of domination as possible into antagonistic sites of struggle, radicalising and extending them through chains of equivalence built across struggles, and doing so in a way that was attentive to the contextually contingent and thus constructed character of interests and identities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 167; 153).

The account of Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy so far already points to a shared emphasis with CO regarding the need to construct bridges across struggles. Particularly striking parallels between them also include how each consider conflict and passion to be central to their enterprise of social and political transformation (Bunyan 2016, 494; Mouffe 2013, 6). Things are a bit more complex here, however. According to Bunyan, for example, "in giving ontological priority to antagonism, theorists like Laclau and Mouffe … [consider that] the political 'we' is constituted by the 'they', in other words the 'constitutive outside' helps form the identity of the 'we'". Sceptical of the privileged status attributed to antagonism by Laclau and Mouffe, Bunyan suggests that CO praxis aligns better with an Arendtian perspective, which "gives ontological priority to plurality and to the constitution of the 'we' from within rather than from without" (Bunyan 2021, 915).

It is certainly true that for radical democrats like Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 108–13) political struggle occurs against the backdrop of antagonism. However, as Mouffe (2013, 6–7) herself has indicated, one can and should incorporate antagonism *and* pluralism into one's democratic theory: "[t]he crucial issue then is how to establish that us/them dimension… in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism". To address this challenge, she turns to the concept of agonism, which she conceives as a 'sublimated antagonism' (Mouffe 2013, 8; 2005, 107). This enables her to distinguish her approach to democratic theory from deliberative approaches that seek to push conflict and passion out of the public sphere by subjecting them to a Rawlsian 'reasonable agreement' impartiality test or to a Habermasian 'communicative rationality' proceduralist test presented as a

regulative idea governed by an ideal speech situation (Mouffe 2005, Chapter 4). According to Mouffe, deliberative democrats do not take antagonism seriously enough, denying its *constitutive* character as regards political life. This means that efforts at public persuasion regarding things that matter deeply cannot be grounded on rational or procedural foundations designed to achieve consensus in a regulated and continuous way. Instead, political life must also be able to legitimately accommodate instances of discontinuous *conversions* (Mouffe 2005, 102). At the same time, however, she insists that antagonism appears in at least two guises: antagonism 'properly speaking', involving the struggle between enemies, and agonism, involving the struggle between adversaries (Mouffe 2005, 102–103).[3] Crucially, from Mouffe's viewpoint, political struggle does not take place with the aim of destroying the enemy (which would privilege the dimension of antagonism proper) but with the aim of affirming the opponent's right to argue their position passionately and with due attentiveness to the contingency that underlies processes of interest and identity construction (aligned with the agonistic dimension). As she puts it in summary form, 'the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*' (Mouffe 2005, 103).

We argue that key aspects of agonism *qua* sublimated antagonism play themselves out at the very heart of CO practice, whose relation to powerholders is understood by its advocates to be rather unique when compared to other social movements: "relating to powerful people effectively means taking their interests seriously and respecting their values" (Bolton 2017, 29). Agonism also captures the significance ascribed to emotions by community organisers in energising and maintaining alliances and mobilising people: "it all starts with the question: What makes you angry?" (Bolton 2017, 19). Thus, numerous aspects of CO praxis resonate strongly with the RD idea that "it is impossible to understand democratic

3. The distinction Mouffe makes here between antagonism and agonism may bring to mind another distinction thematised in DT discussions and debates since the 1990s, concerning the difference in status attributed to antagonism and dislocation. Most recently reprieved in some interesting exchanges sparked by the work of Marchart (2018), this concerns the ontological priority attributed to each, with Marchart defending the early Laclau and Mouffe position favouring antagonism against the later Laclau position favouring dislocation (see Marchart et al. 2020). Without going into this debate in any detail, we can offer a reading of Mouffe's notion of agonism that is compatible with Laclau's later position on the ontological priority of dislocation over antagonism. As Laclau puts it "constructing… an antagonism… is already a discursive response. You construct the Other who dislocates you as an enemy, but there are alternative forms… That is why in *New Reflections* I have insisted on the primary character of dislocation rather than antagonism" (Worsham and Olson 1999, 9). From this point of view, then, agonism becomes precisely one of these 'alternative forms' of construction or a response to dislocation.

politics without acknowledging 'passions' as the driving force in the political field" (Mouffe 2013, 6).

