

# Introduction: Exorcising America's Demons, Building Ethical Democracy

Three demons bedevil American society today. The first is obvious: We suffer levels of economic inequality not witnessed in the hundred years since the Gilded Age, with stagnant or falling wages for the large majority of American families. The second is often misdiagnosed: Political pundits decry the polarization within national political discourse and institutions, but the real problem is not generic “polarization.” In the context of such high economic inequality, polarization is to be expected, for its absence would simply represent acquiescence to stagnant wages and the resultant decline in the quality of family life. Rather, the real problem results from *strategic* polarization from above, that is, from the manipulation of political sentiment and democratic institutions to produce paralysis within national democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup> Thus the second demon is *policy paralysis*: our national political institutions’ inability to foster any shared prosperity or good society in the American future—their failure, in the context of strategic polarization from above, to effectively address a broad variety of crucial realities undermining a shared American future. Those issues include economic inequality and stagnant family wages, the underclass status of a large immigrant sector, the ballooning national debt, the corrosive influence of unregulated money on elections, and the unsustainable rise of health care costs despite recent policy reforms.

Closely bound up with the first two demons is the recrudescence of a third demon that has forever bedeviled American society:<sup>2</sup> racial inequity, the ways that racial and ethnic minorities—the emerging majority of American society in the near future—disproportionately suffer the consequences of economic inequality and policy paralysis. Indeed, minorities in general and African Americans in particular too often stand at the whipping post some politicians and political commentators use to flog the issues that

drive policy paralysis.<sup>3</sup> Only by casting out these three demons can the United States hope to build a shared future for all. Yet American society struggles to find adequate democratic means to even begin to do so.

This book plumbs for a way forward against these three demons by analyzing the experience of one broad movement that directly addresses economic inequality, policy paralysis, and racial injustice in the United States. Faith-based community organizing has a decades-long track record of working to advance the ideals of shared democratic life.<sup>4</sup> The movement works in poor, working-class, and middle-class settings to advance the political voice and economic interests of those sectors; it has recently provided a high-profile voice in national debates regarding universal health care, immigration reform, the foreclosure crisis, racial profiling, and the effort to rein in Wall Street malfeasance.<sup>5</sup> Projecting that voice has required faith-based organizing to broaden its historic focus on local communities or metropolitan areas in order to build links between local organizing and influence on higher-level policy. Underlying this development has been a new, more ambitious set of political aspirations within some sectors of the field. As one prominent strategist in the field, George Goehl (executive director of National People's Action [NPA]) noted:

I think we marginalize ourselves by thinking of [ourselves] as the “community organizing sector.” I think that’s just really small. We want to change the political terrain of the country in a way that creates opportunity and advances racial and economic justice. What do we need to do, to do that? What kind of institutions do we need to build? What kind of talent do we need to attract and train? What kind of infrastructure do we need? What would it take to shift the ideas at the center of American life? And what role does organizing play in that?<sup>6</sup>

We seek answers to Goehl's questions not in abstract theory, but by using ideas to illuminate the experience of faith-based organizing coalitions and networks as they address the three demons identified above. In particular, we probe the tension between two ideals of American democracy: the universalist ideal, embodied in the notion that the democratic promise of equal opportunity applies to all Americans regardless of economic class and social identity; and the multiculturalist ideal, embodied in efforts to actually *redeem* that promise vis-à-vis subaltern groups that have been historically excluded from it, with legacies that continue today.<sup>7</sup> As shown below, democratic theorists and legal scholars have long debated the notion of an inherent contradiction between universalist and

multiculturalist democratic ideals—that is, between understandings and practices of democracy that emphasize universal principles and absolute equality of citizens before the law, and those that emphasize redressing the unequal status of different groups within a multicultural society. Our focus here will fall less on the *theoretical* tension between these strands of democratic thinking and more on how that tension-in-principle actually plays out within organizations struggling to advance democratic outcomes.

Thus the insight we offer emerges from a binocular view: one eye on the interplay of universalist and multiculturalist democratic ideals; the other eye on faith-based organizing's work to advance democratic voice and equality in multiracial settings, where the dynamic tension between the two ideals is played out.

