



BLOOMSBURY  
REVELATIONS

# EDWARD T. CHAMBERS

**ROOTS FOR RADICALS**

ORGANIZING FOR POWER,  
ACTION, AND JUSTICE

With MICHAEL A. COWAN

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# **Roots for Radicals**

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and Justice

**Edward T. Chambers**  
**With Michael A. Cowan**

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To Ann and our children

Eve, Mae, Joe, Lily, and Will

*“Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”*

HANNAH ARENDT  
*THE HUMAN CONDITION*

*“Never, never do for others what they can do for themselves.”*

IAF’S “IRON RULE”

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FOREWORD TO THE *BLOOMSBURY*  
*REVELATIONS* EDITION  
EDWARD CHAMBERS—A LIFE  
IN ORGANIZING

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From involvement in life's events we develop a sense of how things are and how they should be. That sense of things is a lens constantly being ground by life experience. It makes possible and limits how we can understand the present. Our understanding in turn makes possible and limits how we can act. When someone dies their lens, the unique, personal, deeply subjective awareness of reality that they developed over a lifetime of experiences, is no more. However much someone has written down how they see things or shared their views in other ways, the accumulated memories and meanings of a lifetime that guided them through every moment of their lives perish with them. *Roots for Radicals* is a record in his own voice of the lens that Edward Chambers developed in practicing the vocation of community organizing for more than half a century, beginning as a student of two quite different visionaries, Saul Alinsky and Dorothy Day. There are careers and vocations, contracts and covenants. Organizing was Ed's vocation and his commitment to it was covenantal, that is, unconditional.

During the last half of the twentieth century, "community organizing" became part of the vocabulary of English-speaking people. Its meanings are many and varied, but all come down to this: Community organizing is people in civil society acting intentionally in concert with others to change their lives, powered and guided by their own interests and values. The philosophy, strategy and tactics of community organizing, inspired by pioneering labor leader John L. Lewis and devised originally by Saul Alinsky, have spread throughout the world. No movement for change in modern times has so affected the lives of ordinary people in Western nations and beyond. Community organizing in its modern form was invented by Alinsky, but the most significant figure in its spread and development in the last half of the twentieth century was Ed Chambers. Jesus had Paul and Saul had Ed. Christianity would have remained a small religious sect in the backwaters of the Roman Empire without Paul, the

founder and organizer of Christian communities. Alinsky's insights into how ordinary people can build power for change would have floated away like sensitivity groups and flower power absent Ed Chambers' effectiveness in institutionalizing community organizing through the vehicle of the national Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). He began this project to make organizing a bona fide profession in Chicago in 1969, when he was 37 years old. Its long-term success was the proudest public accomplishment of his lifetime.

As the twenty-first century began, the meaning of "community organizing" became bifurcated. Those whose families and communities have benefitted in the past fifty years by learning how to organize know it to be a way of practicing democracy locally, a means for ordinary people to join with others to improve their lives. By contrast, those seeking in 2010–12 to deny a second term to President Barack Obama, who organized in Chicago after finishing law school, have tried to demonize "community organizing" as a stealth form of communism, with Saul Alinsky as Lenin. One commentator rushed breathlessly on the air with the stunning revelation that Alinsky dedicated his most famous book—*Rules for Radicals*—to Lucifer. Talk about demonizing! No sense of irony in sight. The action, as Alinsky taught, is in the reaction. The high-/lowlight of this smear campaign took place during the 2012 GOP Convention when, sarcasm dripping, Sarah Palin sneered at President Obama as a "community organizer," contrasting him with herself, a former mayor who had held a "real job." This cant may continue but civil society leaders who know firsthand the guiding values and constructive effects of community organizing won't be fooled or deflected by it.

Monsignor Jack Egan, the "social justice priest" of Chicago and a partner of Ed Chambers for forty years in Chicago organizing and on the national board of the Industrial Areas Foundation, urged Ed to write this book. Egan said: "Saul did *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals*, but you've gone way beyond his thinking. You need to write what you know before you die. I'll give you a title, *Roots for Radicals*." That Ed allowed his old comrade-in-arms to name his baby, the testament of his life, is a tribute to the relationship between them. This book captures where the understanding and practice of community organizing has gone since Saul Alinsky left the stage of public life in 1972.

