✻ CHAPTER ONE ✻

The Responsibilities of a Citizen

Well and wisely trained citizens you will
hardly find anywhere.
—*Thomas More (1516)*

Late in the summer of 2005, somewhere in the Atlantic basin off the coast of Africa, an elongated trough of low pressure took shape and began moving west. Over the Bahamas, on August 23, it joined with the remains of Tropical Depression Ten to form the more powerful Tropical Depression Twelve. As it moved over the warm waters of the Atlantic, the system gathered energy from below. On August 24 meteorologists declared it a tropical storm and named it Katrina. By the time the storm reached Florida, it had become a hurricane. It weakened briefly while passing over land, but then rapidly gained strength from the Gulf of Mexico, before wreaking havoc on the Gulf coast on August 29. The damage done there had human as well as natural causes.

One evening, sixteen months after the storm, I was in Marrero, Louisiana, a city located on the West Bank in greater New Orleans. At St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, I met with several organizers and leaders of a citizens' organization called Jeremiah, which consists of churches, synagogues, parent-teacher associations, unions, and other nongovernmental groups. Each of these institutions pays dues to Jeremiah, with the money going mainly to the salaries of the organizers. By joining the organization, the institutions also commit themselves to a great deal of internal organizational activity. What that activity amounts to will become clearer in the next three chapters.

For now, it will suffice to say that the internal organizing going on in various New Orleans institutions is directed toward two initial objectives. The first is to get people within a given institution talking with each other about their concerns. In the case of a church this would mean hundreds of individual conversations and small gatherings—called "one-on-ones" and "house meetings," respectively—among church members. The second objective is to identify and cultivate leaders from within. These leaders represent their institutions in the citizens' organization and in the broader forum of public discussion. Drawing together institutional leaders in this way creates the sort of power base that the citizens' organization can then use to hold governmental and corporate officeholders accountable.

In the parlance of groups like Jeremiah, "organizers" are professionals tasked with helping ordinary citizens learn the practices of organizing and accountability. "Leaders" are citizen volunteers who have earned the right to represent an institution—such as a church or labor union—that has decided to join the organization. A "core team" is a set of leaders recognized as having the authority to formulate proposals and develop strategies on behalf of the organization.

Jeremiah is an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a confederation of community organizations founded in 1940 by the legendary Saul Alinsky. Alinsky's mission was to be the kind of mentor to ordinary American citizens that Machiavelli had been to the princes of Renaissance city-states: realistic, pragmatic, and fiercely dedicated to the ideal of liberty. Alinsky is best known for his work in the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago in the 1930s and in Rochester, New York, in the 1960s.

Two of Alinsky's books, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971), vividly describe his experiences and tactics as an organizer.[6] He fashioned himself as an irreverent radical, but both books express reverence for a tradition whose heroes include Pat-

rick Henry, Sam Adams, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, John Brown, Thaddeus Stevens, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Edward Bellamy, and Upton Sinclair (*Reveille*, 13–14; *Rules*, 7). The true democrat, Alinsky insisted, is "suspicious of, and antagonistic to, any idea of plans that work from the top down. Democracy to him is working from the bottom up" (*Reveille*, 17). The purpose of Alinsky's organizing, and of his writing, was to show ordinary people what bottom-up change involves.

Democracy, in his view, "is a way of life, not a formula to be 'preserved' like jelly" (*Reveille*, 47). Implicit in that way of life is a commitment to liberty and justice for all. These ideals become an ideological fog when they are abstracted from the activities of ordinary people. Liberty and justice are made actual in the lives of people who struggle for them. In the struggle to achieve liberty and justice for all, the "Have-Nots of the world" need to provide a counterweight to the "Haves" (*Rules*, 8, 18–23). Yet they can do this only by gathering in groups and exerting power.

> If we strip away all the chromium trimmings of high-sounding metaphor and idealism which conceal the motor and gears of a democratic society, one basic element is revealed—the people are the motor, the organizations of the people are the gears. The power of the people is transmitted through the gears of their own organizations, and democracy moves forward. (*Reveille,* 46)

Alinsky's books explain how such organizations are built and what they can do to seek democratic objectives by democratic means. By traveling to New Orleans and various other places where IAF groups have formed, I thought I might be able to see what Alinsky's heritage amounts to today.