Nevertheless, although RD might help make visible the agonistic character of CO practice, it is also the case that Mouffe's largely theoretical pronouncements have led scholars to highlight the rather abstract character of her account of agonism (Schaap 2007), noting a general reluctance to trace out how these ideals can be translated into concrete democratic practices (Wingenbach 2011). Though "a potentially complex task", therefore, we agree with Bunyan (2016, 500) that there are sufficient crossovers that justify probing in more detail whether CO can provide "an important example of a form of radical democratic civil society-led politics". In doing so we argue that DT's theoretical and analytical framework, in conjunction with a vignette-based analysis, can help elucidate key aspects of CO praxis while also contributing to the further development of RD, offering resources with which to address expressed worries that it tends to pay too much attention to the ontological conditions of politics at the expense of praxis-based experiential aspects.

4. Enhancing our exploration of the theory-praxis nexus through a DT-informed illustrative discourse analysis

To draw out the complex relational dynamics underpinning CO modes of engagement, matters of interest and identity, as well as conceptions of social change from a radical democratic and agonistic point of view, we argue that it is productive to draw on examples from the experiences articulated by community organisers, leaders, and members involved in campaigns via qualitative discourse analysis (Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2008). Our research strategy is not based on the single-case study method. Instead, we adopt an 'illustrative vignette-based' research strategy, whose aim is to draw out key "assumptions or presuppositions about human nature and social reality", including "organizational structures" (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg 1991, 68; Zerilli 2005). Our research strategy thus has a double theoretical objective, namely, to conceptually elucidate CO practice using the DT framework, and to develop our theoretical understanding of RD in a way that can also contribute to DT.

In conducting our illustrative vignette-based analysis, we rely on several conventional methodological principles concerning qualitative data production and analysis (Silverman 2020) situated within a post-positivist framework compatible with the presuppositions of DT (Glynos and Howarth 2007) and which has already been deployed to illuminate the dramaturgical and performative aspects of a key CO device, the accountability assembly (Warren et al. 2024). We treat

discourse as something that incorporates but is irreducible to language, through an interpretive approach that elucidates the way social and political practices are maintained or transformed by identifying and unpacking processes of articulation, in other words, the way subjects fix or contest the meanings of relevant discursive elements (Glynos et al. 2021, 3).

As regards our corpus, we rely on material drawn from two main sources. First, we look to CO leader publications, especially by Alinsky (1971) and Bolton (2017), which contain rich observations, reflections, and lessons of a practical, strategic, and principled sort — also echoed in their respective titles: *Rules for Radicals* and *How to Resist*. Second, we look to Citizens UK's podcast series, broadcast in late 2022, comprising six one hour-plus episodes, each describing in detail one UK-based CO campaign. This rather unique and rich source of data comprises a mix of interviews with CO organisers and leaders providing thick descriptions of the respective campaigns, reflections on participant experiences, lessons learnt, and how the CO framework was used to shape their activities.

In interpreting this material, we adopted a retroductive mode of reasoning (Glynos and Howarth 2019), which involved sequentially cycling through stages of immersing ourselves in the data, formulating conjectures and themes that spoke to puzzles common to CO and DT, returning to the podcasts to refine and sharpen our interpretations of the data, and so on. Although all six campaigns arguably had something valuable to contribute to the CO-DT 'dialogue', we ended up zeroing in mainly on one campaign, because it appeared well-placed to illuminate the way agonistic passion was mobilised around questions of partisanship and alliance-building. Thus, in the analysis we connect theoretical with practical insights through the contextualised self-interpretations (Glynos and Howarth 2007) of organisers, focusing on the 'Sink or Swim' campaign, touching also very briefly on the 'Millions for Mental Health' campaign. The 'Sink or Swim' campaign was run by Citizens Colchester, who — after being ignored, then resisted — convinced a local authority's swimming pool to schedule dedicated women-only sessions. In the 'Millions for Mental Health' campaign, South London Citizens first targeted, then incorporated into the alliance, an NHS provider in the London borough of Merton, with the aim of increasing mental health service access for young adults. [4]

4. For a richer description including the five steps for social change that were followed, see https://www.citizensuk.org/about-us/our-podcast/sink_or_swim/ and https://www.citizensuk.org/about-us/our-podcast/millions_for_mental_health/ (accessed 12/04/2024).

5. Partisanship

We structure our analysis around two key themes that emerged in our interpretive discourse analysis: partisanship and alliances. These themes serve as entry points in our RD-CO comparative exploration, shedding light on the character of political struggle or mode of engagement (as antagonism or agonism). We argue that DT and RD furnish us with the conceptual resources to grasp CO's understanding of partisanship as unavoidable and indeed desirable, while also making sense of its prima facie contradictory maxim to be strictly non-partisan.