Like people, books emerge from relationships. *Roots for Radicals* is no exception. Every page here reflects events that transpired in an organizing career of more than half a century. Over decades of leading actions and

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reflection, Chambers and the senior organizers who worked under his oversight—Mike Gecan, Ernie Cortes, Arnie Graf, Christine Stephens, Larry McNeil, Dick Harmon, Pearl Ceasar, Jim Drake, Gerald Taylor, Leo Penta, Neil Jameson—were not just building broad-based community organizations around the country and abroad, they were mining that experience to create a curriculum for training organizers and leaders in the working knowledge and skills of community organizing. That curriculum became the basis for IAF’s well-known “10 Day Training,” which has been experienced by thousands over the past fifty years. The Dean of the IAF “University of the Streets” was Ed Chambers. He watched over and saw to the development of its basic training curriculum, fine tuning components inherited from Alinsky and developing new ones, like the teaching on public vs. private life. The IAF curriculum was his baby. Weaving together concepts and stories, *Roots for Radicals* introduces readers to critical, battle-tested IAF teachings: The tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be, the relational meeting, broad-based community organizing, public vs. private relationships, interests, and the practice of public life. All are taught in these pages in the voice of Ed Chambers.

Ed was my mentor in public life for more than twenty years. No one taught me more about being a public person, citizen, or leader. A meeting I had with him in 1992 on the evening before I began an intensive stint of organizing under his supervision in the northwest suburbs of Chicago offers a window onto his impact on my life. I was excited and anxious, a thousand miles from home and well outside my academic comfort zone, for the sole purpose of learning from him. I was well aware of his reputation as a tough supervisor. We went spent the meeting going through my assignments and how our weekly supervision would work. Ed ended the meeting by saying, “Mike, what I worry about is that you won’t make a big enough mistake out here.” When I got past my surprise and had time to digest his comment, I realized that this man had just looked right into my soul and issued a profound challenge. In that moment I began to see my strengths and limitations in a new light and gradually to be less constrained by fear of making a mistake. Ed was not telling me to go make a big mistake on purpose, but rather pushing me to trust my judgment enough to risk making errors in the public arena, to understand that in public life, people who don’t make mistakes will never challenge the inertia of the world as it is. Understanding that there are no perfect people in public or private life, he challenged me, in his inimitable way, to lay the profoundly limiting notion of perfection down. I draw on that teaching moment to this day.

What I experienced from him that night was a compassionate challenge. Compassionate challenge was one face of Ed Chambers.

When I first attended national IAF training, he taught one of the first sessions. When he came before us he radiated an intensity that, to speak plainly, scared me. I did my best to avoid his eyes or any kind of confrontation with him. As I am not easily scared, this was a shock. Over the years I became aware of the extent to which high intensity was part of his personality. Great intensity has a great downside. I saw Ed's lead him to berate leaders and organizers in public, with consequences beneficial to no one. I once invited him to speak at my university and had a flyer printed that said: "Come Hear a Prophet." He spoke brilliantly, with passionate intensity, and, yes, there were anxious faces among his hearers, registering his intensity. One great student of the prophets said they spoke in voice an octave higher than most people. This is unpleasant and unsettling for those of us who live in the normal range. Prophetic intensity was another face of Ed Chambers.

As his young protégé, Ed internalized Alinsky's famous distinction between the world as it is and the world as it should be. This became central to his moral compass. Human beings feel the gap between how things are and how we believe they should be. This felt gap agitates people of conscience. When that agitation reaches a certain level, a fire erupts in the belly. When that happens we are motivated to act, but "ignite fire in belly" is not a plan. Action that makes a difference requires imagining how actually to move the world as it is in the direction of the world as it should be. Closing that gap requires social imagination. One Saturday morning in a church basement in Arlington Heights, a labor leader gave a presentation on the declining state of unions. What he presented was the standard account that one hears today of labor unions that have dramatically lost membership and their ethical way, by repeatedly allowing narrow interests to undermine their credibility and effectiveness. After the presentation Ed got up and extemporaneously laid out for the audience, including the labor leader, not only what a "Twenty-First-Century Union" must look like, but what it would take to organize one. It was breathtaking. A mutual associate once said to me: "Ed has the most powerful social imagination I have ever encountered." Social imaginativeness was another face of Ed Chambers.

During my time organizing in Chicago, I would typically conduct 15–20 relational meetings per week, write a brief summary of those meetings, and fax them to Ed's office. At 9:00 on Saturday mornings I would meet with him in the IAF headquarters on Kinzie Street in the shadow of the Merchandise Mart in downtown Chicago. We would spend an hour on my meeting notes

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and next steps, then two more hours in serious conversation about Ed's passions, theology, and philosophy. At some point in nearly every meeting, Ed would pick up his pen and begin to take notes as we spoke about the work of scholars like David Tracy or Charles Taylor. The world's living expert on community organizing retained the humility and curiosity to switch hats from teacher to learner. This was always a moving sight for me and remains so in my memory. I knew I was his student but had not expected to become his teacher. When he was an old man, someone asked the great Michelangelo—sculptor of the David and Pieta and painter of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—what he was doing at this stage of his life. He replied: "I am still learning." Humble curiosity was another face of Ed Chambers.