Presiding over our meeting in Marrero was Jackie Jones, an African-American woman who used to be a teacher in New Orleans and now serves as Jeremiah's lead organizer. The leaders assembled at St. Joseph were all blacks, with the exception of one Latino,

Reverend Jaime Oviedo of Christ Temple Church. When we went around the table introducing ourselves, the leaders gave not only their own names but also the names of the institutions they represented, all of which happened to be churches.

Jackie invited Reverend Jesse Pate, of the Harvest Ripe Church of Christ's Holiness, to begin the meeting with a prayer. "Eternal Father," Reverend Pate said, "we do thank you again for allowing us to be here. We ask your guidance, for we do seek your mercy and your instructions. Give us the wisdom to follow your lead to heaven. You will be our guiding principle and our guiding light, for truly we are members of the same body. Together we have to know that all things are possible if we continually believe in trusting you. So, right now, guide us, strengthen us, and we thank you for the time you have allowed us to be here. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Reverend Pate describes Jeremiah as "a broad-based organization. We deal with a lot of issues. We do take on the IAF motto of not doing for others what they can do for themselves. But we also believe in being a voice for the people, and representing the people. We do research, actions, and things of that nature, we go into house meetings, we bring the public in, and we talk to them. We do community walks and things of that nature. So it's a lot of things that makes us what we are."

David Warren, a tall, elegantly dressed African American who wore shades throughout the evening, was representing the Living Witness Church of God in Christ. Jeremiah, he said, has its roots in faith: "We're a faith-based organization, and we believe in building relationships." David made clear that he wasn't disagreeing with Reverend Pate. Broad-based organizing encompasses, but is not limited to, faith-based organizing. Most member institutions in Jeremiah, as in many other IAF groups, are churches. The number of synagogues, mosques, schools, and labor unions involved in IAF is growing, and organizers hope to hasten this trend. Still, if one subtracted the churches from IAF and other similar organizing net-

works, then grassroots democracy in the United States would come to very little. In chapters 15–17, I will return to the significance of this fact for our understanding of pastoral responsibility, the training of pastors, and the proper relationship between church and state.

African Americans are heavily represented in the Jeremiah Group, and the leaders are quick to point out the role played by racial prejudice in the reconfiguration of New Orleans. But they have made a self-conscious decision to build a coalition that crosses racial lines, in the hope of accumulating sufficient power to address their concerns effectively. I found no reluctance among them to discuss the racial dimension of the situation. They present it, however, as one dimension among others; and they present it in this way, as far as I can tell, because they see it in this way, not merely because they are trying to draw whites, Asians, and Hispanics into the coalition. The major movers and shakers in the immediate wake of the storm were developers and bureaucrats, who took advantage of the racial prejudice in some sectors of the population to advance private interests at the expense of the common good. That is what happened, according to Jeremiah leaders, so that is the story that must be told.

Broad-based organizing aims to transcend racial boundaries.[7] It would be fruitless to fight racism in post-Katrina New Orleans by assembling a coalition consisting only of African-American churches and associations. What it will take to combat injustices caused in part by racism is a coalition in which the interests of many groups converge. If those groups are to be assembled, the identity of the coalition itself will have to be found in a conception of the city's common good. Racial *identification* cannot play the role in the process of coalition building that it plays in establishing solidarity within some of the groups participating in the coalition. Yet many of those groups will have less reason to join the coalition if racial prejudice is not named as one important source of domination in present-day New Orleans.

Jeremiah and the other broad-based citizens' groups discussed in this book all belong to a single network known as Southwest IAF, which stretches from Mississippi to Idaho to California. The ethnic, racial, and religious makeup of these groups vary considerably from place to place, yet they all employ the same political concepts and go about their organizing in a way that bears the stamp of Alinsky's influence. The network's supervisor is Ernesto Cortés Jr.

Around the time *Rules for Radicals* appeared, Cortés was a young organizer in Texas. His frustrations with his work led him to enroll in Alinsky's Training Institute in Chicago. By that time, however, Alinsky was spending most of his time on the road, giving speeches and raising funds. Within a few months of Cortés's arrival, Alinsky died of a heart attack, and Ed Chambers, Alinsky's successor, became the young organizer's mentor. After working on several projects in the Midwest with Chambers and a brief stint of organizing in California, Cortés returned to his home state of Texas in 1974, and began laying the groundwork for citizens' organizations in several major cities there. The first of these was COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service), an organization located in San Antonio that is known among organizers not only for building a power base for Latinos and for many concrete victories, but also for its longevity.

