Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985

by Randy Cunningham · Language: EN

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Overview

Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 by Randy Cunningham is a detailed historical account of a pivotal decade in Cleveland's grassroots political life. The book chronicles the emergence, growth, and eventual decline of a vibrant community organizing movement that sought to give ordinary residents a voice in the decisions affecting their neighborhoods. Cunningham, a participant in these events, combines personal experience with archival research to tell the story of how citizens organized against disinvestment, redlining, and municipal neglect, and how they built coalitions to demand accountability from both public and private institutions.

The narrative arc follows the movement from its early successes in the mid-1970s, when neighborhood groups won concessions on housing, utilities, and city services, through its peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it became a significant force in local politics, to its fragmentation and decline by the mid-1980s. Cunningham argues that the movement's rise was fueled by a combination of economic crisis, federal funding for community development, and the energy of a new generation of organizers, while its fall was precipitated by internal divisions, co-optation by city government, and the shifting political climate under the Reagan administration. The book is important because it provides a case study of the possibilities and limits of community organizing in an era of urban decline, offering lessons for contemporary activists and scholars interested in grassroots democracy and urban policy.

Key Takeaways

- Community organizing in Cleveland in the 1970s and 1980s achieved concrete wins on housing, utilities, and city services, proving that organized residents could force change.
- The movement's success depended on a combination of federal funding, local economic crisis, and the dedication of a new generation of organizers.
- Internal divisions over strategy and identity, particularly around race and class, weakened the movement and made it vulnerable to co-optation.

• The Reagan administration's cuts to federal community development programs removed a crucial resource that had sustained neighborhood organizing.

• Cleveland's city government, under Mayor George Voinovich, adopted a strategy of incorporating neighborhood leaders into official structures, which blunted the movement's independent power.

• The rise and fall of Cleveland's community organizing movement offers a cautionary tale about the need for movements to build independent bases of power rather than relying on government funding or political alliances.

• The book demonstrates that community organizing can be effective in the short term but requires sustained strategy and adaptability to survive political and economic shifts.

• Cunningham's insider perspective provides a valuable, if subjective, account of the movement's internal debates and personal relationships.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: The Promise and Peril of Community Organizing

Cunningham sets the stage by describing Cleveland in the mid-1970s: a city in crisis, with a declining population, a shrinking tax base, and neighborhoods suffering from disinvestment and redlining. He introduces the key players and organizations that would shape the community organizing movement, and he outlines his own role as a participant-observer. The introduction frames the book's central question: why did a movement that seemed so promising in the mid-1970s collapse by the mid-1980s? Cunningham argues that the answer lies in a combination of internal weaknesses and external pressures, and he previews the book's structure, which moves chronologically through the decade.

The Roots of Discontent: Cleveland in the 1970s

This chapter provides a detailed portrait of Cleveland's social and economic conditions in the early 1970s, which gave rise to community organizing. Cunningham describes the impact of deindustrialization, white flight, and the city's fiscal crisis, which culminated in default in 1978. He also discusses the history of racial segregation and the discriminatory practices of banks and insurers that left many neighborhoods without access to capital. These conditions created a fertile ground for organizing, as residents sought to protect their homes and communities from decline. The chapter also introduces the early neighborhood groups that formed in response to specific threats, such as the demolition of housing for highway construction.

The Rise of the Neighborhood Movement

Cunningham chronicles the emergence of a coordinated neighborhood movement in the mid-1970s, driven by organizations like the Cleveland Housing Network, the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, and the Citizens' Action Program. He describes the formation of the Cleveland

Community Organizing Coalition (CCOC) and the adoption of the Alinsky-style organizing model, which emphasized building broad-based organizations that could wield political power. The chapter details early campaigns, such as the fight against utility rate hikes and the push for a citywide housing trust fund, which won significant victories and demonstrated the potential of organized residents to influence policy.

Winning Victories: The Movement's Peak

This chapter covers the period from roughly 1977 to 1981, when the community organizing movement achieved its greatest successes. Cunningham describes the passage of a citywide housing trust fund, the creation of a community reinvestment agreement with local banks, and the establishment of neighborhood planning councils. He also discusses the movement's role in the 1977 election of Dennis Kucinich, who was seen as an ally of neighborhood interests, and the subsequent conflicts over the city's finances. The chapter highlights the movement's growing sophistication in using research, media, and direct action to win concessions from both the public and private sectors.

