

The Legacy of ACORN in the Age of Populism

This column was written for The Lens, a New Orleans/Gulf Coast based publication based on politics and social issues. The op-ed was timed to coincide with the New Orleans theatrical run of my documentary feature, The Organizer.

"Do you remember the community organization ACORN?"

As we worked for several years on a film about the organization and its founder Wade Rathke, it's a question I asked many times in casual conversation. The answers I got were varied. A few folks remembered ACORN as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, once the biggest and most effective community-organizing group in the U.S. Louisiana natives remembered ACORN for their tireless work in the aftermath of Katrina.

On the whole, though, most people remember the organization but only vaguely: "Wasn't there something about hidden-camera videos and pimps and prostitutes?" "Weren't they involved in voter registration?" "I think I knew somebody who worked for them." These were the common responses we might get.

Look online, however, and other people remember ACORN differently — as “Obama’s Communist stormtroopers” or “the corrupt face of the left” or some other line fed to them by Breitbart or Fox News. A Google search mostly yields results about ACORN’s downfall: the coordinated attacks by the Republican Party and Fox News, the video sting. I think that’s unfortunate because in this moment there’s more value in the lessons about how ACORN was built than in how it was destroyed. It’s what fascinated me when I began researching “The Organizer” — and what we decided to concentrate on when constructing it. (The film opens Friday, Jan. 11, at Zeitgeist.)

Headquartered in New Orleans, ACORN took the lead on campaigns to raise the minimum wage and fought for home ownership and political enfranchisement for the nation’s low and moderate-income families, but how did Rathke, who in 1970 was a young organizer raised in New Orleans and based in Little Rock, Arkansas, manage to grow ACORN into a nationwide powerhouse for the poor? How was he able to recruit and train many of the best political organizers of their time? What is the process of building a truly democratic and grassroots political movement? And, more importantly, why, in the years since the organization’s demise has the desperate need to confront the fundamentally unfair market-driven politics of the last decades been filled not by

new ACORNs, but by a different, more sinister and fundamentally contradictory type of populist politics?

"Populism" has become a buzzword in the last few years and is now mostly associated with a kind of demagoguery that is currently sweeping the globe at an alarming rate. Donald Trump in the U.S., Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the Ford brothers in Ontario—these are leaders who have exploited a legitimate anger with the political establishment, the same kind of anger that fuelled ACORN, but that have twisted that anger into something hateful, based on fear and base nationalism.

That's today's "populism." Few media outlets even use a qualifier anymore. In the New York Times Jair Bolsonaro is not a "right-wing populist," he's just a "populist." What does this mean for the thousands of people who have dedicated their lives to the work of building progressive populist movements — movements that are of the people and against the elites, but are inclusive, multi-racial and committed to equity and justice?

The term "populist" originated as a self-designation used by members of the People's Party, a left-wing, agrarian movement that rose to prominence in the Southern and Western U.S. in the 1890s. The historical line from these populists to ACORN, which was founded in 1970, passed through the Partisan League in the 1920s and Saul Alinsky's Back of the Yards in the 1930s to the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s.

ACORN was a part of this progressive populist tradition and became perhaps the largest and most prominent example of it as the 20th century gave way to the 21st. ACORN was fundamentally a grassroots organization, owned and directed by its membership. Paid organizers acted as consultants, assistants, guides, researchers and guardians of the democratic process, but the membership — low and moderate-income individuals and families — determined what campaigns to work on and in what directions the organization should move.

Of course, the relationship between membership and organizer was nuanced and not without controversy, but in my experience the commitment among organizers to the membership's self-determination often bordered on the fanatical. In that sense it was a truly populist organization.

Since its demise, no organization has taken up ACORN's mantle in quite the same way. There have been "moments," but these moments have either been fleeting wildfires that burnt out as quickly as they started (Occupy Wall Street) or that coalesced around a charismatic individual (Bernie Sanders or Great Britain's Jeremy Corbyn, for example) that made them fundamentally opposite to what ACORN was trying to achieve.

ACORN worked relentlessly on the nuts and bolts of organizational structure, financing, resource management, and membership growth. The goal was to survive and build on

the shifting sands of history. In an archival interview we excerpt in “The Organizer,” Rathke talks about ACORN’s potential for growth and power. He is speaking in 1975, a post-Watergate moment when the credibility of the American government was at its lowest ebb (perhaps until now.) He makes the important point that power is often not taken from those who have it, but is “picked up in the street” after periods of chaos and uncertainty.

He asserts that ACORN never could “take over the government.” Instead, when popular investment in government and other institutions of power was reduced, it was up to ACORN to put in place all the pieces —trained organizers, resources, a strong membership—so that the power in the streets could be galvanized.

That time could be now.

In my home town of Toronto, there was a controversial public debate recently between David Frum, the former George W. Bush speechwriter, and Steve Bannon, the self-proclaimed architect of the Trump campaign and now a globe-trotting “populist” crusader. The debate’s proposition was this: “Be it resolved, the future of western politics is populist not liberal...”