Ernie Cortés has since organized elsewhere in Texas and in California. In addition to coordinating Southwest IAF, he now serves as a director of IAF at the national and international levels.[8] Like his predecessors in that role, Alinsky and Chambers, Cortés teaches that democracy depends for its very survival, as well as for its health, on what citizens do. This claim is hardly new. Montesquieu inferred it from a theory of politics in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Tocqueville placed great weight on it in *Democracy in America*, and Whitman spun it into poetry in *Leaves of Grass*. Of course, these thinkers all had in mind a worry that goes back to Plato. The worry is that a

democratic polity assigns to ordinary citizens a set of responsibilities for which they do not appear qualified.

If democracy depends for its survival on what citizens do, it could still be that citizens are not up to the task envisioned for them. Walt Whitman was as troubled as anyone by what he called the "question of character" haunting American democracy in the decades after the Civil War. In "Democratic Vistas," his long list of reasons for concern includes the "robbery and scoundrelism" practiced by economic elites. Justice, he wrote, "is always in jeopardy." Why, then, suppose that the people are capable of effective collective action on behalf of justice? His answer was grounded in "the experiences of the fight," including both successes and failures.[9] He witnessed thousands of acts of benevolence and courage during the war. He understood that the slaves would not have been emancipated unless countless ordinary people had campaigned for abolition. Whitman hoped that similar movements would eventually win the franchise for women and constrain scoundrels in high places from robbing ordinary folk.

Alinsky, Chambers, and Cortés all share Whitman's desire to prove democracy's detractors mistaken. Like him, they are committed to *grassroots democracy*.[10] That is, they hold that ordinary citizens can indeed act responsibly and effectively if they organize themselves properly and cultivate the virtues and skills of democratic citizenship. The belief that this condition can be met is grounded in the experience of particular examples of collective action—a social movement for Whitman, community organizing for Alinsky, and organizing on an increasingly broad scale for Chambers and Cortés. Abolitionism, the Back of the Yards organization in 1930s Chicago, and Southwest IAF represent three particular kinds of grassroots democracy.

In this book, I shall mainly be examining the third kind. Broad-based organizing differs from social movement organizing in that it

does not restrict itself to a single issue and instead takes up different issues over time in response to concerns expressed by citizens. It differs from community organizing insofar as it sometimes succeeds in building lasting coalitions that involve multiple communities. Social movements are inherently limited in focus and duration.[11] Community organizations are inherently limited in geographical scope and have also often fizzled—or become corrupted by antidemocratic impulses—after a few local campaigns. Broad-based citizens' groups are meant to transcend these limitations. This is why the longevity of the COPS organization in San Antonio is significant for our understanding of grassroots democracy today. It is also why the network in which Jeremiah and COPS participate has importance for an appraisal of democracy's prospects at a time of worsening stratification. If grassroots democracy is going to address the most pressing issues now emerging at the national and international levels, and sustain itself over time, broad-based organizing will have to be expanded and strengthened.

On the many occasions when I have discussed this matter with Cortés, however, he has always underlined the importance of patience. In broad-based organizing that aspires ultimately to have a significant impact at the national and international levels, the standing temptation is, as he puts it, "to skip steps, to take short cuts." If the right sort of micro-organizational work is not being done, the macro-organizational work of connecting citizens' groups with one another in progressively wider networks will create only an illusion of democratic power. This can happen in two ways. In the first, the networks are too loosely connected with people on the ground to generate power. In the second, the connections linking network spokespersons with people on the ground are somewhat stronger, but function in a way that is not democratic. The first way creates an illusion of *power,* the second an illusion of *democratic* power.

If Cortés is right, it seems that high degrees of participation, vig-

ilance, self-constraint, and patience on the part of organizers, leaders, and citizens will be required to scale up the organizational effort without sacrificing either effectiveness or internal accountability. In an era of economic crisis, globalization, terrorism, and melting ice caps, the task is as consequential as it is daunting. The trouble is that many citizens appear too alienated, deluded, ignorant, or fearful to advance even their private interests wisely. Still less do they seem capable of striving for the common good. Cortés would be the first to point out that elections are, for the most part, exercises in mass manipulation. Candidates declare their allegiance to democratic ideals, but behind the scenes something antidemocratic is going on. Citizens who sense that the puppeteers are pulling their strings are tempted to withdraw from the process in disgust.

