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978-1-107-03039-8 - Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics  
of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

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## Introduction

It was a clear, crisp autumnal morning in London, with just a hint of the previous night's dampness still in the air as guests entered the crystalline edifice of Allen & Overy, an international law firm. Its offices were part of a gleaming new complex built over what had previously been one end of Spitalfield Market, a site that used to mark the boundary of the financial district and the beginning of the East End. We gathered for coffee, croissants, and fresh orange juice, all served by demure and identically dressed waiters and waitresses, on the top floor suite. From the glass-walled offices one could look out over the raggedy bustle of Commercial Street and Brick Lane and glimpse Canary Wharf, a citadel of steel and glass beyond the teeming jostle of Whitechapel and Stepney, areas long associated with poverty, congestion, and intense religious diversity. We were gathered for a meeting of the Council of Christians and Jews, an organization set up in 1942 to foster better relations between the two traditions in the midst of World War II. It was now November 25, 2009 and a very different world crisis was prevailing: the unquiet specters of capitalism – scarcity, fear, and instability – haunted the news cycle with the prospect of a second Great Depression and the potential collapse of the global banking system. The theme of the breakfast meeting was “Ethical Capitalism” and the presenters were Stephen Green, chair of the global bank HSBC and an ordained minister in the Church of England; Lord Levene, chair of Lloyds of London, former Lord Mayor of the City of London and a major figure in the British Jewish community; and Lord Paul Myners, the then Financial Services Secretary for the Labour government and aspirant theology student (earlier that year Lord Myners, a Methodist, declared that on retirement he intended to study theology). Like exorcists gathered at the bedside of the possessed, they put forth their remedies for the troubled souls of the financial markets and those that traded in them.

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[More information](#)

Immediately below this gathering, and timed to begin just after it finished, another group was assembling in a coffee shop on Brushfield Street. This one was made up of middle-aged Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders in clerical dress mingling with fresh-faced and frenetic young community organizers who were taking orders for coffee and relaying these to the baristas serving behind the counter. They were assembling for a press conference organized by London Citizens, a broad-based community organization whose banners and literature proclaim that it “reweaves civil society” and that it is “building powerful communities to work together for the common good.” The focus of the press conference was the announcement of an “accountability assembly” that evening at the Barbican Theater in the heart of the City of London in which politicians and bankers would be questioned about the need for anti-usury measures and other proposals required to address how the financial crisis was affecting ordinary people.

The Barbican assembly marked the beginning of a campaign by London Citizens that was to lead up to the General Election in 2010 and called for a response by politicians and bankers to the proposals outlined that evening. The campaign, the global financial crisis it was a response to, and the subsequent impact that campaign had on all involved, is the context and backdrop of this book. However, the context and events depicted here serve to dramatize a much larger set of debates about the relationship between democratic citizenship, religious beliefs and practices, and the power of money. The power of money refers to money as both a frame of reference for imagining social and political relations and the agency of those who control the means of finance and credit. It is the relationship between faith, citizenship, and money that is a primary focus of this book.

What the events of November 25 illustrate is that we live in a time of economic and political turmoil when the efficacy of democracy in bringing accountability to financial markets and ruling elites is being tested. It is simultaneously a time when the relationship between different faiths and political life is under intense negotiation at a local, national, and international level throughout the world. It is my contention that community organizing provides a lens through which to constructively address these concerns and understand better the relationship between religious diversity, democratic citizenship, and economic and political accountability. Through examining the relationship between them the book tackles a core paradox that confronts the conceptualization of democracy in modern political thought: that is, how democratic citizenship is seen as an expression of individual liberty, but its performance and defense is in great measure dependent on participation in a group. Without being embedded in some form of association, the individual citizen is naked before the power of either the market or the state and lacks a vital means for his or her own self-cultivation. Yet at the same time, the market and the state can help to liberate the individual from communal overdetermination. The relationship between different religious traditions and democracy encapsulates the triadic tension between market, state, and community within which the individual is

Cambridge University Press

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of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

located. State and market processes are seen to limit, challenge, and provide alternatives to those derived from religious obligations and identities, yet in an increasingly deinstitutionalized and atomized society religions provide one of the few corporate forms of life available for mobilizing and sustaining the ability of individuals to act together in defense of their shared interests. However, political thinking at both the popular and academic levels tends to perceive the vibrant religious groups operating in the contemporary context as antidemocratic and reactionary. This book explores whether or not community organizing represents a paradoxical politics that draws on religious associations to renew democracy, democracy to strengthen religious associations, and religious beliefs and practices and democratic politics together to limit the power of market, state, and community over the individual. Central to any such exploration is a problem that ancient and modern political thought has wrestled with: that is, how to coordinate the at times conflicting obligations demanded by faithfulness to the polity and one's fellow citizens with faithfulness to God and one's fellow believers.