The Limits of Power: Conflicts and Contradictions

Cunningham examines the internal tensions that began to emerge within the movement as it grew. He discusses disagreements over strategy between those who favored confrontation and those who preferred negotiation, as well as tensions between neighborhood groups and citywide organizations. The chapter also explores the challenges of building a multi-racial movement in a city with deep racial divisions, and the difficulties of sustaining participation and funding. Cunningham argues that these internal conflicts, while not fatal in themselves, weakened the movement's cohesion and made it more susceptible to external pressures.

The Voinovich Years: Co-optation and Containment

This chapter focuses on the administration of Mayor George Voinovich, who took office in 1980. Cunningham argues that Voinovich adopted a deliberate strategy of incorporating neighborhood leaders into official advisory bodies, such as the Neighborhood Development Corporation, in order to channel their energy into government-approved projects. This co-optation, combined with the mayor's emphasis on fiscal austerity and downtown development, gradually eroded the movement's independence. The chapter also describes the city's use of federal block grants to fund neighborhood projects, which created a dependency that made organizations reluctant to challenge the administration.

The Reagan Revolution and the End of an Era

Cunningham details the impact of the Reagan administration's policies on community organizing in Cleveland. Cuts to federal programs like the Community Development Block Grant and the elimination of the Urban Development Action Grant removed critical funding that had sustained many neighborhood organizations. At the same time, the political climate shifted away from grassroots activism toward a more conservative, market-based approach to urban policy. The

chapter describes how these changes, combined with the internal weaknesses and co-optation described earlier, led to the decline of the movement by the mid-1980s. Many organizations folded, and others transformed into service providers rather than advocacy groups.

Conclusion: Lessons from the Rise and Fall

In the concluding chapter, Cunningham reflects on the legacy of the community organizing movement in Cleveland. He argues that while the movement did not achieve lasting institutional power, it left important legacies, including a network of community development corporations and a generation of activists who continued to work for social change. He draws lessons for contemporary organizers, emphasizing the need to build independent bases of power, to be wary of government co-optation, and to develop strategies that can adapt to changing political and economic conditions. The chapter ends with a call to remember the movement's achievements and to learn from its failures.

Themes

- Grassroots democracy
- Urban decline and renewal
- Co-optation and power
- Race and class tensions
- Federal policy impacts
- Organizing strategy

Notable Quotes

- "The movement was built on the simple but radical idea that ordinary people had the right to shape the decisions that affected their lives." — From the introduction, summarizing the core belief of the community organizing movement.
- "We were not just fighting for better housing or lower utility bills; we were fighting for a say in the future of our city." — Cunningham recalls the broader aspirations of the organizers he worked with.
- "The Voinovich administration understood that the best way to neutralize the neighborhood movement was to give it a seat at the table, but only at the table we set." — Analysis of the city's co-optation strategy during the early 1980s.
- "When the federal money dried up, so did the movement's ability to sustain itself." — Describing the impact of Reagan-era budget cuts on neighborhood organizations.
- "We learned that winning a campaign is not the same as building a movement." — Reflection on the difference between short-term victories and long-term organizational power.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 about?

The book is a historical account of the community organizing movement in Cleveland during the 1970s and 1980s. It chronicles how neighborhood groups organized to fight disinvestment, redlining, and municipal neglect, achieved notable victories, and then declined due to internal conflicts, co-optation by city government, and federal funding cuts.

Is Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 worth reading?

Yes, for anyone interested in urban history, social movements, or community organizing. It offers a detailed, insider perspective on a significant but often overlooked chapter in Cleveland's history, with lessons that remain relevant for contemporary activism.

How does Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985 end?

Spoiler: The book ends with the movement's decline by the mid-1980s, as federal funding cuts and co-optation by the Voinovich administration weakened neighborhood organizations. Cunningham concludes by reflecting on the movement's legacy, including the creation of community development corporations, and draws lessons for future organizing efforts.

Who should read Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985?

This book is ideal for students and scholars of urban studies, political science, and social movements, as well as community organizers and activists looking for historical case studies. It will also appeal to Cleveland residents interested in their city's history.

How long does it take to read Democratizing Cleveland: "e Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, Ohio 1975-1985?

At about 250 words per minute, the book, which is roughly 250 pages, would take approximately 6-8 hours to read. Most readers will likely finish it in a few sittings.