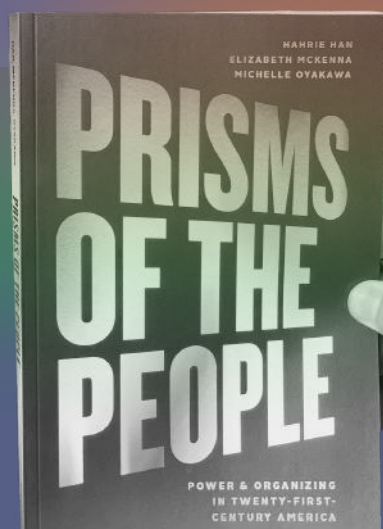


BOOK REVIEW

PRISMS OF THE PEOPLE: POWER & ORGANIZING IN TWENTY- FIRST-CENTURY AMERICA

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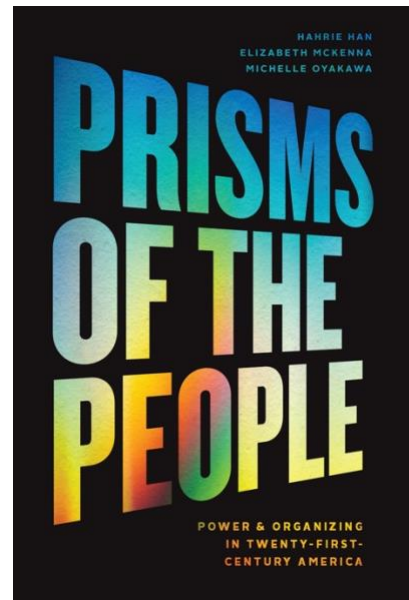
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Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America offers critical insight into the strategies that grassroots organizations and their leaders adopt to gain and negotiate power in modern day U.S. democracy. The prism metaphor is showcased throughout the book as a reflection of how “what happens inside these cases of collective action (the design at the heart of the prism) determines what kind of power (or light) is refracted outside” (Han et al., 2021, p. 3). Through the metaphor of “prisms of people power,” (Han et al., 2021, p. 8) the authors creatively show “the two-way relationship between the ability of grassroots leaders and organizations to exercise power in dynamic political environments and the extent to which these leaders are accountable to an independent, committed, and flexible constituency” (Han et al., 2021, p. 17). Rather than relying on the well-held belief that democratic power exists as a two-way relationship between the government and its people, *Prisms* highlights the role of grassroots intermediaries in power negotiation, focusing on “six case studies of improbable collective action” (Han et al., 2021, p. 10). Across Arizona, Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, and Nevada, these case studies exemplify how the strategic logic of



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collective action defies expectations and conventional wisdom about how to use activism for political and social change.

While most models of collective action ask, “*what* vehicles of collection action need,” *Prisms* necessarily shifts the focus to “*how* ... [vehicles of collective action] turn what they have into what they need” (Han et al., 2021, p. 8, emphasis in original). The book provides three notable contributions to the interdisciplinary scholarship surrounding collective action in the United States. First, political environments are constantly changing, and organizations must build a constituency base that is loyal, flexible, and resilient. Second, *Prisms* demonstrates that the strategic logic of grassroots organizations and leaders focuses on developing a power source that is not reliant on help from political elites, and which invests in civic feedbacks, or “the downstream consequences of constituency engagement that feed back to shape the strategic position of the organization over time” (Han et al., 2021, p. 20). Third, *Prisms* cleverly challenges the main models of collective action through its analysis and findings of constituency characteristics—namely, that people exert their agency within the organization through commitment to one another over the organization, self-reflection, and acting as strategists.

Throughout the book’s six chapters, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa effectively dissect and analyze the evidence gathered from case studies focused on specific organizations and their leaders. The authors strategically employ surveys, interviews, ethnographic observation, internal-to-organization document analysis, and publicly available document analysis to piece together the impacts of these leaders and their constituents. Chapter One serves as an introduction, drawing the reader in with an ethnographic vignette from the book’s Arizona case study. In this case, the organizational leader, Jeff, was catalyzed into action by Arizona’s anti-immigrant Senate Bill 1070 in 2010. This chapter then provides a roadmap for the rest of the book and highlights the authors’ core arguments: 1) organizations that use people power need be strategic to build long-term, sustainable relationships with their constituents; 2) organizations must have a variety of tools in their toolkit to be adequately equipped for uncertainty and future challenges; 3) people-powered organizations have people who are independent, committed, and flexible; and 4) leaders should remain accountable and responsive to cultivate a relationship with their constituents.