We show that this tension, when handled effectively, can be politically fertile in the sense of producing new democratic energy for grassroots political efficacy. We show that faith-based community organizing offers an excellent setting for advancing this analytic agenda, because major sectors of that movement are embedded in highly diverse communities and are committed to sustaining internal multicultural pluralism and do so in ways demonstrably effective in external political terms. All of the above have been true of faith-based community organizing at the *local* level for some time, but two new factors make this analysis particularly timely. First, in the last ten years the field has become markedly more ambitious (and significantly more effective) at projecting power onto higher-level political terrain and into more substantive political fights at the local level. The field thus has greater insight to offer an American society struggling to find adequate democratic means to combat rising inequality. Second, in the past faith-based organizing had largely kept the linkage between multicultural pluralism and the struggle for racial equity *implicit* in its work, whereas today large sectors of the field now make that linkage *explicit*.<sup>8</sup> At a time when concerns are growing about deepening inequality between racial/ethnic groups in America, making this linkage explicit is critical for a society in which children of color already constitute a majority of those under eighteen years of age, a society on a trajectory to become a majority-minority country in those children's lifetimes.

This introduction briefly frames the theoretical and philosophical issues at stake in the tension between the democratic ideals of universalism and multiculturalism, introduces the social movement that offers a concrete setting for exploring and addressing that tension, and provides an overview of the book's chapters and central argument.

## Democracy and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of the Democratic Public Sphere

Moral and political universalism . . . are not irreconcilable with the recognition of, respect for, and democratic negotiation of certain forms of difference.

—Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*

Seyla Benhabib, a leading social theorist, captures the complexity of the struggle to preserve the promise of universalist democracy while simultaneously coming to terms with the multicultural reality of contemporary society. The “forms of difference” for which strong multiculturalists argue include those based on race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, and sexual preference, as well as those carried in communities based on religious affiliation or nationality. In arguing for a certain kind of democratic universalism, Benhabib takes seriously the legitimacy of particular claims emanating from these communities, but she argues that those claims best contribute to the long-term development of a democratic public sphere when they are embedded within broader, more universalistic understandings of democratic life, such as those derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>9</sup>

Although not widely known to nonacademic American audiences, Habermas provides the framework for much contemporary thinking about the nature of democracy.<sup>10</sup> Central to his theory and widely adopted among social theorists is the concept of a *democratic public sphere*: all those settings in which people deliberate together regarding publicly relevant concerns. Via the public sphere, the democratic will takes shape—that is, the building up of sufficient collective will to impel shared civil initiatives and governmental action to solve problems faced by contemporary society. Also via the public sphere, subcultures that unnecessarily restrict personal rights, opportunities, and autonomy can be interrogated and encouraged to change, over time contributing to democratizing trends throughout a culture. Importantly, however, it is also via the democratic public sphere that those subcultures can argue back in favor of the validity of their worldviews and commitments—and why *society* should change.<sup>11</sup> Thus Habermas offers a society-centered view of democratic life instead of the highly government-centered and market-centered views more familiar to most audiences. In providing a focus on cultural and institutional dynamics in civil society, Habermas’s framework offers a way to think about long-term political and economic reform as partly a struggle to reshape the institutions and cultural assumptions that inform political and economic decision making.

Benhabib and another feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser, were among the most cogent early interlocutors and critics of Habermas's initial analysis of the democratic public sphere, which was centered on the abstract notion of an "idealized speech community."<sup>12</sup> Both were concerned with the way Habermas's abstract conceptualization elided questions of power, especially the way powerful interests exclude or suppress marginal voices even within what is ostensibly a democratic space. But they developed their positions vis-à-vis Habermas in quite distinct ways. In counterpoint to Habermas's universalism, Fraser developed the concept of *subaltern counterpublic spheres*—alternative public spaces outside of the public arena that money and power dominate. Such spaces shelter subaltern groups from the stigmatizing assumptions that constitute them as outside public discourse. In such subaltern spaces, the marginalized can formulate their own identities and recognize their own dignity—and ultimately insist on that dignity in the wider society. Thus, in the past, men without property, women in general, racialized minorities, and subnational ethnic groups all built subaltern counterpublic spheres from which to contest their marginal status. Today in American society, we witness the same dynamic among undocumented immigrants and same-sex couples seeking a recognized, legitimate status.<sup>13</sup> Fraser's position, while not in principle hostile to universal democratic standards, in practice emphasizes insights in keeping with a more deeply multiculturalist version of democratic theory.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, Benhabib's position remains grounded in the universalist democratic tradition derived from Habermas. Benhabib draws on that tradition to articulate a critique of what she calls the "four dogmas of multiculturalism." She identifies these as (1) the dogmas of cultural holism, (2) the overly socialized self, (3) the prison house of perspectives, and (4) the distrust of the universal.<sup>15</sup> We can summarize her concerns as follows: even when multiculturalists are motivated by a proper desire to advance the cause of justice for marginalized social groups, they promote understandings of society that ultimately undermine that very project. They often promote a view of each subculture as an integrated whole, relatively static and sufficient unto itself, with its own standards of justice held without interrogation by other views. However, subcultures are dynamic; they are embedded in history and inevitably shaped by interaction with other subcultures. In particular, each embodies its own forms of injustice and illegitimate power, which must be interrogated (in part from within, but also via critique from the standpoint of other subcultures). According to Benhabib, multiculturalists give culture such power over people that individuals and groups appear locked into culturally de-

