

Book Review: Ganz, Marshall. People, Power, Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. x + 287 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.

Marshall Ganz is a senior lecturer in public policy at Harvard Kennedy School and a leading scholar-practitioner of social movements and community organizing. In his book *People, Power, Change*, he offers a deeply instructive synthesis of his lifelong work in democratic leadership and civic action. Known for his roles in the civil rights movement, the United Farm Workers, and later as a principal architect of the Obama organizing model, Ganz brings together theory, history, and practice in a volume that is analytical and profoundly pedagogical. The book addresses the craft of public leadership: how ordinary people build power through relationships, shared stories, strategy, disciplined action, and structure.

Ganz's central argument is that organizing is a practice through which individuals and groups learn to exercise collective agency under conditions of uncertainty. Leadership, in this view, is not a title or positional authority but "accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose." The book's five core practices—relationship building, storytelling, strategizing, taking action, and structuring—form an integrated framework that guides readers from personal motivation to institution-building. Ganz maintains that democratic renewal requires not only emotional and strategic skill, but also the intentional development of leadership teams capable of scaling action across constituencies.

The book unfolds in a clear and deliberate progression. The early chapters lay out the core practices of organizing: building public relationships grounded in shared values, using narrative to convert those values into motivation, and crafting strategy as the creative work of turning available resources into needed power. The middle chapters shift from the individual to the collective, showing how campaigns function as both motivational engines and structured sequences of mobilization, consolidation, and reflection. A standout chapter on structure argues

that democratic organizing requires “just enough” formalization—sufficient to ensure accountability, protect dissent, and distribute responsibility without stifling initiative. The book culminates in a rich treatment of developmental leadership, anchored in the Biblical encounter between Moses and Jethro. Through this story, Ganz underscores a core principle: leaders must cultivate other leaders, using coaching, team-based work, and shared authority to generate scale.

As a theory, *People, Power, Change* offers a coherent and accessible model of democratic practice. As an applied social science, it stands out for marrying analytical clarity with empirical depth. Ganz draws on a wide range of historical and contemporary cases—the United Farm Workers, the civil rights movement, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, climate networks, immigrant rights organizing, and modern electoral mobilizations—to show how leadership practices, structural choices, and strategy interact to produce or impede collective action. These examples function not merely as illustrations but as empirical anchors that illuminate the craft of organizing in real-world settings. Throughout, Ganz writes with uncommon clarity and an attentiveness to the emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions of political life—dimensions too often overlooked in scholarly treatments of collective action.

The book is not without limitations. Although Ganz acknowledges global cases and movement traditions, the analysis remains primarily U.S.-centric, rooted in American institutional norms, civic infrastructures, and political opportunity structures. Readers working in non-democratic or severely repressive environments—where surveillance, state coercion, and restricted associational life shape the very possibilities for mobilization—may therefore need to adapt elements of his model for contexts in which risk, secrecy, and informal networks play a more dominant role. Additionally, the book approaches digital technologies chiefly as supplementary tools for communication and coordination rather than as structural forces that

profoundly reshape identity formation, mobilization patterns, and the boundaries of public life. Scholars attuned to digital-era dynamics may wish for deeper engagement with issues such as platform governance, algorithmic amplification, surveillance capitalism, and the challenges of organizing within hybrid online-offline ecosystems.

A further limitation concerns what might be called “the politics of success.” While the developmental leadership chapter is exceptionally rich in its treatment of how leaders recruit, coach, and scale capacity, the book devotes less attention to the organizational challenges that follow major wins. Movements often falter after policy wins, recognition, or increased visibility due to inertia, internal division, or external cooptation. Greater attention to sustaining power after the moment of triumph—maintaining discipline, preventing mission drift, and converting mobilized energy into durable institutions—would have strengthened the book’s utility for both scholars and practitioners. Despite these limitations, however, the book’s contributions remain substantial and enduring.

People, Power, Change is a timely and genuinely field-shaping contribution to the study and practice of democratic action. Ganz offers a sophisticated but highly accessible account of how people learn to build power together, drawing on decades of lived experience, historical insight, and empirical observation. The book’s blend of conceptual clarity, moral purpose, and practical guidance makes it valuable not only for social scientists, but also for organizers, policy educators, and anyone committed to strengthening democratic life. At its core, Ganz issues a clear challenge: democratic renewal will not come from charismatic figures or technical quick fixes, but from organized communities capable of learning, acting, and leading collectively. His book provides both the framework and the tools to take that challenge seriously—and to begin the work.

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