In Chapter Two, the authors provide the context from which the book’s analysis stems by delving into the case studies. By way of ethnographic interviews, this chapter provides stories of collective dissatisfaction with the status quo and the strategic push against it. The case studies illustrate how people who are most disenfranchised by political power (e.g., constituents of color or lower socioeconomic status) reclaim this power through community and collective action. Here, the authors also detail their methodology, including how and why they selected these so-called outlier cases to better understand collective action, and specifically why some grassroots organization leaders succeed, by looking for patterns across sociopolitical, organizational, and constituency contexts. In this chapter, the authors reinforce the strategic nature of their methodology, addressing potential questions that might arise for the critical reader, similar to

how organizational leaders behave with their constituents. In this way, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa build trust with their audience and hold themselves accountable for their work.

Chapter Three of *Prisms* centers the idea of power, problematizing both its definition and measurement. The authors illustrate that power is an interactional, negotiated dynamic between two political actors—and that no single resource equates to power. The amount of money an organization can muster or the number of signatures they can elicit are most often not enough for consistent power negotiation. Instead, consistent power negotiation is better determined by an organization’s people power. As collective action often fails, *Prisms* demonstrates that people power—as an independent source of power—has the potential to impact legislation, political leaders, and executive orders. Rather than apply a blanket-analysis of power across case studies, the authors measure power on a case-by-case basis, using network surveys, assessments of legislative data, and text-as-data tools to measure the power that these organizations (and their leaders) exerted. Interestingly, the authors explain how the organizations under study most often focused on those actors within power relationships with whom they were most closely allied—but perhaps with whom they were not on the same page—rather than staunch opponents, as is often depicted in power struggles.

The fourth chapter gets at the core of the book, the strategic logic of prisms, by analyzing the strategic leadership and logic of the leaders in the case studies. This chapter makes clear why investing in people is critical for organizations and why these organizations opted to do so as a strategy. The authors argue that “leaders’ agency...is a function of the *size and quality of the strategic toolkit* they develop” (Han et al., 2021, p. 109, emphasis in original). Challenges and uncertainty are commonplace, especially in the complexity of today’s political contexts. Having a wide breadth of tools available makes overcoming these challenges more feasible and allows constituents and their organizational leaders to continue to engage in the power dynamic that is U.S. politics. Rather than succumb to a choice between ideology and pragmatism, leaders push back against this “false choice” (Han et al., 2021, p. 116) and embrace pragmatism while committing to their ideologies because of a flexible and committed constituency base and continued use of civic feedbacks. Chapter Five of *Prisms* highlights how each of the case studies shared four characteristics of “prismatic constituencies” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150): a “deeply intertwined network of relationships” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150); use of constituents as “distributed strategists” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150); constituents who were committed and flexible; and how the constituents “developed identities that bridged distance” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150), thereby helping the organizations build and sustain constituencies as the base of their prism.

The final chapter of *Prisms* serves as a conclusion, highlighting the tenuous balance of power and resulting fragility of democracy. Especially as most of the constituents in these case studies were low-income people of color, including some who were formerly incarcerated, the power imbalance could be shifted further against their favor at any moment. This potential detrimental shift is one of the most pertinent reasons why community and collective action—when people-powered—are so important.

Through analysis of strategically selected outlier case studies, this book offers recourse to readers who have felt hopeless about their ability to partake in democracy and make change. Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa fully address potential limitations of the work—including the challenge of measuring the power leaders exerted and the level of impact organizations ultimately had—as well as how the analysis provided in *Prisms* is not fully generalizable. Nonetheless, the authors' findings provide useful insight even across broader contexts.

While there is no direct call to action on behalf of the authors, any reader with an inclination toward activism could glean takeaways from *Prisms* to apply to their own engagements within organizations. Another key audience for this work would be the leaders of movements and organizations, especially because *Prisms* provides insights for movement leaders for whom the standard activism playbook no longer works. These takeaways might also help readers to strategically seek out fresh connections with organizations based on newfound understandings of people power and how it can be strategically leveraged by effective leaders. Especially as the political environments across many parts of the country feel so bleak, this book—in its impactful, thorough 167 pages—serves as a counternarrative to the negative, seemingly dismal portrayals of the ability of collective action to effect change in today's polarized political climate. If these organizations, through investing in people power, can advocate for themselves, others should be able to as well.