An old adage has it that the cure for democracy's ills is more democracy. The adage assumes that there is a cure for those ills. It implies that the cure is to be found in democratic activity of some kind. But what sort of behavior, if any, could cure what ails democracy today? And why should one think that real-life citizens are capable of such a thing? Cortés argues that citizens who behave irresponsibly and ineffectively tend to be either disorganized or organized in a counterproductive way. The cure for the ills of democracy is therefore a more productive kind of organizing.

Skillful and virtuous citizens of any social class acquire their skills and virtues under specifiable conditions, as members of groups that gather people of good will, provide them with information, and cultivate their dispositions to behave well. The evidence that makes democracy seem like a foolish wager is best understood as evidence of how poorly organized, poorly trained people behave. The members of any social class, if poorly organized and poorly trained, are likely to behave irresponsibly and ineffectively. The issue, Cortés maintains, is not *which* social class to entrust with the responsibility of influencing and contesting governmental deci-

sion making but rather how to extend the benefits of good organizing and good training to the populace as a whole.

Citizens are individuals who have a share of responsibility for the arrangements and policies undertaken by a republic. A *republic* is a polity officially devoted to securing liberty and justice for its citizens. By separating executive, legislative, and judicial powers, and by granting citizens the rights of political participation, republics strive to make it more difficult than it would otherwise be for a single person or group to dominate others.[12] If a republic fails to secure liberty and justice, the citizens of the republic include all of the people who can legitimately be held responsible for permitting their polity to go wrong, whether it be by committing injustices or by neglecting available opportunities to influence and contest the decision making of officeholders.

An individual counts as a citizen in the formal sense only if he or she is recognized as such under law. The legal system confers the official status of a citizen on particular individuals. But when the legal category is applied in an arbitrarily narrow way, it can come into conflict with an informal process of mutual recognition among the people. In a broader sense, then, citizens are individuals who treat one another as bearers of the relevant kind of responsibility.

To be a citizen, in this sense, is to be recognized by others as such, or more strongly, to be worthy of being recognized. The trouble, of course, is that the informal process of recognition is a work in progress and has its own contradictions. The concept of a citizen, like other value-laden notions employed by citizens, is contestable. At any given moment, various people are applying it in somewhat different ways, and either recognizing, or refusing to recognize, certain others as legitimate bearers of responsibility in public life. These days the members of Jeremiah and certain other residents of New Orleans are applying the concept differently.

Citizens are supposed to be able to fulfill their public responsibility nonviolently: by casting ballots, speaking out freely, informing

themselves, petitioning for the redress of their grievances, and assembling peaceably into groups. Beyond the affirmation of these rights, a republic is *democratic* insofar as it: (1) removes arbitrary restrictions on who counts as a citizen, (2) opens up sufficient opportunities for citizens to influence and contest official decisions and laws, and (3) is animated by a spirit of mutual recognition and accountability.[13]

The issue of immigration shows that the ability of the United States to satisfy the first criterion remains in question, despite adoption of the Thirteenth, Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth amendments to the Constitution. Undocumented workers currently classified as illegal perform essential labor for legally recognized citizens, yet many are exploited in the workplace and live in fear of deportation. They are here because their alternatives are worse. Most Americans, if faced with the dilemma of undocumented workers, would do as they have done.

Some such workers contribute significantly to the civic life, as well as to the economy, of the United States. They bear civic responsibility while lacking the corresponding form of authority. This means that they are denied representation in the government, a denial that echoes the battle cry of the American War of Independence. Their defenders argue that the category of citizenship is being applied arbitrarily, at the whim of those already represented. The claim, in short, is that undocumented residents lack what our tradition calls liberty—security against domination. If so, then our treatment of them as noncitizens violates one of democracy's basic ideals.[14]

As for the second criterion, while there may be more opportunities than there used to be for legally recognized citizens to contest and influence official decisions, some of the most powerful people in our society are not in fact being held accountable for actions that have gravely negative effects on many of their fellow citizens. Economic power is accumulating in novel ways and is increasingly

concentrated in the hands of a few. The multinational corporation and the modern banking system are plutocratic in tendency and have been extraordinarily successful in escaping and undercutting democratic attempts to rein them in. For several decades they have transcended all existing forms of accountability, and even the near collapse of international finance has not decisively changed the drastic imbalance of power in society. So long as economic power is exercised on a global basis, beyond the effective control of nation-states, and translates with ease into political power within nation-states, the existing means for influencing and contesting decisions made on high will seem feeble in comparison.