terminated views rather than being capable of contesting and combining cultural views as they go about constructing their own political agency in the world. Benhabib argues that in rightly rejecting the claim to rational impartiality and universalism made by some white, male, heterosexual, Western perspectives, multiculturalists implicitly throw out any standards of fairness by which social policy might be judged. Ironically, they do so in the name of a multiculturalist project seeking precisely such fairness for marginalized groups. As a result, from this standpoint even the best-intentioned multiculturalists face what Benhabib calls “the fundamental dilemmas of multiculturalism”<sup>16</sup>—that is, the tensions between universal egalitarian democratic standards and the implications of their own appeal to particularist cultural identities.

Ultimately, Benhabib embraces Fraser’s argument for recognition of marginalized identities and redistributive policies to benefit the least advantaged—but she does so while insisting that such policies be universalist:

I would indeed agree with defenders of strong group identities that to redress entrenched social inequalities redistributive programs need to be in place, and that the democratic dialogue about collective identity should not result in the neglect of the needs of the weak, the needy, the downtrodden, and the victim of discrimination. Here again a more universalistic perspective suggests itself: In the allocation of distributive benefits, why not find programs and procedures that foster group solidarity across color, culture, ethnic, and racial lines? Why not universalize the entitlement to certain benefits to all groups in a society? . . . [she goes on to suggest high minimum wages, better access to health care and education] The public conversation would then be about redistribution as well as recognition. Yet the goal would be to redress socioeconomic inequalities among the population at large via measures and policies that reflect intergroup solidarity and cultural hybridity.<sup>17</sup>

By embracing and extending a core insight from Fraser’s work, Benhabib moves beyond a caricature that would equate all multiculturalist positions as “identity politics” conceived in narrowly ethnocentric terms. She explains that when multiculturalist claims are reconceived as a “politics of recognition,”<sup>18</sup> they can be voiced and debated without simply “accepting that the only way to do so is by affirming a group’s right to (unilaterally) define the content as well as the boundaries of its own identity.” That is, multiculturalist claims *can* be asserted without dissolving the healthy interchange between cultures as well as the healthy contestation of inequality within them that produces democratic progress. Benhabib argues on theo-

retical grounds that this will occur only when multiculturalist claims are embedded within an overarching universalist aspiration.

Iris Marion Young adopts an even stronger multiculturalist position, insisting on the limitations of any universalist claim:<sup>19</sup>

I agree with many of the points that Benhabib makes about the wide range of issues she takes up in this essay. Like many others who in recent years have worried about the dangers of group-based political claims, however, Benhabib wrongly reduces the differences that motivate such claims to culture. In these remarks I want to reinstate a more generic interpretation of a politics of difference in which culturally based claims are only one species. In this more generic understanding, the problems that motivate social movements around group difference have to do with dominant norms and expectations in the society. Dominant institutions support norms and expectations that privilege some groups and render others deviant. Some of these are cultural norms, but others are norms of capability, social role, sexual desire, or location in the division of labor. Most group-based political claims of justice are responses to these structures of privilege and disadvantage.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Young's protestations, her focus on "norms of capability, social role, sexual desire" seems to evoke precisely the kinds of cultural norms that Benhabib discusses. But Young's position does foster great clarity regarding the disadvantaged *power* position of subaltern groups in democratic dialogue. To the extent such dialogue occurs on cultural terrain defined by dominant institutions, subaltern groups are often marginalized or stigmatized *within* whatever dialogue occurs. She thus continues, "Attention to the issues of justice [that] many group-based claims raise, however, goes beyond principles of tolerance and openness, to the criticism and transformation of social structures that marginalize and normalize," and, later, "What is at stake in a politics of difference is *privilege* more than 'recognition.'"<sup>21</sup> Thus Young's framing more clearly marks out ground from which subaltern groups can question the terms of privilege across the boundaries of multicultural settings.