“Faith” is used here to denote both an identifiable habitus of belief and practice (whether explicitly “religious” or not) as well as a virtue that entails loyalty, reliability, commitment, and trustworthiness. Such qualities can appear foolish, but treachery as the opposite of faithfulness still carries a sulfurous stench even in the nostrils of those schooled by a hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>1</sup> We can recover the vitality of faith as a political virtue when we understand that it implies attentiveness to a world we did not make, as well as to people we do not control, but with whom we must order our relationships, whether we like it or not. The ordering of social, economic, and political relationships must of necessity entail acts of faith as such acts are part of coming to know and participate in the world around us. As an orientation to attentiveness and reception – best characterized by a posture of listening – faith is the precursor of shared speech and action and therefore the coming into being of a common life. As a condition for the possibility of politics faith is orientated to the specific. We cannot keep faith with everyone all at once in every place. We can only be faithful to these people, in this place, at this time. Thus, to modern cosmopolitan ears, faithfulness provokes a scandal of particularity: it demands boundaries and limits. Part of the tragic nature of political life is that we have multiple loyalties and therefore conflicting obligations and interests that must be navigated and negotiated in the configuration of a common life. This book examines the inherent interplay of faith – in all its dimensions – and citizenship as mediated through a particular form of democratic politics: community organizing.

## DEFINING CITIZENSHIP

The concerns outlined so far all intersect with the broader question of what constitutes democratic citizenship. In order to clarify how community organizing contests and extends contemporary understandings of citizenship we

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

must delineate the different uses of citizenship as a term.<sup>2</sup> Its first and primary use is to denote a legal status with certain civil, political, and social rights as granted and distributed by the institutions of a national government whose sovereignty is derived from the citizens themselves. In contrast to the subjects of a monarch, who receive rights from the crown, democratic citizens receive rights from a government for, by, and with the people, which entails a claim about the popular nature of sovereignty and the self-derived nature of rights and laws. Distinctions between citizens and denizens, resident aliens, guest workers, foreigners, refugees, and a constellation of “others” mark the boundaries and scope of who does and who does not have the legal status of being a citizen. Intrinsic to these demarcations is the link between citizenship and place: citizenship as a legal status is inherently tied to a bounded territory. However, while citizenship and place are interconnected, the nation-state is not the only bounded territory within which citizenship is performed. Part of what is explored here is the way in which constructions of place other than the nation-state enable different ways of performing citizenship.

The second usage of the term citizenship refers to participation in a system for representing, communicating, and legitimating the relationship between governed and government. In large-scale nation-states this process of authorizing cannot be done by popular assembly, and so involves a system of representation. To be a citizen is to be designated as someone who can participate in these kinds of mechanisms, whether as a voter or a representative or both. Democratic citizenship demarcates who is authorized to govern and the processes by which their authority is legitimized.

Third, to be a citizen of a polity is to identify or be identified with an “imagined community.”<sup>3</sup> Imagined communities generate a sense of identity and belonging and may be national but can be sub- or transnational in scale. As a political identity that co-inheres with an imagined community, citizenship is not just a legal term; it has an affective and subjective dimension that is the result of cultural processes. Key questions to be asked about this aspect of citizenship are: What does a citizen look like? And who counts as a “normal” member of the body politic? In relation to these questions, issues of belief, race, gender, class, physical ability, and sexuality come to the fore. The work of the social theorist Michel Foucault has been of particular importance in highlighting how citizenship is not just a legal status and part of a system for relating the governed and their government, but, as an identity, citizenship is also a regime of governance, culturally produced through a matrix of institutional and social practices.

