



## Reclaiming our Birthright

**Ernesto Cortez**

*Ernesto Cortez, Jr., is director of the Southwest region of the Industrial Areas Foundation.*

*The assumptions that communities organized around twenty, thirty, and forty years ago are no longer valid. When the Industrial Areas Foundation began organizing during the '50s and '60s, its goal was to balance asymmetric power relationships within existing intermediary institutions such as schools, churches, unions, and political parties. The goal of IAF then was to establish justice and accountability in these institutions, through a thick network of relationships embedded within and between them.*

*The challenge that organizers face today is that the presumption of a thick network of relationships no longer holds true. Thus, institutions cannot be expected to have the social capital or infrastructure necessary to serve as effective intermediaries. Although today we believe we are connected, we are not. The seductive lure of "Opinion-makers" in the form of television, media, and the internet provide us with the illusion of being connected, while in reality, we drift further and further apart. Our children drift further from their parents; and our suburbs seemingly drift further from our center cities.*

Today's organizers and leaders face the dual challenge of restoring the civic culture that traditionally gave strength to intermediary institutions, while establishing accountability and justice among the institutions that affect our livelihood. Amidst those attempting to address these challenges with programs, initiatives, working groups, and strategies, there is a topic that unfortunately gets left out of a lot of conversations about education, economic development, and even community organizing. That is, the role that schools, churches, parents, and communities play in developing what I think is the most important contribution that our culture has to offer the world the vision and the values of a democratic society. The common school in particular, as John Dewey talked about it, is a profoundly important institution for the transmission and the development of a democratic culture. The Industrial Areas Foundation has responded by organizing churches and schools around a vibrant culture of face-to-face conversations among small groups of people. These conversations, occurring across geographic and economic lines, work towards reclaiming the vitality of our intermediary institutions by developing relationships and social capital.

The work of the IAF is best conceptualized as strengthening democratic culture through the development of civil society and citizenship through conversation and negotiation. The IAF organizations deliberately teach ordinary people to be conscious of both the powers of the market and the state and to be vigilant about protecting the power of citizens to govern themselves. This entails procuring a well-developed concept of citizenship among people connected to each other, and developing a culture of conversation that can preserve democracy by tempering the power and reach of the market and the state. This culture of conversation is about developing relationships around shared interests. Jeane Bethke Elshtain describes the capacity for citizens to interact and have conversations as a civic culture that is an environment of engagement, an environment that encourages people to be citizens, not clients; creators rather than consumers. In many of our congregations and schools, these conversations are initiated by organizers and leaders and begin in churches and homes in the form of one-on-one conversations. These one-on-ones lead to larger house meetings, research actions, and eventually political action. Not surprisingly, in practice

these conversations often return to similar themes whether they take place in the Rio Grande Valley or in the Los Angeles Valley.

The experience of the IAF organizations has shown that many people are concerned with supporting their families with living wage jobs, ensuring the success and safety of their children, and securing access to affordable housing. The initiatives that develop from these conversations are therefore frequently about creating job training that will lead to work that can support families and developing academically enriching programs for children both before and after school. Despite the fact that our institutions have eroded, conversations enable people to identify the needs of their families and communities.

These are the types of conversations that I remember from my childhood, when institutions were able to mediate between families and the market. When I grew up in San Antonio in the 1950s, I grew up in a very tight neighborhood, a *barrio*. In my *barrio*, there were over 250 adults organized against me, 250 adults who felt like they could intrude on my life, 250 adults who felt like they could give me advice and tell me what to do. Everyone from the bus driver in the morning when I got up, to the school cafeteria people, to my neighbors, to my aunts and uncles, to my *compadres*, and my *comrades*: all these people felt they had the right to tell me what to do, what to wear, what to study, and what to eat.

When I began to organize in Los Angeles in the 1970s, I found the opposite situation. Instead of 250 adults organized against one kid, it was 70 kids organized against one adult. The adults were under house arrest: afraid to go to church, afraid to attend festivals, some intimidated by their own children. Adults were fearful of participating in basic activities that are requisite for a civil society. That was 20 years ago. Today I find this situation almost everywhere I go, whether it be New Orleans, Houston, or Albuquerque; because the intermediate institutions of family, unions, political parties, schools, settlement homes, and congregations have imploded.

The erosion of the social capital that once enabled institutions to share in the obligations of community life has left families, churches, and schools disconnected and the ramifications are far-reaching. The majority of schools no longer share in the responsibility of providing a place for parents to engage around the issues that affect their community. Reductions in welfare and other safety nets have left churches unable to provide temporary services to all who need them.

Addressing the fears and the ensuing disengagement and retreat of whole communities requires community organizing that creates a structure and a culture with accountability, obligation, and collaboration. Developing this collaborative culture challenges IAF organizers and leaders to develop a social and spiritual dimension in them that only emerges through conversation. Aristotle said that we are social beings whose humanity and personhood is defined in public relationships, and that our humanity emerges only to the extent that we engage in serious and deliberative conversations with other human beings about the needs of our families, the education of our children, and what happens to our property. IAF believes this holds true today, which is why organizers are constantly having conversations with pastors, with parents, and with each other to develop their dimensions. But with the fragmentation of institutions and communities, much of society has retreated and deferred these conversations and deliberations to the realm of "experts."