Compassionate challenger, intense and rough-edged prophet, gifted social imaginer, and perpetual student of ultimate matters; these were some of the many faces of Ed Chambers. Some words of his from *Roots for Radicals* are a self-portrait:

Organizers are agitators, catalysts, and public life coaches. They stand for the whole. They make things happen. They are rooted in the holy books, democracy's founding documents, and the lives of public heroines and heroes. They are radicals in the best sense of the word. The "Why?" question is important to professional organizers, who need a nagging curiosity about how it is that people, events and politics are this way or that way. They are generally feared and misunderstood for standing against the status quo. They are public people who seek collective power to act for justice. Being an organizer is not about being liked, but rather ... about being respected. Organizers march to a different drummer.

While marching to his own drummer, and speaking with his own authentic voice, Ed was a mentor to some and a teacher to many more across generations. All those who stood in that relationship to him see the world partly through his eyes and hear it through his voice. *Roots for Radicals* is the most comprehensive statement we have in his own voice to light our way.

Michael A. Cowan  
Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict,  
Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford

## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

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Big Ed Chambers is a natural as the successor of Saul Alinsky. He was Saul's biggest disciple in more ways than one. It follows that this book, *Roots for Radicals*, completes the trilogy that Alinsky began with *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals*.

Big Ed picks up where Saul, in his untimely death, left off. Much has happened since 1972: three steps forward and two steps back. Cynics may say that's too sanguine an outlook, that it's the other way around, what with the few having more power than ever and the many being more powerless. Not quite so, says Chambers. Voices are heard today that were dead silent yesterday. There is, of course, a long, long way to go before the have-nots, the voiceless, find their full-throated voice.

The fact is, as Big Ed cites in chapter and verse, in one revelatory conflict after another, those voices are being heard in a surprising number of quarters, hitherto silent. There have been a surprising number of triumphs as well as defeats that need not have been.

Here is a how-to book in the best sense: a primer on how to beat the dragons. It has been designed for community organizers: to know, to feel, and mostly *to think creatively* about how to not so much lead as to *incite* the powerless to find the power and to speak themselves. It calls for social knowledge, born out of experience—with its trials and errors, and a few here-and-there knocks and blows—rather than romantic idealism.

It is not accidental that Chambers quotes the words of Nobel laureate Bernard Crick: "The more one realistically construes self-interest, the more one is involved in relationships with others . . . the more conflicts of interest or of character and circumstances will arise." Crick might have included the word "community," though that may be inferred.

Chambers is at his top form in referring to the "ABCs" of organizing. "It's not the power you possess, but using the power of the opposition against itself that changes things. It's called political *jujitsu* [an Alinsky phrase]. You must go outside the opponent's [Big Boys] experience. You aim the action for the inevitable reaction, knowing that the reaction is more important than your action itself." (I might amend Big Ed's observation: It's your action that brought the reaction about.) He recounts a victory during a black have-

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nots battle against Kodak's discriminatory policies in Rochester: "Organized people took on organized money and won."

One of the most moving sequences in this book deals with his beginnings as a Midwestern rural kid, being trained for the Catholic priesthood. From early on, he asked questions that were considered impudent and, indeed, sacrilegious: questions and doubts that are part of today's daily discourse and contretemps. Basically, he wanted God brought closer to the people of the parish.

That's what this book is really about. Big Ed Chambers is something of a secular priest, with the community as his parish, teaching that the least of us have the right to lead decent lives. I should point out that his first real teacher was Dorothy Day.

*Studs Terkel*  
*Chicago, Illinois*

# INTRODUCTION

## THE INDUSTRIAL AREAS

### FOUNDATION: SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND POLITICALNESS

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This book is about roots—roots for radicals. The late Monsignor Jack Egan of Chicago, an old friend and comrade in the struggle, suggested the title, and it fits. But “radical” is a misunderstood word for many folks today, so I need to make it clear from the start. The people you’ll meet in these pages don’t dress in black, wear masks, or kick in shop windows. “Radical” is from a Latin word that means “root.” Radical means going to the roots of the matter, and the roots of the spirit. A radical is a person who searches for meaning and affirms community. For me, that has meant half a century of organizing for power on behalf of justice and democracy. People’s public lives are fueled by a tension that won’t go away, and the most radical thing they do out of that tension starts with what I call the relational meeting. More on that tension and those meetings later.

Don’t expect a quick read here. These pages require that you bend back and reflect on your own life. Readers who hunger for meaning, for making sense of daily reality, should be fed here. People looking for a quick fix for what ails America, the faint of heart, and those without passion should stop now. So let’s whet our appetite and go on a journey.