What, then, about the third criterion? Central to the *spirit* of democracy, as I understand it, is a people's disposition to care about liberty and justice for all and to act in ways that make this concern manifest. Caring involves taking an active interest in something, in contrast with being apathetic about it or unconcerned with it.[15] Caring about the goods of liberty and justice for all is manifested in striving for their realization in law and public policy; in joy, relief, or satisfaction when liberty is protected or justice is done; and in anger, grief, or disappointment when these goods are violated. But it also involves a disposition on the part of citizens to hold one another accountable for the condition of the republic and thus to treat one another *as citizens*.

The behavior of the American people has, however, hardly been consistent with concern for liberty and justice for all, and the habits of mutual recognition and accountability seem to have atrophied in most domains of public life. The hopes aroused by the emergence of Barack Obama as a political leader arguably show that many citizens yearn for bottom-up change. Cortés insists, however, that much more than electoral victories of this sort will be needed to revive the democratic spirit that once manifested itself in abolitionism, the struggle to win the franchise for women, the civil rights movement, and Alinsky's community organizing.

Grassroots democracy is an evolving collection of practices intended to perfect the exercise of political responsibility by citizens in a republic that officially aspires to be democratic. As such, grassroots democracy is essentially social, as well as essentially embodied in action. It takes shape in activities that link citizens together organizationally and relate them in various ways to governmental institutions and corporations, to officials and political parties, and to the general public. The activities are undertaken self-consciously, in light of value-laden conceptions of what democracy and democratic citizenship are. To the extent that the activities are successful, by the lights of the citizens participating in them, the activities *embody* an ideal of democratic citizenship and an ideal of democratic association.

Many people have construed the responsibilities of the average citizen in a more restricted way than grassroots democrats do. Beginning in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann argued that the main actors in a modern democratic republic are officeholders, political candidates, opinion makers, and other members of powerful elites. Ordinary citizens, he thought, have more limited obligations: to inform themselves about the issues and about the politicians vying for office, to conduct themselves with civility in public debate, to vote in a way that advances their own interests fairly, and to exercise their influence appropriately—for example, by contacting their elected representatives, signing petitions, or writing letters to the editor. Given that most citizens fail to fulfill even these limited civic responsibilities, Lippmann considered it foolish to expect them to do more.

John Dewey declared Lippmann's faith in elites undemocratic. Without a more extensively organized and active citizenry, Dewey thought, a nominally democratic republic would morph quickly into a form of oligarchy, or dominance of the lucky few over the unlucky many. The Lippmann-Dewey debate of the 1920s was not a merely verbal quarrel, and it remains timely. Lippmann's point

was that grassroots organizing on a broad scale is unlikely to have the good effects democrats like Dewey envisioned for it. Dewey's point, which Alinsky wholeheartedly endorsed a decade later, was that grassroots organizing on a broad scale is *required* to keep elites from exercising their power *arbitrarily* over ordinary people.[16]

Broad-based organizing, as practiced by Cortés and others, is the latest version of a grassroots strategy designed to prevent a particular form of domination, oligarchy, from legitimizing itself through elections and the provision of certain constitutional liberties. When Cortés stresses the need for patient, indeed perpetual, micro-organizing as the basis required for genuinely democratic macro-organizing, he has in mind the delicate task of building sufficiently strong ties among citizens to generate power without creating, within the resulting networks of citizens' organizations, yet another version of oligarchy.

Cortés holds that the ideal of liberty and justice for all can in fact be achieved, provided that: the category of *citizen* is applied *nonarbitrarily*, ordinary people *cooperate* in the responsible and prudent exercise of their rights as citizens, and they embody *a spirit of mutual recognition and accountability* in their actions. He maintains that only by forming groups of the right kind and behaving wisely, as well as justly, are citizens able to fulfill their public responsibilities. Among their responsibilities is that of holding the most powerful members of society accountable. The accountability issue arises, however, within citizens' organizations and within networks of such organizations, as well as in relation to governmental and corporate elites.