As fruitful as these ideas have been in exploring the dynamics of democracy and the struggles of subaltern groups to deepen democratic life, they have also generated sharply contested understandings of democratic ideals. Those debates have been especially sharp around the question of multiculturalism and democracy. We can locate our democratic growing pains at the tension between two questions: First, how can highly valued "forms of difference" be sustained in the face of the disruptive and (at times) homo-

genizing forces of modernity and globalization? Some communities attempt to sustain their difference by striving to wall themselves off from critique or influence from those who do not share and thus would reject their own commitments and construction of reality. Such “walling off” occurs in socially powerful groups because they strive to avoid engagement with those who might question their power; it occurs in marginalized groups as they seek shelter from the stigmatizing gaze of the powerful. In both cases, isolation can serve to avoid egalitarian and democratic pressures (for example, pressure to discard assumptions of white privilege among the powerful; or to discard sexist, anti-immigrant, or antigay assumptions in some marginalized groups). The second question therefore arises: How can full commitment to the egalitarian ideals of democracy be sustained if any self-identified “form of difference” can legitimately wall itself off from being questioned by the wider democratic dialogue? In the long term, how we answer these questions will determine whether democracy will be substantively deepened via the hard dialogue of differing worldviews, or simply fragmented into competing worldviews incapable of engaging one another constructively.

This book explores these questions while asking what a shared future for all members of American society might look like—not just any “shared future” but rather one that could be termed *ethical democracy*. Ethical democracy entails not simply the presence of a particular set of electoral institutions or political arrangements, nor does it assume that elected political representatives are ethical virtuosos. Rather, the term *ethical democracy* is rooted in the early democratic theorists of American pragmatism and marks off a particular way of living together and imagining ourselves as inhabiting a shared future in a free society.<sup>22</sup> Such a way of living together requires democratic institutions to channel shared desires into public policy and laws, but it also requires an underlying democratic culture that shapes individuals capable of self-government, of advocating for equal economic opportunity, of deliberating together and fostering political voice within all societal sectors. Ethical democracy thus demands attention to the cultural and institutional underpinnings of democratic life, not simply to partisan politics during elections; it involves habits of ongoing criticism of structures of economic or political domination and advocacy for movements that foster democratic agency from below.

We suggest that the struggle to construct a shared future of ethical democracy must take seriously both the universalist and multiculturalist emphases within democratic theory. We ask how—in a deliberative democracy in which elected representatives make ultimate political decisions,



yet are in principle accountable to all via a participatory society-wide dialogue—the workings of the democratic public sphere relate to the subaltern counterpublics rooted in particular communities of interest. We argue that the field of faith-based organizing offers important lessons for an American public struggling to combine universalist democratic ideals with an increasingly multicultural reality—in what will soon be a thoroughly multicultural society, as new immigrant arrivals and demographic diffusion spread diversity into settings that were once bastions of white subculture.

Those hoping to build a shared future of ethical democracy must also struggle with questions of *power*. Dominant institutional and cultural patterns, even those that ultimately frustrate the best aspirations of all, also benefit some societal sectors—and those sectors use their power to resist change. As we argue in the concluding chapter, such hegemonic patterns typically change through some combination of “top-down” initiatives (for example, new legislation, new interests of economic elites) and “bottom-up” transformation (for example, social movements, demographic changes, and cultural change). All intentional efforts to foster social reform, including the struggle to build ethical democracy, must therefore generate forms of counterhegemonic power. Thus while our analysis focuses on the creative tensions between universalist and multiculturalist democratic commitments, questions of power are never far from the surface—and we return explicitly to those questions in the conclusion.

One way the field negotiates the universalist-multiculturalist tension is by thinking about social policy in terms of what John Powell (he does not capitalize his names) has called “targeted universalism” (see chapter 4).<sup>23</sup> Targeted universalism involves setting universal *goals* for equal opportunities and social outcomes; its means of attaining those goals address the particular needs and draw on the particular strengths of concrete communities with their specific histories. Such organizing by no means shelters subaltern communities from the pressure of democratic norms and demands of responsible citizenship in a diverse society; indeed, when done well it exposes communities to the full challenge of engagement in the complex demands of public life in a culturally and racially diverse, scientifically and technologically based, polarized society with rising levels of economic inequality.

Significant sectors of faith-based community organizing use targeted universalism to negotiate the tension between universalist and multiculturalist understandings of the democratic challenge. In studying their efforts, we can most clearly see that tension’s creative potential, rather than assuming that it necessarily undermines democratic work.

## Universalist and Multiculturalist Democracy in Action: The Scale and Strategic Ambition of Today's Faith-Based Community Organizing