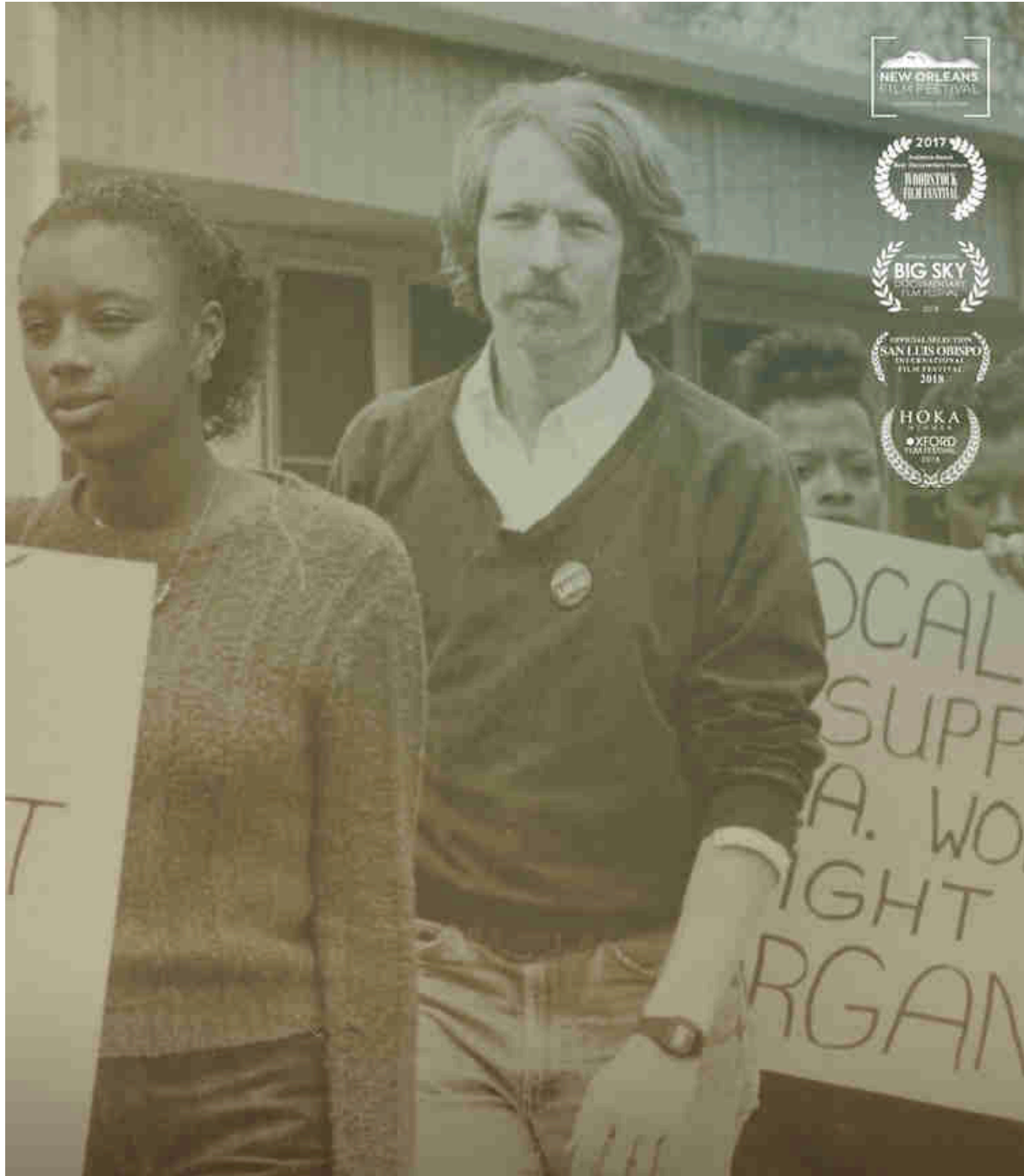
It was based on the supposition that faith in neoliberal institutions has eroded, perhaps permanently. Frum argued against the resolution, in favor of liberalism; Bannon, promoting the Trumpian brand of populism, argued that the future of politics will not be a battle between liberalism and populism but between left-wing and right-wing populism.

That hundreds of people gathered outside, not to champion Frum’s viewpoint, but to protest that debate organizers had given a platform to Bannon, an alleged white supremacist, kind of made his point. Bannon is now operating primarily in Europe, trying to turn himself into connective tissue uniting right-wing populists.

What’s the counterweight to all that? The internationalist and inclusive populism that constitutes an alternative to Bannonism? “The Organizer” includes a look at the work Rathke is doing right now.

Since the bankruptcy of the U.S. ACORN, he, too, has been traveling to other countries, advising startup ACORNs and allied organizations. During production of “The Organizer” we shot with him in Honduras, the United Kingdom, India, Canada and West Africa. Some of these organizations are tiny, but others are starting to have real influence.

In the four years since U.K. ACORN was formed it has spread to several cities and become perhaps the most visible national organization on tenancy and renter issues in Great Britain. These are the types of organizations that need to exist and grow if populism is going to regain the prominence it once enjoyed as a deeply democratic political force, with fairness and justice as its core principles.



NEW ORLEANS
FILM FESTIVAL

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HARRISBURG &
FARMERSVILLE
FILM FESTIVAL

BIG SKY
DOCUMENTARY
FILM FESTIVAL
2018

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SAN LEAN CRISTO
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
2018

HOKA
FILM FESTIVAL
OXFORD
FESTIVAL
2018

THE ORGANIZER

SUNDIAL PICTURES AND CASA LIBRA PRODUCTIONS PRESENT THE ORGANIZER A FILM BY NICK TAYLOR & JOEY CAREY
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theOrganizerFilm.com



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