But this realization obviously brings us back to the age-old worry about democracy: Where are the citizens who can do what grassroots democracy demands of them? The question is often asked in a dismissively rhetorical mode, but sometimes in a spirit of authentic inquiry. Either way, the reply will have to be specific if it is going to be effective. One needs to direct the skeptic's attention to par-

ticular people who are saying and doing particular things. If the skeptic responds by discounting as exceptional the examples being offered, one can always give more examples. There is a limit to how many examples can be discounted before the skeptic is exposed as impervious to evidence. In any event, such examples as there are require explanation. If there are citizens who are doing what grassroots democracy demands of them, how did that come to pass, and what, if anything, prevents the same process of socialization from being extended?

There are many books on the behavior of lazy or myopic or easily manipulated citizens, and many more books proposing abstract ideals by which the conduct and character of citizens should be judged and found wanting. There are also some books on what good citizenship used to look like in practice, as recently as the civil rights movement. But there are relatively few books on present-day citizens who are behaving as grassroots democracy says they must behave if democracy is to survive. Is that because such citizens are few and far between, or because the public hasn't paid much attention to them?

To see why the lacuna is worth filling, if it can be filled, consider a few analogies. In business schools future executives learn about something called "best practices." The phrase has become trite, but the wisdom behind it is that anyone who wants to run a business had better look closely at enterprises that are already being run well. A steady diet of bad examples would be dispiriting, as well as misleading. Some businesses succeed. Good examples promise to inspire and instruct. They show us what successful practice looks like, thereby giving us something to aim for.

Coaches, in any team sport, look to successful organizations for clues about how to win. If we want to start a sports team, we assemble it, and in doing so, we understand the value of a good coach. Ideally this turns out to be someone who has actually played the sport we want to play and has accumulated the relevant sort of

practical wisdom along the way. Under his or her mentorship, we play the sport, and, with luck, get better at it as we keep playing. The game, our teammates, and the coach alike become our teachers.

This is not, however, how most of us approach politics. When the safety, well being, and freedom of a community are at stake, citizens who are not professional politicians rarely hire a coach, an "organizer," to help them. They do without mentors and good examples. They assemble haphazardly, if at all, giving little thought to building a powerful and skillful team. They spend little time reflecting critically on what they are doing. The likely results are defeat, disappointment, retreat, and eventually, resignation.

Not all citizens behave in this self-defeating way, however. In groups like Jeremiah and COPS, thousands of ordinary people gather regularly in living rooms, churches, synagogues, community centers, and schools. They swap stories, identify shared concerns, work through differences, investigate the relevant facts, and select leaders. Over time, with the help of professional organizers, they build powerful organizations. The organizations cultivate leaders, teaching them, among other things, the importance of reflecting critically on what they are doing. When the groups act, they often do so with a well-constructed plan and with considerable effect. Here are a few more examples.

In the southernmost region of Texas a Latino priest brings his parish into a citizens' organization known as Valley Interfaith. His motivation, he tells me, is fidelity to the church's teachings on social justice. Why does he think that something good can come of his efforts? It is because Valley Interfaith has already succeeded in transforming hundreds of impoverished shantytowns along the U.S.–Mexico border into habitable neighborhoods. An organizer is helping him figure out how to energize his parish. The heroes of the shantytown struggle enliven his imagination.

The section of Los Angeles formerly known as South Central is

riddled with violence and ethnic tension. Yet in a public school there the principal, the teachers, and some of the parents, with the help of organizers, have constructed an island of civility where children can learn. The principal tells me that citizens of good will are in a life-and-death struggle with gangs over the allegiance of the young. He says that whoever does the best job of organizing, wins.

Near San Francisco, sixty delegates from citizens' organizations in northern California are meeting together for the first time. Among those represented are labor unions and religious institutions. In welcoming the delegates, a rabbi says that the work of a citizen pertains to the preciousness of human beings, to something one ought to hold sacred. The next speaker is a Latina, who represents farm workers in the Napa Valley. Later, a nurse asserts the need to build power. The chief organizer is a nun who tells me that it isn't enough to care about social change: "You have to know how to bring it about."