Contemporary community organizing in the United States draws from a variety of figures in the history of grassroots American democracy, including Jane Addams, Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as from union organizing and the movements for civil rights of African Americans, women, and Hispanics.<sup>24</sup> Out of that broad tradition, Ed Chambers and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) pioneered early elements of a model of organizing based more explicitly in community institutions—primarily but not exclusively religious congregations—a model that has been adopted and reworked by a variety of organizations. Today, most faith-based community organizing efforts are affiliated with one of several sponsoring networks. Nationally, these include the PICO National Network, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaliel Foundation, and National People's Action (the last does both institution-based and individual-based organizing). Important regional networks include Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART) in the Southeast and Midwest and the InterValley Project (IVP) in New England, as well as state-level collaborations (most prominently the Ohio Organizing Collaborative) and several statewide efforts internal to each network or collaborative efforts between these groups and other forms of organizing. In addition, a smaller number of organizations doing faith-based organizing exist independent of the formal sponsoring networks. Although each of the organizations mentioned above has developed its own organizing approach, they remain sufficiently similar to treat them as one field. Their "tool kits" of organizing practices overlap considerably, and all are built with *institutions* as their foundation—that is, participants are not "members" of the organization, but rather become involved via congregations, labor unions, parent-teacher organizations, neighborhood organizations, or other institutions.<sup>25</sup> More broadly still, a variety of other community organizing efforts built on individual rather than institutional membership also form part of this tradition. The Center for Community Change, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the Center for Third World Organizing, and ACORN (before its collapse, with its work still carried forward in some states) represent important strands of this model. Other related organizing models include the work of Interfaith Worker Justice, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), and the Sojourners community. But all these differ significantly from the faith-based model founded on institutions that is analyzed here.<sup>26</sup>

The organizations studied here train grassroots leaders to push for public policy to improve the quality of life for residents of poor, working-class, and middle-class communities. They sponsor “political actions” or “accountability sessions” at which they call on political officials to support particular public policies; organizations based in religious congregations undergird that call by articulating a vision of a better community and a good society, drawing on the languages of faith traditions. Each member institution typically works on issues of concern in its local area and collaborates with the larger coalition to address issues requiring citywide solutions. This model of organizing has often helped produce policy change regarding city services, policing, low-income housing, health care, immigration enforcement, and public education; the fields’ most sophisticated practitioners have organized and trained long-standing teams of leaders in communities that previously suffered from a lack of effective democratic representation.

Because each local coalition carries a unique name, and because until recently nearly all such organizing focused on local issues, the broad reach of faith-based community organizing in the United States often goes unrecognized beyond the local level. But in fact these organizations have built a significant presence in American society and faith communities. As of 2011, 189 local community organizing coalitions rooted in institutions existed in the United States, with a presence in forty of the fifty states. In order to see clearly the contours of that presence, we draw on our National Study of Community Organizing Coalitions, a new national census of all institution-based organizing efforts in the United States.<sup>27</sup> These coalitions, as reported in detail in subsequent chapters, are among the most racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse civil society organizations in America. They also represent substantial religious diversity. Of the approximately 4,500 community institutions that provide the foundation for this work, more than 3,500 are religious congregations from a variety of traditions. The strong majority is from the liberal and moderate Protestant (32%), historic African American (24%), and the Roman Catholic (27%) denominations. But Jewish synagogues (5%) and Unitarian Universalist churches (4%) also have a growing presence, each having more than doubled their proportion of participating congregations in the last decade. Evangelical Christian (4%) and Pentecostal Christian (2%) churches also engage in this work, but at levels not nearly reflective of their presence in the wider field of American congregations—in which they represent nearly half of all congregations. This underrepresentation is particularly acute for white evangelical churches.

The religious composition of the field should be understood in the overall context of the changing demographic and organizational structure of religion in the United States. While beyond our purposes here to fully delve into that structure, a quick summary may suffice. First, the proportion of Americans who report no religious affiliation (religious “nones”) has rapidly increased over recent decades, in part because they have been alienated by faith-based voices of religious exclusivism. Religious nones now represent about a fifth of all Americans—and almost a third of Americans under the age of thirty.<sup>28</sup> Combined with rising religious diversity, these trends may mean that faith-based community organizing will increasingly need secular allies and that the more tolerant and diverse faith voices associated with this field will have an easier hearing in the public arena. Second, the more liberal Protestant congregations and the core urban churches within the historic African American and Catholic traditions—all mainstays of the faith-based organizing field—have undergone fiscal and organizational decline in recent decades. Such decline may or may not continue, but it has clearly presented challenges to the field in ways we will later see. Third, white evangelicals and African American and Latino evangelicals of the Pentecostal tradition have all shown a growing propensity to address issues of inequality in society. Reflecting this trend, these groups have become more active in faith-based organizing, as have Jewish synagogues and Unitarian Universalist churches. Finally, sectors of American Catholicism that have long been committed to social justice and addressing inequality are showing new vigor under Pope Francis I. This new energy and the potential, under Francis’s inspiration, for renewed institutional priority to Catholic social teaching may buttress Catholic involvement in faith-based organizing and, more generally, strengthen the Catholic voice on issues of inequality in society. All these contextual factors will shape the trajectory of faith-based organizing in the future, and thus its ability and desire to link public policy to universal and multicultural democratic priorities.