Fourth, and closely aligned with citizenship as a form of identity, is how citizenship necessarily includes the performance of a vision of politics. In this guise, citizenship involves doing certain things. However, the performance of citizenship is not reducible to formal mechanisms of representation or involvement with the apparatus of the state. Rather, it entails a mesh of beliefs, narratives, practices, bodily proprieties, habits, and rituals reiterated and enacted in

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of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

contexts as diverse as the workplace, social media, and the street, and which together constitute a “social imaginary” of what good and bad politics entail, and thus what the good citizen should do.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, citizenship names a political and moral rationality through which a “common sense” is forged and reproduced: that is, it is a way of discerning goods in common and a vision of the good life through which “we, the people” come to decide on how to live. In relation to this denotation of citizenship, the question is how should citizens talk and deliberate together and on what basis can they make shared judgments about what to do and how to do it? This question directly relates to debates about “religion” and politics because the issue of whether religious speech and practices can constitute forms of public speech and practice is vehemently contested. The construction of citizenship involves an ongoing debate about what constitutes the requisite kinds of moral and political rationality that make one capable of talking and acting with others in ways that build up the common life of a polity.<sup>5</sup>

Community organizing of the kind London Citizens represents is primarily concerned with the construction of citizenship as an identity, a performance of democratic politics, and as a shared rationality. Citizenship in these registers is not about possessing a set of rights but about having the capacity and virtues necessary to relate to and act with others in diverse ways and settings. As a form of citizenship it can include those without legal status, notably the undocumented and refugees, who nevertheless assume responsibility for and contribute to the life together and commonwealth of where they live. How community organizing builds this capacity contrasts with other constructions of citizenship and contradicts many widely held assumptions about what good democratic citizenship involves. Part of what community organizing contests is the idea that the nation-state is the arena most fitting for the ways in which citizenship functions as an identity, performance, and shared rationality. It may well be the primary vehicle for citizenship as a legal status and system of representation – for now – but this does not mean we should collapse all other dimensions of citizenship into the vessel and category of the nation-state. As an identity, performance, and shared rationality, citizenship can be subnational, national, and transnational simultaneously. Union membership, Catholicism, and environmental activism are cases in point: they are means for enacting citizenship at registers above and below that of the nation-state. As the example of London Citizens illustrates, a focus on community organizing locates democratic citizenship at an alternative scale to that of the nation-state but within an ancient and modern nexus of the formation of citizenship: the city. Attention to community organizing also attends to the importance of civil society and workplaces to constructions of citizenship. A focus on the urban, civil society and work allows for the interplay of subnational, national, and transnational processes in the construction of citizenship to be observed and analyzed. In addition, it foregrounds the conditions and possibilities of individual and collective agency at the heart of the concept of democracy, the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

meaning of which is, after all, derived from the words *demos* (people) and *kratia* (ruling power).

#### DEMOCRACY, POPULISM, AND CONSOCIATIONALISM

In struggling to make sense of how broad-based community organizing constructs citizenship, “consociationalism” emerged as a framework consonant with community organizing. The initial assumption was that community organizing would best be located within a conceptuality that built on the thought of the political theorists Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin as many leading organizers explicitly draw from their work. However, it became necessary to make sense of the populist roots of community organizing and the institutional form that organizing embodies. While some consider Arendt as having an “idiosyncratically populist notion of the People,” a consociational account of democracy suggested itself as allowing for a stronger integration of all the different elements that constitute organizing as a form of politics.<sup>6</sup> The term consociation is defined here to mean a mutual fellowship between distinct institutions or groups who are federated together for a common purpose.

The consociationalist tradition of political thought has been largely eclipsed on both sides of the Atlantic but at the turn of the twentieth century it represented an important and vibrant stream of conversation that ran between North America and Europe.<sup>7</sup> The work of the German legal historian Otto von Gierke and his “discovery” of the seventeenth-century political thinker, Johannes Althusius, were important components in the European side of the conversation. As were political movements ranging from anarcho-syndicalists to Guild Socialists and Christian Democrats, all of whom aimed at restoring the “federal multiplicity” of political life and upholding the priority of social relations over economic and political ones. It was also a conversation that bridged “secular” and theological concerns as evidenced in the pluralism of the British theologian and historian of political thought John Neville Figgis and the “anarcho-federalism” of the Austrian Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. The “dean” of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, directly interacted with this conversation through his relationship with the Roman Catholic philosopher and political thinker Jacques Maritain, but he brought to it a distinctly American and populist perspective and experience.

It would be wrong to falsely corral thinkers as diverse as Buber, Figgis, and Maritain into a unified position. However, they can all be seen as part of a broad alternative tradition of consociational democratic thought to that which begins with some notion of a social contract as the basis of good political order. This alternative tradition is as equally cautious about the liberal state as it is about capitalist markets, seeing them as two sides of the same coin. Moreover, as a pathway in the development of modern political thought it was not anti-theological or inherently secularizing; rather, it was always inflected and interwoven with theological currents and points of reference. My own account of

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of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

consociational democracy and of community organizing as a performance of citizenship should be seen as a restatement of this broad tradition. However, the kind of consociational democratic politics I claim community organizing embodies differs markedly from the standard uses of the term “consociational democracy” in political science and its application to countries like Switzerland or power-sharing arrangements in contexts like Bosnia-Herzegovina. The distinction between my own conception of consociational democracy and its more common usage, one that is largely derived from the work of political scientist Arend Lijphart, is set out in Chapter 7.