Earlier we saw how Mouffe regards as pivotal the role that passion and antagonism plays, foregrounding these concepts in the theory of RD. This enabled us to draw an important parallel between RD and CO, because the latter also emphasises the importance of harnessing anger and emotion more generally to drive forward a campaign. Alinsky explicitly places confrontation at the forefront of his social theory:

> One acts decisively only in the conviction that all angels are on one side and all the devils on the other. (Alinsky 1971, 134)

> All life is partisan. There is no dispassionate objectivity. (Alinsky 1971, 10)

To be partisan is thus fundamental to CO, entailing that one adopts a stance that is both passionate and oppositional, just as antagonistic conflict is understood to be foundational in RD. As highlighted, this convergence on the need to embrace emotion and conflict as key to a flourishing polity serves to distance both RD and CO from those approaches to politics that over-valorise the role that dispassionate reason, rationality, objectivity, technical expertise, and ideals of consensus should play in shaping the mode of political engagement in a democracy. In fact, DT's ontology, which underpins RD, can help us better appreciate and understand the practical insight expressed by Alinsky and others. From this perspective, the claim that all life is partisan affirms the *political* dimension underlying all social life, challenging those who present the prospect of a *post*-political world as either possible or normatively attractive. From this perspective to say that all life is partisan is to say that all aspects of our life are in principle contestable (and therefore contingent and political), even if they are not in fact contested, and especially when they are subject to considerable emotional investment.

However, RD's underlying ontology enables us not only to make sense of CO's idea that partisanship is unavoidable. It can also help us better grasp another practical intuition expressed by community organisers that at first sight sits uneasily with the earlier expressed dictum, namely, that CO leaders should prosecute their demands in a "*strictly non-partisan*" fashion (Bolton 2017, 84, our emphasis).

While community organisers insist that all life is partisan, they also suggest that campaigners should have their demands met in a non-partisan fashion. In short, CO practice appears to be about being partisan *and* non-partisan.

There is a simple way to resolve this paradox. This would involve regarding the first claim about *all life being partisan* to be making an ontological claim about passionate conflict being the foundation of social life as such; while regarding the second claim about *being strictly non-partisan* to be an injunction to avoid being 'party-political' when engaging with powerholders (Bolton 2017, 84; 116).

Yet we argue that there is scope to develop these insights further by drawing on RD. We can see this by considering how Mouffe's idea of agonism as a 'sublimated antagonism' resonates with this paradoxical formulation of the partisanship puzzle. After all, the idea of agonism as a sublimated antagonism insists on the centrality of antagonism, while also acknowledging the need to affirm a pluralist stance. In other words, rather than 'othering' your antagonist by layering *ressentiment* into your relation with them, Mouffe suggests that agonism is what you get when you fold respect for your adversary into the antagonistic relation. This perspective, then, allows us to reconsider the emotional and conflictual aspects of CO's partisanship as features of an *agonistic* relationship. As CO organisers put it, the relationship with powerholders should be understood to be "confrontational, *but not of the usual kind*" (Ep 5, 01:10:45, our emphasis). Or, as Bolton (2017, 81) puts it, "[c]reating a confrontation is not about aggression". Instead, it should be understood in "relational" terms (Ep 3, 10:50), "tensional" terms (Bolton 2017, 81), or indeed, in some contexts, in "celebratory" terms (Ep 5, 33:18).

This understanding of the relation between campaigners and powerholders, therefore, conforms to Mouffe's (2005; 2013) idea of adversaries, as distinct from enemies. Yet this does not lead to the kind of post-political relationship that Mouffe wants to avoid, as conflict remains central to CO actions, fomenting the affects and emotions necessary to energise political action by citizens who might otherwise be excluded from traditional party politics. In our effort to characterise these aspects of CO practice we thus appeal to the expression 'fiercely non-partisan' because it condenses into one phrase a reference to both a concrete social justice objective and the mode by which this objective is prosecuted. In this view, *being fiercely non-partisan does not mean not taking sides.* On the contrary, the qualifier 'fiercely' now captures how the subject maintains a clear conflictual position on a social justice issue for which there is emotional commitment. At the same time, however, the DT underpinnings of agonism suggest that we can now also consider the idea of non-partisanship to be not really about not being party-political, in the sense of identifying with and advocating a fixed 'party-line'; but rather about being anti-essentialist in a broader sense. In this view, being partisan

can be just one instance of 'performing essentialism', in the sense of reifying one's position or identity. DT thus allows us to interpret being 'fiercely non-partisan' in a way that renders it perfectly compatible with a decision to *reject* cooperating with some actors. The key issue is whether such a rejection is informed not only by a judgement regarding the demands espoused by each party but also by an attentiveness to the contingency underlying those judgements.