The most consequential example of faith-based organizing’s effort to link universalist and multiculturalist democratic commitments—which also reflects the field’s strategic ambition to effectively address inequality and policy paralysis at the national and state levels—lies precisely in what is arguably the most important domestic policy initiative of recent decades: health care reform. At the forefront of this effort is the PICO National Network.<sup>29</sup> The PICO National Network sponsors a particular model of faith-based community organizing in nineteen states, through the work of fifty local organizing coalitions that the network refers to as “federations.”<sup>30</sup> We

will see more of the PICO National Network later; here, we briefly profile its national work in order to demonstrate the field's emergent strategic ambitions. PICO first achieved prominent national-level influence during the debate under the administration of President George W. Bush regarding reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), the primary federal program to provide insurance coverage to uninsured children (approximately fifteen million American children lacked health insurance at the time of SCHIP's enactment in 1997). In 2007 and 2008, PICO leaders testifying before Congress provided much of the faith-based moral voice in favor of reauthorization, and twice Congress passed the relevant legislation—only to see it vetoed by President Bush as unwarranted federal spending. As one of its first acts under President Barack Obama in 2009, Congress once again passed SCHIP legislation, again with testimony from PICO leaders. Those leaders were in the front row of invited guests at the March 2009 White House ceremony at which Obama signed SCHIP reauthorization, accompanied by Vice President Joseph Biden, other leaders in the administration, and the congressional leaders who had seen the legislation through.<sup>31</sup>

The PICO National Network continued its heavy involvement in the national health care reform effort during the 2009–10 debate to shape the signature domestic initiative of the Obama administration's first term: the Affordable Care Act (ACA, a.k.a. Obamacare). Through the ACA, the administration sought to universalize access to insured health care and bring down the long-term cost of health care provision in American society. Throughout this period, the final shape of the legislation was very much in doubt—as was its ultimate passage until the very end, as congressional Republicans emboldened by the "Tea Party" movement united to defeat it. PICO was a prominent part of the coalition seeking to shape the legislation in ways maximizing affordability and access: affordability for low- and middle-income families and individuals, and access to health care in poor communities. PICO leaders testified in Congress, met with administration policy makers, and rallied on Capitol Hill and in the home districts of key legislators around the country. Most of that effort went into pushing for substantial subsidies to help low-income workers afford health insurance in the new health care exchanges and coverage for immigrant workers; both items were eventually adopted in the final legislation.

Through this effort, faith-based community organizing demonstrated its capacity to work effectively for significant policy change, not only at neighborhood and metropolitan levels but also in state and national policy arenas.<sup>32</sup> Particularly important for the success of such higher-level

organizing efforts are three factors: (1) the ability to mobilize “everyday folks” (in both home congressional districts and periodic national events) who are perceived as not the typical Beltway activists, and thus granted a certain credibility in policy circles; (2) the ability to do so over sustained periods (measured in years) in order to shape gradual policy emergence, build a political reputation, and forge lasting coalitions with other organizations in favor of pragmatic policies to benefit poor and middle-class Americans; and (3) perhaps the unique strength of faith-based organizing as a sector—the ability of religious leaders to fluently connect such pragmatic policy alternatives to the deep moral languages and ethical framing carried by their various faith traditions.<sup>33</sup>

While the health care debate represents the highest profile the field has attained on successful national legislation so far, faith-based organizing has come to play a salient role in the public arena at the local, state, and national levels in a wide range of settings around the country. As we shall see, the field built that influence on a foundation of universal democratic values, the mobilization of highly diverse constituencies, and an embrace of the multicultural reality of those constituencies. Furthermore, some sectors of faith-based organizing have made working for racial equity—both within their organization and in the public sphere—an explicit commitment. The field thus constitutes an ideal case study for understanding the tensions between the universal norms of democratic theory and the specific democratic demands our emergent multicultural reality generates. Such tensions represent a dilemma within contemporary democracy. But we argue that it is a dilemma fertile with constructive possibilities for building a shared future for all Americans, a future that narrows our yawning chasms of inequality and ends the strategic policy paralysis in the nation’s capital. In so doing, such work might enable democracy to once again serve as a beacon to people the world over.

### **The Other Democratic Dilemma: Religion in the Public Sphere**

Using faith-based organizing as a case study of universalist-multiculturalist tensions also introduces a second key theme that remains in the background for much of our analysis yet should not disappear from our sight: the complex role of religion in contemporary democratic debate and in helping the field of faith-based organizing manage its internal diversity.