A little historical perspective never hurts. Nearly fifty years have passed since poverty and urban decay became matters of major attention and contention in America (eliminating slums, LBJ’s war on poverty, etc.). But after decades of ideological argument and top-down bureaucratic experimentation, our cities are still drowning in poor people, violence, and desperation. During that same period, our public life has been eroded by the isolation and anxiety of consumerism, unfettered capitalism, and social divisions. The capacity of everyday ordinary people to make room at the table of public life for folk from other cultures is strained. The problems of the cities, the economic pressures of the market, and the increasing diversity of cultures aren’t going away. We have senators for oil and gas,

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and senators for farmers, but none for cities or families. Democratic self-governance—public conversation and collaborative action by organized citizens—remains our best hope for dealing with these challenges. That's the radical message of this book.

In the world as it should be, democracy means participation in public decisions in which all are included because of the dignity of being “created equal.” In the real world, democracy is dominated by the interests of a few wealthy and powerful institutions. A truly democratic public life requires the organization, education, and development of leaders who regard themselves as equal, sovereign citizens with the know-how to stand for the whole. We're not born with these civic skills and virtues, and today's instant gratification culture constantly undermines them. The radical question of this book is, why should things be this way, rather than another?

Since its founding by Saul Alinsky in 1940, the Industrial Areas Foundation (hereafter, IAF), meaning “Urban Areas Foundation,” has worked with citizens, both people of faith and seculars, to build broad organizations that don't rely on liberal belief in the welfare state or conservative faith in the invisible hand of the market.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the IAF has invested in the power of organized families and congregations acting together to refound democratic public life. By staying on this course, the IAF has been instrumental in the creation of more than sixty independent, nonpartisan, dues-based citizens organizations throughout the United States and has encouraged the development of such organizations in the United Kingdom, Germany, and South Africa. By winning on issues in places where both state and market have failed, our broad-based citizens organizations lead the way in showing how civil-society institutions can be a source of powerful citizen participation and a creative way to achieve social change. The radical question of this book is, why not a different world?

In the Back of the Yards and TWO organizations in Chicago and the FIGHT organization in Rochester, New York, foundational and universal insights about organizing people were discovered and crafted. In San Antonio, a city where people of one culture formerly functioned as menial laborers for those of another, a vibrant, bicultural political community has been achieved. In East London, civic participation has emerged within a mix of cultures and religions that those radical predecessors of ours who founded the mother of parliaments could never have imagined on English soil. In New York, large communities of new working-class homeowners reside where politicians and experts said they never would. In Baltimore, a comprehensive scholarship and jobs incentive program for public high

school graduates and a co-op of temporary workers have been created. In the cities and suburbs of Chicago and Boston, the foundation has been laid for metropolitan-wide, culturally diverse, broad-based citizens organizations on a size and scale never before attempted, one appropriate to the complexities of the twenty-first century.

Two defining characteristics of IAF organizations are their plurality and inclusiveness. Within our organizations, citizens whose ancestors were born in the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and North America collaborate as equal partners in the pursuit of justice and opportunity for all faiths, cultures, and classes. Within our organizations, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists join together to seek the well-being of their cities. (Rumor has it that a few New Age types have been spotted recently.) Within our organizations, women and men share leadership, authority, and public roles. Within our organizations, city dwellers, suburbanites, and rural residents come together to face issues that none can address alone. Within our organizations, people who believe in God, democracy, or both pursue matters of mutual interest. Within our organizations, some political conservatives, lots of moderates, and some liberals seek common ground, refusing to allow ideological differences to perpetuate social divisions. Members of IAF organizations understand that while the “silent majority” goes along with the status quo, it only takes a well-organized 2 to 3 percent of the body politic to initiate social change. That’s the radical message of this book.

Readers familiar with the reputation of our organizations for dramatic, imaginative and effective public action may be surprised to find that the first—and most critical—chapter waiting for you here is an extended reflection on the tension between concrete realities and cherished ideals. Such a response, however, betrays a simplistic grasp of organizing in the IAF tradition. The liturgy of public life developed by our professional organizers and citizen leaders over the course of sixty years of organizing, teaching, and mentoring ordinary people in the practice of citizenship is “research, action, evaluation.” Action is the middle term in a three-part formula, sandwiched between moments of hard reflection. The intentional discipline of IAF organizing requires that public actions begin and end in reflection. While no one develops a public life without action, we only learn how to build the power to act for justice in the real world when public actions are preceded and followed by disciplined reflection.

The time has come for me to put into words something of the formidable practical know-how about doing nonpartisan politics that has been gleaned