6. Alliances

Generalising the idea of non-partisanship from being anti-party-political to being anti-essentialist carries an important benefit, namely, that discussion about the mode of engagement ceases to apply only to the relationship that CO leaders and members have with external powerholders. Instead, the notion of an agonistic ethos or being 'fiercely non-partisan' can apply with equal force to relationships *within* the CO alliance, between its leaders and members, and among members. While DT makes this insight theoretically legible, enabling us to appreciate the complexity and nuance of both sets of relationships in CO practice, it is striking that radical democrats themselves tend to deploy the idea of an agonistic ethos to shed light almost exclusively on the external relation inhering between advocates of a political project and its opponents (here, the CO alliance and powerholders).

We now draw more directly on the podcast series to show how agonistic tensions and contingencies are continuously navigated internally in CO practice as external responses are addressed. Our contribution can be summarisd in terms of the *depth* of relational power that CO cultivates and promotes, not just its breadth, illustrating how external relations dynamically interact with internal relations. We suggest that drawing out these aspects may help elucidate its potential contribution to a theory of RD. This is because an enhanced *depth* of relational power tends to build the kind of trust and resilience that makes possible not only the longer-term viability of a CO alliance (or any other social movement) and its capacity to tackle a wide range of issues effectively, but also increases the capacity of the alliance to absorb and process contingency agonistically.

This is exemplified by the deep recognition exhibited by all members of the CO alliance (female-identifying or not) in the 'Sink or Swim' campaign for the cross-cutting challenges faced by differently situated women of the community. This deep recognition was no accident, but a direct result of a series of committed and patient listening exercises, 121s, and house meetings (Ep 3, 20:21), that produced a clearly articulated need for many women to express, enhance, and exercise their physical autonomy through women-only swimming sessions. Certainly, this need was felt most acutely by certain individuals for a range of distinct rea-

sons linked to historical sexual abuse, religious belief, or body dysmorphia. However, these listening exercises became a means of creating a depth of attachment that exceeded this building up of a common cause only among the women directly affected, because the challenges they faced became visible not only to them but also to others who did not face those challenges. Connections between members thus became 'thicker' in the sense that even those less directly impacted by a particular issue started to feel implicated and thus affected enough to stand with the campaign. It is through such 'depth-building' that one can avoid a tendency that many campaigners often observe when forging alliances, namely, achieving success only in cases in which the 'lowest common denominator' is satisfied (Ep 3, 33:50–35:00). These successes, further, energise the participants in the alliance to continue campaigning for the changes they want to see in their communities. In particular, Citizens UK is able to mobilise participants from the margins of society who might otherwise struggle to express themselves politically, which is important too from a RD perspective that promotes the extension of the field of democratic struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 160). "For the majority of the people we were working with, they had never won anything like this before, ever. And that is hugely significant in terms of people's sense of what can be achieved next" (Ep 3, 16:22–16:34).

The key insight underlying CO's effort to maintain and expand an alliance is that participating in different campaigns and listening exercises over time thickens the connective tissue linking its constituent members, deepening and thus strengthening their relational power, which they can then exercise to achieve their objectives across a wide range of issues that do not directly affect all people, all the time, to the same degree. In discourse theoretical terms, the alliance creates a chain of equivalence that both enlarges the number of individuals and institutions demanding change and strengthens their internal relation. It is this internal relational depth that makes the equivalential chain robust enough to withstand common 'divide and rule' tactics deployed by powerholders who, in this campaign, suggested that a women-only swimming session would impede the interests of men or other women (Ep 3, 32:00–34:00). By discursively articulating "the Muslim community, the black community, the LGBTQ+ community" in a way that put them on the same side, "coming together for the same goal" (Ep 3, 02:30–40), the alliance succeeded in making their demand inclusive by tapping into the strength built up through preceding listening exercises. Indeed, at a crucial moment in the negotiations, the Bishop of Colchester countered the recurring argument by the powerholders that male members would object to having potential swimming time taken away from them. The organisers reflected that