Culturally defensive religious forms—and at times explicitly anti-intellectual and fundamentalist expressions of them—have come to domi-

nate religiously framed public discourse, at least in the popular perception based on media coverage. That perception of blanket religious conservatism across issues from access to birth control to sexual behavior to gay marriage to tax policy to American and Israeli policy in Palestine represents a gross oversimplification of complex religious terrain, and the conservatism itself often oversimplifies complex religious teachings. But the perception is pervasive and has combined with public scandals regarding clergy sexual misconduct and irresponsible religious authority to undermine the credibility of religious voices within American political discourse. Although no doubt celebrated among strong secular fundamentalists, this weakening of public religion represents a significant democratic loss. Historically, religious actors played central roles in democratic movements, from the nineteenth-century abolition of slavery to Progressive-era urban reform to the movements for the civil rights of minorities to the struggles to end apartheid in South Africa and gross human rights violations in Central America. It remains an open question whether faith-based community organizing can contribute to reestablishing a credible religious voice for deepening democracy that is broadly accepted as legitimate in the American public arena.

Benhabib's argument for a political and moral universalism that exposes all human communities and cultural traditions to democratizing critique—and explicitly *against* those models of multiculturalism that would particularize cultural groups and shield them from the claims, opportunities, and challenges of shared democratic life—carries an important implication for this book's analysis of religion and public life. Whereas academic multiculturalists typically either exclude religious voices from serious consideration as democratic protagonists or see religion as simply another set of incommensurable cultural strands that can be tolerated by society, Benhabib's version of political and moral universalism must include religious traditions as potential democratic interlocutors. But how can they best play this role?

A given tradition or community (religious or otherwise) can certainly argue that some emergent democratic norm should not apply to them, on the grounds of the integrity and self-understanding of the tradition. But all such communities face rising democratic expectations, both among their own dissenting members and in wider American society; all face evolving societal standards of what constitutes the minimal acceptable norms of democratic life. So traditional arguments may or may not carry the day. Gradually, even the most traditional of religions change, driven by ongoing internal discernment and shifting societal priorities and standards. This

need not be seen as giving up the founding religious truths of the tradition, but rather can be seen as the ongoing discernment of the implications of religious truth in light of new realities and keener insight—or even of ongoing divine revelation.<sup>34</sup>

Wood has written elsewhere more extensively about the role of religion in public life, not the focus here.<sup>35</sup> But given that faith-based community organizing is primarily comprised of religious congregations representing multiple traditions, it is worth noting that religion represents a key mechanism through which these groups live out their commitment to universalism within a multiculturally rooted social movement. For some readers, this will represent a sticking point. For those whose only real exposure to religion has been via the voices of fundamentalism emanating from strident factions of evangelical Christian, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or Orthodox traditions in different countries, the very definition of a democratic public sphere seems to exclude religion from any democratic public role. Fundamentalist definitions of truth claim to lie beyond critical reason and thus are not open to deliberative debate. But this represents simply a caricature of religion's historical public voice and fails to capture the reality of much more sophisticated and nuanced voices of religion today. Over time, Habermas recognized the ways that religious traditions can open themselves to critical reason and thus become valuable actors within the democratic public sphere.<sup>36</sup>

The *reflexivity* of religious traditions is the crucial issue, as shown in the works of Michele Dillon and Jerome Baggett. Dillon embraces Habermas's democratic criterion noted above but argues that certain forms of religion—even those most deeply rooted in "tradition"—can embrace and practice a kind of ongoing self-revision that meets the demand for openness of all truth claims to critical evaluation and ongoing revision.<sup>37</sup> Using the Catholic Church as a case study of a religious tradition asserting a strong claim to fundamental truth, she analyzes how any given *specific* religiously defined truth is critically appropriated, interpreted, and potentially revised within the context of commitment to the *overall* tradition. Although Dillon certainly does not suggest that contemporary Catholicism is a paragon of such reflexivity, she argues that openness to such reflexivity is crucial for religious traditions to remain credible and legitimate interlocutors in a democratic public arena. More recently, Jerome Baggett shows how this kind of reflexivity undergirds the continuing engagement and vitality of American Catholics from across the political and theological spectra.<sup>38</sup> In this way, religious actors can participate in the democratic public sphere, both as active interlocutors in societal deliberation and by exposing their



tradition's teachings and practices to ongoing dialogue and potential critique. Religious traditions thus become credible public actors to the extent they embrace the fundamental norms of democratic participation, such as willingness to listen to competing societal voices (including scientific claims, alternative political positions, and other religious voices).<sup>39</sup>

While this theme of religion in the public arena is not a central focus of this book, it does return in two important ways in the end. First, we show that religiously grounded cultural practices are crucial to how these organizations manage internal racial and ethnic diversity (as well as socio-economic diversity). Second, we argue that religiously grounded capacities for reflexivity and deliberation represent key practices through which faith-based community organizing links its universalist and multiculturalist democratic commitments.