Part I identifies and depicts a consociational vision of democratic citizenship by observing and reflecting on the different strands of thought and practice that feed into and help constitute community organizing. Part II unpacks the implications of this vision for how we conceptualize and respond to the determining and interwoven spheres in which citizenship is enacted, namely, civil society, the sovereign nation-state, and the globalized economy. Being consociational in form and rationality and populist in its performance and identity, community organizing refuses simplistic dichotomies and oppositions between the state and the market. Neither does it envisage itself as in opposition to them. Rather, it seeks to stand amid the tensions and shifting sands produced by asking several questions at once. First, what does the state need in order to be a means of establishing the conditions of liberty without crushing a just and generous common life? Second, what do markets need so they can genuinely be a market and not become an overweening substitute for the state and thereby usurp political authority and commodify social existence in order to be crowned king? And third, how can the market and state serve and prioritize social existence while providing the disciplining forces of law, mobility, and innovation so that social practices themselves do not ossify into structures of oppression but feed into the formation of a just and generous common life?

POLITICS, THEOLOGY, AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF  
THE SECULAR

To make sense of the kind of event described at the outset and of a consociational vision of democratic citizenship, it is necessary to reconceptualize what we mean by the term “secular.” The past decade has seen a massive shift in academic thinking about the nature of secularization. The so-called “secularization thesis” that processes of modernization result in the inevitable decline in the public significance and presence of religious beliefs and practices is now largely rejected. In its place a more nuanced account is emerging of how religious and nonreligious commitments and practices interact over time and thereby constitute particular formations of secularity. Constructions of the public sphere as secular are understood to be as much a creation of theological beliefs and practices as they are of anticlerical ideologies and modern processes such as industrialization.<sup>8</sup> As the anthropologist Talal Asad argues, the secular “should

Cambridge University Press

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of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves that latter’s relocation.”<sup>9</sup> If anything, secularization is itself a religious process.<sup>10</sup>

What is clear now is that constructions of secularity vary according to cultural, historical, and religious context and institutional domain. So the form secularity takes in healthcare is different from its outworking in prisons or the military; likewise, how it emerges and develops in Great Britain is different to its construction in the United States, China, or India.<sup>11</sup> Building on this new theoretical standpoint, this book moves beyond binaries that pose a necessary and inevitable opposition between the “religious” and the “secular.” This is not to say that such binary constructions of the public sphere do not exist: France’s regime of *laïcité* is an example of exactly this. But in contrast to such oppositional and binary constructions, this book portrays a form of secularity constructed as a meeting point of diverse and complexly religious and nonreligious positions. It is a form where the tending of the commons on which the flourishing of all depends constitutes secularity as plural and open. In this kind of secularity, commonality amid difference and the reality of people having multiple loyalties and identities sets the course, rather than everyone being determined by either a “secular” or “religious” identity. On this kind of account, secularity is not a universal teleological process leading to a uniform historical outcome but an ongoing work subject to multiple iterations and formulations. Visions and experiences of secularity are historically contingent and vary according to context. Community organizing is assessed as one way of constructing a form of secularity, the creation of which is mediated through a specific kind of democratic politics and which produces a realm in which those of different faiths and identities forge a common life. The “faithful secularity” that certain kinds of democratic politics generates allows for the public recognition and interplay of the myriad obligations and commitments that citizens keep faith with (whether “transcendent” or “immanent”) and which must be coordinated and negotiated in order to generate a common life.

There is a methodological analogue to the theoretical debates about the nature of secularity. Part of what is at stake in this book is an attempt to move beyond overly materialistic assumptions that dominate political theory and which inherently construe religious discourses as epiphenomenal and therefore marginal to understanding political life. The arguments developed here represent a form of what some call a “post-secular,” “asecular,” or “sociotheological” discourse, but which I call a “faithfully secular” one wherein religious beliefs and practices co-construct and are interwoven with other patterns of belief and practice so as to constitute a genuinely plural pattern of secularity that is open to multiple configurations of time and space. In a faithfully secular account theological forms of analysis stand side by side with other modes and contribute to the coloring and texture of the overall picture. This faithfully secular analysis is in keeping with developments in the contemporary study of “religion” and “secular” politics, which, once viewed as academically distinct

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03039-8 - Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics  
of a Common Life

Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

areas of concern, are now seen as intertwined, both in theory and practice.<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Habermas is but one example of a contemporary philosopher who now recognizes the importance of religious categories for the development of generative political thought able to address central dilemmas of contemporary human existence. However, although “post-secular” philosophers often draw from theological ideas, they are not very interested in the lived experiences, practices, and communities of religious people.<sup>13</sup> And for all the recent emphasis on “practice,” a similar inattention plagues many theologians writing about politics.<sup>14</sup> Inattention to the actual embodiment and performance of religious beliefs and practices is deeply problematic as it replicates an ideological marginalization of religion to the private, the internal, and the subjective and thereby replicates methodologically many of the false assumptions about the nature of religious belief and practice that underwrote the secularization thesis. My use of an ethnographic methodology and attention to theological discourses is an attempt to overcome the myopia about religious belief and practice that shapes much contemporary political thought (whether theological or not).<sup>15</sup>

The analysis developed here builds on prior work that distinguished between two interrelated and symbiotic forms of civic life: a hospitable politics and the politics of a common life.<sup>16</sup> A hospitable politics relates to those situations in which religious groups are the initiator and lead in generating shared action and a faithful form of secularity. The hospice and sanctuary movements are instances of a hospitable politics I have examined previously. By contrast, the politics of a common life occurs when no single tradition of belief and practice sets the terms and conditions of such shared speech and action, and the generation of a faithful and pluralistic pattern of secularity is a negotiated, multilateral endeavor.<sup>17</sup> Both a hospitable and a common life politics can constitute performances of democratic citizenship and faithful secularity. In this book the particular focus is on the conditions and possibilities of a common life politics and the role of religious groups in constituting it.

#### DECIPHERING ALINSKY AND LOCATING COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing is not new. As a formal practice it emerged in Chicago in the 1930s and was brought to prominence and distilled into a distinct craft by Saul Alinsky [see Figure I.1], who founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. The history of its emergence and development is told in Chapter 1. Since his death in 1972, and beyond the specific work of the IAF, Alinsky’s legacy remains hugely significant for numerous strands of democratic activism. It is seen by many as a direct influence on not only the development of community organizing as a practice, but also on the civil rights, student, and anti-war activists of the 1960s and the organizers of the environmental movement, feminism, and consumer activism from the 1970s onward.<sup>18</sup> Since the foundation of the IAF in 1940, numerous other community organizing networks have

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Luke Bretherton

Excerpt

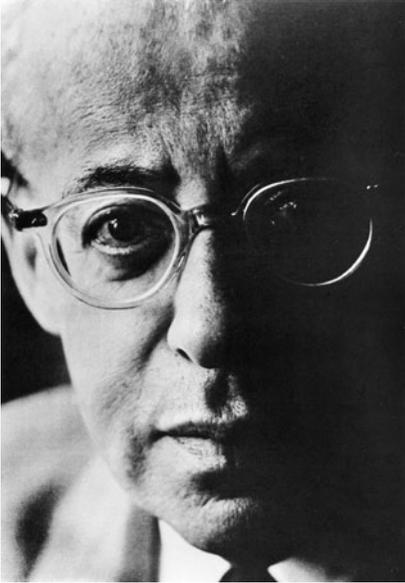
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FIGURE 1.1. Portrait of Saul Alinsky, 1968.

been founded. Those who initially worked for Alinsky established many of these. Among the most prominent are PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), DART (Direct Action Research and Training), the Center for Community Change, National People's Action, and the Gamaliel Foundation. At the time of writing, the IAF itself had sixty-three affiliate coalitions operating throughout the United States and in Canada, Britain, Australia, and Germany. Beyond the work of the IAF, a recent comprehensive survey of community organizing in the United States calculated that there are now 178 different coalitions involving 4,145 member institutions.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, Alinsky came to renewed prominence in the 2008 U.S. presidential race and the election of Barack Obama. Obama not only began his political career as a community organizer in Chicago, but his highly innovative and successful election campaign drew on the ideas and practices of community organizing. Moreover, Obama ran against Hillary Clinton to win the Democratic nomination. Much was made both then and during her time as First Lady of her 1969 honors thesis written at Wellesley College, entitled "There Is Only the Fight ...": An Analysis of the Alinsky Model." Clinton was allegedly offered a job by Alinsky but turned it down. After Obama's election, Alinsky and community organizing became the *bête noire* of right-wing commentators and Republican politicians who made repeated use of references to Alinsky's work to paint the new administration as subversive radicals bent on destroying American decency and democracy.