> he sat there and said, 'look: I wouldn't object to losing an hour and a half of access once a week if it meant that 50% of the population felt safe to swim.' And because

> it was coming from a man [and a Christian supporting many Muslim women's cause], that particular answer was very powerful. (Ep 3, 31:53–32:24)

Another way to see how relational depth helps an alliance process internal effects produced by the confrontation with powerholders is to ask how a CO alliance decides what constitutes a legitimate compromise. In the 'Sink or Swim' campaign it was clear that while the alliance possessed a commonly constructed identity on account of the stories shared through listening exercises, the core interest underlying the campaign was both lived and shaped predominantly by those women whose autonomy was most at stake. For this reason men, and also some women, actively took a back seat when it came to making judgements about what constituted an acceptable compromise (Ep 3, 00:29). This did not mean that other members of the alliance could not contribute to such decisions, but that actively soliciting the views of those with a core vested interest was a significant part of this process. Nor did this mean that the core interest was necessarily fixed or obvious. When the Council-led swimming pool rejected initial requests to introduce women-only swimming slots into its programme, members of the alliance could rely on the depth of their relational identity to consider how to re-formulate their demand, encouraging members also to refine and reconstruct an understanding of their own interests.

It is worth emphasising here the dynamic inter-dependency and interaction of internal and external relations, which we can further illustrate with reference to the 'Sink and Swim' campaign and, very briefly, the 'Millions for Mental Health' campaign. The idea here is that the *depth*-based approach to CO can apply not just to relations internal to the alliance; it can also apply to the external relation holding between the CO alliance and the powerholders.

In the 'Sink and Swim' campaign the expression 'relational, not confrontational' was invoked by members of the alliance to signal a desire to build a meaningful and respectful relationship with the managers of the local authority-run swimming pool, knowing that they may need to deal with them at another point in the future (Ep 3, 10:50; Ep 2, 31:43). After the initial disappointment of being ignored by the powerholders, the alliance decided to perform a creative action. Their agonistic ethos becomes clear when the organisers reflect that

> instead of doing an angry protest, which probably wouldn't have achieved much, we were playful. (…) 52 of us, mostly women, wearing swimwear over our clothing, met outside [the venue], the day before Valentine's Day. We gave testimony, we serenated the key decision makers with an altered love song, we gave them a giant Valentine's card full of reasons we loved [the organisation], wanted to work with them. We played some water games and requested a meeting in front of what by then became quite a big crowd. (Ep 3 11:10–12:00)

Being surprised by the "dry swim-athlon" (Ep 3, 25:20) and the number of people in front of their doorstep, the powerholders agreed to the meeting. There, the relational power of the alliance was again made visible to the powerholders, as 15 members of the various organisations showed up which made the venue executives "confused by who this quite unusual alliance of people was" (Ep 3, 26:23–37). This made their demand more difficult to ignore as the alliance created an equivalential chain vis-à-vis the powerholders which they were careful to uphold. "[I]f we would have gone in as anything less than a united front, I don't think we would have won. Because what impressed them was the sheer diversity in the room and the fact that we represented all these [organisations]" (Ep 3, 39:07–37).

This rather unique mode of engagement coupled with an appreciation of the contingency of social relations unique to RD is also exemplified in 'Millions for Mental Health'. In this case, the South London Alliance initially identified the local NHS Mental Health authority as a target powerholder to which it put its demands for improved access to mental health services following an extensive listening campaign, engaging around 11,000 people (Ep 5, 21:00–22:20). With dialogue and further listening, however, they ended up rearticulating this demand, folding it into a commonly shared interest that cut across their differences (one as recipient of services, the other as provider of services), transforming what was an external agonistic relationship into an internal agonistic relationship in which the statutory body became a member of the alliance demanding funding for improved community access to services *together* (Ep 5, 33:30). We can thus understand the campaign in terms of the contingent constructions of both adversary and citizen alliance where *neither* is fixed beforehand. Just as radical democrats point out how political frontiers marked by the logics of equivalence are unstable and can be displaced (Laclau 2005, 153; 231), resulting in the reconfiguration of alliance memberships, for CO organisers and leaders, this transition in identity illustrates how the boundaries can blur between state, market, and civil society on the back of the discursive reconfiguration of interests (Ep 5, 40:30–46:00; 01:10:00ff).