Thus the role of religion in public life reemerges in the conclusion for both analytical and ethical reasons: analytically, because the faith-based organizing field operates precisely at the intersection of religion and politics, and ultimately its democratic capacity draws important sustenance from its spiritual grounding; ethically, because faith-based organizing represents a concrete effort to deepen democracy in American life, which we consider a central ethical goal of our time.

It seems hard to disagree with the notion of "deepening democracy."<sup>40</sup> But in invoking this as an overarching need for our time, we mean something specific and more controversial. Deepening democracy involves reversing the rising economic inequality in American life while simultaneously improving the ability of everyday citizens to have an impact in shaping societal priorities. That is, deepening democracy involves increasing "equality" and "voice" in American society, in ways that build toward a shared future closer to the ideal we term *ethical democracy*.<sup>41</sup> Since some religious congregations are profoundly engaged in this work, we pay attention to religion's role in it while focusing primarily on the interplay of universalizing and multiculturalist strands within the democratic public sphere.

### Outline of the Book's Argument

This book's central theme revolves around three key arguments. First, that a commitment to a certain kind of moral and political universalism can simultaneously sustain strong engagement with multiculturalism (in this case via practices of reflexivity and deliberation within a democratic public sphere internal to a movement). Second, that some sectors of the faith-

based organizing field combine such reflective multiculturalism-within-universalism with the organizational infrastructure and strategic capacity needed to make a significant impact on economic inequality, policy paralysis, and racial injustice in American life. Third, that the field as a whole still falls short of living up to that promise. To defend those claims, we show: (a) that the field of faith-based community organizing has sufficient institutional scale to actually make a difference in civil and political society; (b) that at least a significant portion of the field succeeds reasonably well at linking universal democratic values and multicultural commitments; and (c) that the field effectively brings those values and commitments to bear on public policy, but could do so more widely than is the case today. If faith-based community organizing does so, we argue that it can indeed help shape a shared future through which American society moves closer to an ethical democracy less bedeviled by economic inequality, policy paralysis, and racial injustice.

The chapters of part I address the first issue. We draw on systematic new evidence to argue that faith-based community organizing today has the organizational infrastructure, diverse leadership, and significant elements of the strategic capacity and organizational culture to play this role. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the subsequent analysis by presenting the overall national profile of the field, especially its significant growth in scale and capacity over the last decade. The next two chapters present the results of the National Study of Community Organizing Coalitions, a census of essentially all faith-based community organizing efforts in the United States. Chapter 2 provides a detailed demographic profile of the local leadership within faith-based community organizing and highlights the emergence of a more diverse field of leaders (in part via the internal struggle to recruit, retain, and promote a diverse leadership base). Chapter 3 describes the field's organizational infrastructure and strategic capacity, suggesting that although the former is impressive, the latter is uneven and at times disappointing. The chapter closes with a brief comparative analysis of how the field handles a quite different dimension of diversity: the challenges associated with having diverse sponsoring religious traditions. In keeping with the quantitative data being analyzed, our writing in part I strives for a relatively objective tone, laying out the contours of the field and the organizational underpinnings of its work to address economic inequality, policy paralysis, and racial injustice.

Part II offers an extended case study of one particular network's shift to a focus on racial equity within its own structures and on racial justice in America. Because part II draws on ethnographic and interview data, the

tone shifts to a more interpretive mode of analysis as we strive to understand the dynamics of organizational culture that accompany such a transformation. Chapter 4 discusses how the universalist moral and political orientation that underlies the political culture of faith-based community organizing plays out in the context of that shift, particularly vis-à-vis African American communities but with an eye toward how those communities intersect with predominantly white, Latino, and Asian/Pacific institutions. Chapter 5 analyzes the highest-profile national campaign for racial equity and racial justice within faith-based community organizing today. Chapter 6 offers a less “digested” view into these dynamics via a 2013 interview with a key national leader of that campaign. Chapter 7 steps back to suggest what these efforts to deepen democracy can tell us about the role of spirituality and creativity in democratic struggles, and how those struggles might be better grounded in American culture and institutions. Drawing on the concept of “ethical democracy” that Wood’s previous work used to characterize the ethos that underlies faith-based community organizing, we argue throughout that efforts to sustain moral/political universalism and multiculturalism can learn a great deal from faith-based organizing’s commitment to ethical democracy—but it will only do so if the field succeeds in embodying that ideal and projecting it more assertively into American political society. The conclusion reflects on the way forward into a more satisfying and democratic future shared by all.