Sheldon Wolin, in his book *Presence of the Past*, warns against this deferral of our obligations by reinterpreting the spiritual and social dimensions of life as a person's birthright. Wolin further defines this birthright as a person's politicalness.

The story of Esau and Jacob is useful to interpret the culture of obligation and birthright in organizing. Esau and Jacob were always in tension with each other; it is said that they struggled even in the womb. They were twins. Esau, the eldest of the two brothers, was a hunter, a solitary man, his father's favorite. Esau was what I call a '50s kind of guy. Jacob, on the other hand, knew his way around the tent. He was younger, smooth of skin, and knew how to cook. Jacob was his mother's favorite. Jacob was a '90s kind of guy. Returning from an unsuccessful hunting trip Esau arrived starving and came upon Jacob, who was making lentil soup. When Esau asked Jacob to feed him, Jacob replied that of course he could eat, but Jacob wanted to know what he could expect in return. When

Esau asked his brother what he had that Jacob could possibly want, Jacob replied, "Sell me your birthright." Esau sold his brother his birthright. And so the Bible says in the book of Genesis, that from that day forward Esau despised his birthright. Esau's birthright neither fed him, nor kept him warm at night; it was his father's obligation that he had to keep. For Esau, his birthright had become a burden, which he was glad to get rid of. Wolin suggests that we are all Esau.

We are like Esau because we are willing to sell, to give up, and to contract our birthright for a bowl of soup. Society is willing to give up its inheritance for the culture of materialism. We are willing to give up a Birthright Culture for what IAF calls a Contract Culture.

IAF teaches that in a Contract Culture a person is defined by his or her individuality. Each person is always treated the same way, no matter the situation, a universal one-kind-fits-all. A person is not responsible for what happened before them, nor for what comes after them in a Contract Culture. These responsibilities and relationships are contracted away for narcissistic material desires. The Contract Culture depends on the rhetoric of traditionalism, the dead ideas of the living. IAF organizes around Birthright Culture rooted in the stories and history of tradition, the living ideas of the dead. In the Birthright Culture, a person's humanity is defined by his or her relationships with others and their ability to negotiate these relationships. A person is encumbered by the responsibilities inherited from these relationships. It is the obligation and responsibility of each community to forge the necessary public space to allow the creation of institutions that can teach the Birthright Culture.

IAF organizers develop relationships and skills in and among community institutions through meetings that lead to research actions and, ultimately, political action. Institutions have no interest to connect to one another, unless a connection can lead to the ability to act, unless the relationship can lead to power. IAF teaches organizers and leaders how to have conversations that lift up shared interests and build relationships in and across multi-ethnic and multi-faith institutions, enabling communities to define and fulfill their birthright. For IAF organizers, this means holding 50 individual meetings each week and teaching leaders to hold these same kinds of meetings. This means seeking out leaders that have energy, the ability to reflect, a sense of humor, anger, and the ability to gather a following. It is only through these types of conversations that organizers can develop a collective leadership able to claim their collective birthright.

The organizations of the Industrial Areas Foundation have come far in claiming their birthright. In San Antonio, the two local IAF organizations, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance, are now challenging the fact that the city has been giving significant subsidies in the form of tax abatements to hotels that employ people at poverty wages, primarily Latinos and African Americans. In a captive market, San Antonio has chosen to subsidize vast hotel chains like Marriott and Hyatt. Now, COPS and Metro leaders are going to the city and saying, "This makes no economic sense; and if you are going to give companies subsidies, you are going to have to pay people living wages." Because their strategy includes leaders connected through house meetings and actions from all parts of San Antonio, leaders are able to negotiate with the city with some energy and power. In addition to successes on the local level, there have been several recent regional victories in the Southwest. Leaders leveraged \$8 million for the 1997-98 supplemental state funding program for the IAF's Alliance Schools; created a \$12 million fund for long-term training for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients; and designed a bond package for \$250 million in state bonds to bring water and sewer services to the colonias along the Texas-Mexico border.

A broad-based approach, based on relationships developed through a Birthright Culture, is effective with all kinds of organizing strategies to improve education, to develop career ladders, and more importantly, to create possibilities of effective civic engagement. This will be done successfully to the extent that we recognize that what people need most is some kind of connection to intermediary institutions.

What IAF has learned from past organizing experience is that to begin to address issues of poverty and race, we must move beyond recognition of grave inequalities. In the midst of the surrounding poverty, racism, and inequality, institutions that have some thickness, stability, and power, need to be continuously reorganized through

conversations and the development of a civic culture. What we have learned from organizing is that we need to connect the shared interests of leaders from cities and suburbs.

We must continue to develop leaders in the context of broad-based organizing not only because it provides power and justice for ordinary people, but because having conversations and relationships that encumber us to one another is healthy for adults, healthy for our children, and healthy for our institutions and communities.

The challenge for broad-based organizing is that it must connect communities across religious, racial, and economic lines. Reweaving the social fabric of institutions does this and training leaders who can begin to be relational with one another, agitate one another, and struggle with one another. Once the fragments of institutions can be woven back together, congregations, unions, civic organizations, and schools can begin to use this network and structure to enable people to negotiate with those who have power, and thereby transform their communities.