A priest, a principal, a rabbi, a farm worker, a nurse, and a nun: these leaders and many others like them will be heard from in chapters 2 through 17. Empowered citizens are eager to convey what they are doing. They take pride and encouragement from their successes. Their frustrations reveal what they are up against, what *anyone* who wants to hold elites accountable is up against. These ordinary people are practicing a kind of grassroots democracy and helping each other get the hang of it. Hearing them out is, I believe, a good way of learning what citizenship can be and an apt occasion for reflecting on the nature of power, authority, and domination in a society officially committed to liberty and justice for all.

Toward the end of the book, in an analysis that culminates in chapter 18, I shall consider the gap between grassroots democracy as it is currently practiced at the local level and the systemic imbalances of power at the national and international levels that have tilted politics in the direction of plutocracy and perpetual war.[17] The gap is large enough to make the future of democracy uncer-

tain. For this reason, a lot hangs on whether existing networks like the one examined in this book can be broadened and linked together in a way that creates effective publics of accountability. It remains unclear whether grassroots democracy can be scaled up to address the realities of power in the age of global capitalism and American military dominance.

The scaling-up effort is certain to fail in the absence of democratic organizational structures conducive to both accountability and effective collective action. Most liberals, for all of their good intentions, are grouped too loosely to hold corporate bosses and public officials accountable. Stronger ties, however, would not *necessarily* be democratic. The challenge is to build organizations that can facilitate *both* the upward flow of influence *and* the exercise of collective power. Democratic change will happen on a large scale only if many organizations that are themselves democratically structured cooperate in bringing it about. Unfortunately, these organizational requirements are not widely understood by citizens who would be pleased to see stratification reduced and ruling elites held accountable to ordinary people.

Social critics have not provided much help on this matter. Many of them make careers of denouncing domination. A few are gifted at analyzing its systemic manifestations. But whether social critics earn a living as academics, as clerics, or as journalists, they nowadays give surprisingly little concrete guidance concerning the organizational means and institutional ends of change. The current crisis of democracy demands a precise, accessible, and detailed description of the organizational options open to people who seek large-scale change.

Loosely grouped liberals are doing some good. They express their qualms about the status quo mainly by casting votes, attending occasional rallies, signing petitions, and donating money to agencies like Oxfam and Amnesty International. Such acts have good ef-

fects. But they will never succeed in overturning plutocracy and militarism. The liberals' aversion for strong ties hampers them.

This does not mean, however, that radicals who specialize in debunking liberal democracy are doing any better. Anarchists offer a vision of a coming community without rulers but neglect to explain what would keep the strong from enslaving the weak if the vision were realized. Of course, the vision will not be realized. Academic Leninists suggest that we shall need to take orders from a revolutionary avant-garde if we want to bring about large-scale change. No explanation is forthcoming as to how this would differ from submitting to another mode of totalitarian oligarchy. Both the coming community and the future revolutionary avant-garde are, at this point, mere projections of the radical imagination. As such, they express a longing for a sublime break with the present, a desire for an identity apart from the complicities of an unjust order.

These feelings may be understandable, under the circumstances, but the resulting fantasies do not issue in informed or dependable guidance about how to move forward. The audience for these genres of radical theory tends to be short in either historical memory or moral scruple. We have been down these paths before. Somehow, people who wish to avoid domination need to fashion a clear, realistic, and ethically acceptable alternative to the unpromising options of lifestyle liberalism, anarchism, and academic Leninism.

Chapter 19 will show that the president who was once a community organizer has not done so. Whether wittingly or not, his rhetoric of grassroots democracy disguises the nature of his own partisan political apparatus. This option, too, needs to be understood for what it is. While much of what Barack Obama said when he first explained the need for grassroots democracy is true, anyone who thought that Obama's "grassroots" organization would be an apt instrument for holding him and his powerful allies accountable

was bound to be disappointed. The extent of the disappointment his followers have experienced is proportionate to the extent of their confusion about what grassroots democracy is. Obama bears some responsibility for generating that confusion.

If bottom-up change is to be achieved, ordinary citizens will have to construct a network of organizations that are democratic in their internal structure, in the ends they seek, and in the means they employ. Citizens cannot rely on the political parties—or, for that matter, on radical social critics—to do the work of democracy for them. This book suggests that the effort is already underway. Our journey in search of grassroots democracy begins in New Orleans.