

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CITY AND THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THAT CALL IT HOME:

The Hybrid Networking and Documentary Work of AREA Chicago

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INTRODUCTION

This text outlines a methodology for researching localized social movements as a means of analyzing their history, effectiveness, and ability to strategically participate or intervene in politics. I use insights gained from AREA Chicago -- a publication founded in 2005 that has compiled a print/online archive based on interviews with over 300 Chicago activists, cultural producers, and organizers_ to offer up a proposal for a broad-based pan-leftist approach that can help avoid classic sectarianism yet still ask challenging questions and produce forward-moving analysis.¹

In this essay, I outline AREA Chicago's long-term and locally situated method of 'movement mapping'. The text should be relevant to anyone hoping to strategically contribute to the development of a robust and critically reflexive Left movement, which can advance the absolutely necessary goal of replacing the logics that govern our lives with systems that promote a long-term healthy balance between living things and the earth, where people have equal access to resources, and where movement is determined not by brute force, but by creative collective process.

AREA Chicago began at a moment when Chicago, in a manner similar to many other places, experienced a break in its typical flurry of social, political, and cultural community organizing. That break may have been characterized by exhaustion due to very hectic, yet largely ineffective, anti-war and economic justice activism of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The source of this lull was multi-faceted, but to an engaged participant, it was plain to see. At the same time, there were burgeoning networks of people working at the intersections of art, research, education, and activism, in ways that did not fit into the rigidly defined conceptions of community organizing, social justice, and authentic struggle that had characterized previous moments. This hybrid work encompassed organizations such as the Department of Space and Land Reclamation, Pilot TV, non-exploitative collaborations between academics and neighborhood groups, Neighborhood Writing Alliance, Feel Tanks (as opposed to Think Tanks), Mess Halls, Freedom Schools, Social Justice Curriculum Fairs, Chances Dances, Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and its Operation First Casualty action, and a plethora of new reading groups and post-sectarian political education projects. These activities happened parallel to (but often disconnected from) the tried-and-true peace vigils, community arts classes, youth media literacy programs, labor unions, neighborhood coalitions, temporary affinity groups, and other short-lived as well as institutionalized community centers that had previously characterized the city and its social movements. These practices -- new and old, experimental and tested, consistent and temporary -- had to find each other and build new connections if their work was ever going to amount to something more. Often separated by vast geographic, cultural, and generational divides, these different ways of working needed to both co-exist as well as find common ground. We created AREA Chicago as a device to make visible the disparate practices to one another, to create a common ground, and to critically frame the present moment in a way that would challenge groups to feel compelled to see one another as potential allies in times that require unconventional alliances.

We were inspired by the local work mentioned above, but also by international projects such as What is To Be Done? (Russia), Sarai (India), Colectivo Situaciones (Argentina), What, How and For Whom? (Croatia), Copenhagen Free University (Denmark), the Center for Urban Pedagogy (U.S.), the Right to the City Alliance (U.S.), INCITE! (U.S.), and numerous other regional and international efforts.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CITY

The cities we live in are always expanding, contracting, and- changing. People have compared cities to living organisms (living, breathing), microcosms (reflecting and reproducing the world in which they exist), and parasites (sucking the resources of the regions on their periphery), as well as to independent nations (having their own rules and identities distinct from the world around them), markets (where people are merely buyers and sellers), and command-and-control centers (Where networks of people, wealth, and resources are organized and manipulated from a safe and distanced vantage-point). These metaphors are frameworks for understanding what cities are, why they exist, how they work, and where they are going.

AREA is based in one particular city: Chicago. The project is organized by an advisory group of twenty people working in various social justice, educational, and cultural projects throughout the city. One approach we have used to examine the city is a 'conceptual limiting' strategy, which is borrowed from literary traditions; if you limit and focus the framework to a specific area or topic, then you can more fully explore that area and navigate complex ideas through that lens. Some people might try to explore contemporary capitalism through the lens of culture (i.e. soccer), or commodities (i.e. tea), or perhaps through a particular movement (i.e. socialism). In our work, a place -- Chicago -- is the lens through which we view the complexities of an increasingly mobile and always violent capitalism. This mobility influences the places people live, how often they move, the jobs they can have (and for how long), and how they relate to their neighbors and surroundings. This affects the kind of politics and culture that emerge in a place at a particular time, and we focus on this as our magazine's subject matter. Soon after we started the AREA Chicago project in 2005, a feature article appeared in the magazine *The Economist* hailing Chicago as a "post-industrial success story":

This is a city buzzing with life, humming with prosperity, sparkling with new buildings, new sculptures, new parks, and generally exuding vitality. The Loop, the central area defined by a ring of overhead railway tracks, has not gone the way of so many other big cities' business districts -- soulless by day and deserted at night. It bustles with shoppers as well as office workers. Students live there. So, increasingly, do gays, young couples, and older ones whose children have grown up and fled the nest. Farther north, and south, old warehouses and factories have become home to artists, professionals, and trendy young families. Not far to the east, locals and tourists alike throng Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile, a stretch of shops as swanky as any to be found on Fifth Avenue in New York or Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Chicago is undoubtedly back.

Back, that is, from what many feared would be the scrap heap. In 1980, when *The Economist* published a survey of Chicago, it found a city whose "facade of downtown prosperity masked a creaking political machine, the erosion of its economic base, and some of the most serious racial problems in America..."²

This declaration was curious, as it very clearly conflicted significantly with our own experiences and observations. One of the questions that informed the development of AREA as an activist research project was a slight re-framing: "Is Chicago a post-industrial success story?"