Practically speaking, however, whether actions, performances, or protests end up being judged to be agonistic cannot be guaranteed in advance. We can see this when we compare the outcomes of two similar actions taking place 'on the turf' of powerholders. As was the case with 'Sink or Swim', the various organisations supporting the Merton alliance performed an action on the doorstep of a powerholder, this time of the local council building, assembling there to remind the council of the promises made to its constituent organisations. In contrast to the reaction provoked by the 'Sink or Swim' action, the council experienced the Merton action as overly confrontational and threatening (Ep 5, 47:00–51:00). This contrast reveals how context-dependent contingency also runs through relation-

ships and activities that are intended as agonistic but are experienced as antagonistic. One key contextual difference related to the creative and playful character of the 'Sink or Swim' action, leading organisers to reflect whether such actions might be more productive or, in our terms, help 'sublimate' potential antagonistic relationships, nudging them into a more solidly agonistic orbit: "creative actions (…) are designed to build relationships and engage with the decision makers we need to influence rather than alienating them (…) We can be angry but we can do it in a way that builds relationships and is impactful" (Ep 3, 12:25–35).

In both cases, moreover, the (ant)agonistic tension remains present and energising, serving as a reminder that relationships within and beyond the CO alliance are contingently fluid and changeable, always dependent on the social justice issue being pursued in a particular context. In sum, we can understand CO's preferred mode of engagement, both externally and internally, as an agonistic mode of engagement.

7. Conclusion

This paper turned to the alliance-based activism of Community Organising (CO), as practiced by Citizens UK, to situate their practical insights on achieving social change within the conceptual framework of political discourse theory (DT) and radical democracy (RD). While DT and RD offered a way to grasp CO's insights regarding its pronouncements on partisanship, CO practice offered concrete ways to flesh out some of the more abstract formulations of RD, particularly concerning the idea of agonism as a mode of democratic engagement. The paper thus forges a new front by extending DT research to a distinct sphere of political activism that has so far largely escaped its attention.

Our discussion of this theory-praxis nexus has several implications for the study of social movements and especially for theories of RD that promote the adoption of an 'agonistic ethos'. First, while the concept of agonism is used most often to characterise relationships between a social force and its adversaries, we have shown how CO praxis points to its significance for conceptualising the relationships *within* a social movement too, as well as the practicalities and dynamics of their interaction with their external adversary. Second, zooming in on these insights through CO publications and a podcast series containing thick descriptions of concrete campaigns, our DT-informed vignette-based analysis highlighted the strategic value of relational thickness — not only the relational breadth that tends to be emphasised in DT and RD — when building and maintaining alliances across its membership. In particular, it suggests that relational

thickness can assist movements to agonistically overcome contingent challenges with less risk of 'fizzling out'.

A related implication follows from this. While theoretically often taken for granted in DT scholarship, we were able to see practically the contingent and fluid aspects of the frontiers separating a movement from its adversaries, which can sometimes produce unexpected displacements. In discourse theory, such displacements are often discussed in the context of what Gramsci calls 'transformism', namely, when powerful actors incorporate particular movement demands, thereby weakening the chain of equivalence supporting an alliance (Laclau 2005, 207). However, our illustrative vignettes enable us to juxtapose this more typical 'transformism from above' with a 'transformism from below', whereby a movement extends its equivalential chain to include powerholders to which it was originally opposed. While it is crucial that we take seriously the ever-present possibility of regressive top-down co-optation pressures and temptations, an important implication of our analysis is that scholars also be attentive to concrete, context-specific ways some powerful bodies (such as a local NHS body) can be incorporated into the social force contesting the *status quo*.

The above-noted implications of our CO-RD exploration also point to new areas of research. A more encompassing assessment of CO's progressive character would need to ascertain how its local, regional, and national wins contribute to significant social change more widely. It would also require a more detailed investigation of the way self-interest and negotiations are conceptualised and discursively constructed in CO practice. A particularly rich vein of CO research here, from a discourse studies perspective, would involve expanding on the role religious faith plays in non-partisan agonistic engagement and alliance building in CO practice. This is because a wide range of religiously affiliated organizations typically constitute a substantial number of CO alliance memberships. Such research would contribute further to our understanding of the complex and dynamic discursive interplay in CO practice between mode of engagement, interest and identity, and social change. This would enable scholars to shed further light on several areas of interest to both CO and RD, concerning, for example, their respective conceptualisations of leadership; non-DT traditions of radical democracy; traditions of CO outside the Anglo-American context; and the relationship between CO and union organising.

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