It is difficult to assess the validity of "success stories" in our contemporary cities. In an era of place-marketing and of cities competing among each other for everything, from tourists, to Olympic Games, to corporate re-locations, seeing through the public relations haze of what constitutes success can be tricky. In an era of urban real-estate 'renewals' amidst housing bubble bursts, wading through the public relations muck of simultaneous mortgage crisis and neighborhood renaissance can make 'success' seem like an abstraction. In order to provide critical perspectives of our city's success narrative, AREA printed a series of articles dealing with the flip-side of Chicago's supposed success. From AREA #1:

The new world order is coming to Chicago with a vengeance. Increasingly the city is defined by neoliberalism, the global policies of transnational capital that make the market and individual self-interest primary in every sphere of economic and social life. On every side we see the elimination of the public interest and public control -- from privatization (and corporatization) of parks (Millennium Park), schools (Renaissance 2010), and bus shelters to the elimination of public housing. Corporate and finance capital in collaboration with the Daley administration are reconstructing the city to serve their interests. Their agenda grows out of changing relations between cities and the global economy and the emergence of gentrification as a pivotal force in urban economies.³

From AREA #2:

One day I decided I wanted to eat something healthy, and I thought greens would be perfect because they were healthy for cleaning negative particles out of my body. So I started on a horrible journey from one store to the next, about eight stores to be exact. I went from California and Jackson past Pulaski and Madison. I was getting very angry. I couldn't understand why there weren't any fresh vegetables in these stores. Was it because it was a predominantly Black area, or was it because the community didn't care enough to demand that the stores supply the essential goods they needed? I couldn't believe it.⁴

From AREA #4:

After a four-year, \$7 million investigation, special prosecutors have released their findings on police torture in Chicago, and the results are familiar. Once again, former Commander Jon Burge and the white police officers under him -- who, in the words of the *Chicago Tribune*, "for two decades coerced dozens of confessions with fists, kicks, radiator burns, guns to the mouth, bags over the head, and electric shock to the genitals" -- are walking away scot-free from their crimes.⁵

From AREA #6:

I have lived in Chicago since 1979. My family was part of the exodus that followed the steel plant closings in Buffalo and we arrived here when I was seven. I grew up in Logan Square and have spent most of my life on the Near Northwest Side. There have been two major sea changes in the landscape of Chicago since my childhood, which parallels the era of the deepest deprivation and disinvestment in the history of the city. One is the rise of the Latino community, in numbers, in community development, in aspiration, creativity, and political power. The second is the gutting of the inner city and its replacement with an amnesiac, upscale consumer paradise for outsiders with money. What has changed the least in Chicago is this state of control by a cohort of elite gangsters known as The Machine, who are desperately trying to buy out the first change and raking in buckets of cash over the second. I hate how we betray the best of our histories and our communities, which I love to death.⁶

While cities are not the end all/be all of contemporary capitalism, they are strategic places to focus our energies because of the dense accumulation of contradictions within them. As Nik Theodore states in AREA #6:

[C]ities (including their suburban peripheries) have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy experiments, from place-marketing and local boosterism, enterprise zones, tax abatements, urban development corporations, and public-private partnerships to workfare policies, property redevelopment schemes, new strategies of social control, policing and surveillance, and a host of other institutional modifications within the local state apparatus. The overarching goal of such experiments is to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices.

Indeed, we must understand this function of cities in the more diffuse and international manifestations of uneven development and capitalist exploitation. Cities are home to nearly half of the world's population, and our existence in them plays a significant role in their reproduction.⁷

Since its inception, AREA has coordinated *Notes for a People's Atlas of Chicago*, a project intended to highlight people's role in the production of the city in their daily lives. Blank maps are circulated at our public events, through workshops, at curriculum fairs for public school teachers, and through drop-boxes at local community centers. They are accompanied by a call for mapping to anyone and everyone:

What should I put on my map?

You are encouraged to map out sites that are significant to you as someone who lives, works and plays in this city. You can map out sites of past or current political struggles, lost histories, cultural spaces, environmental devastation, personal histories, real estate speculation, social movements of the past, places of formal/informal education, sites of gang violence, where to get the best coffee, places where tourists do not go, the periphery of the city, proposals for alternative uses of public space, distribution of wealth, anything. You are encouraged to combine, intersect, contrast, flip upside down themes or topics of your maps. You are encouraged to map out personal histories and points of interests as well as what else they relate to, why are these points important, and to whom are they important to?

Why maps? Because maps are a visual tool for sharing information with others. Because they can be produced by many people and combined to tell stories about complex relationships. Because maps are never finished and only tell part of a story that can constantly be expanded upon. Because power exists in space, struggle exists in space, and we exist in space. Because we cannot know where we are going if we do not know where we are from.

The project, like many which utilize maps and visual information methods, engages people across literacy levels and larger cultural barriers. Simply presenting the blank map, with an invitation to express a person's knowledge and impressions of this place they live, work, and play in everyday, gives voice and meaning to the statement by Nik Theodore above: that we play a significant role in the reproduction of our city every day. In what direction we push that role is the next subject to explore.

GETTING TO KNOW THE LEFT IN YOUR CITY

Once the context is thoroughly understood -- or is at least on its way to being understood -- it is time to get to know the social actors and engaged citizens, both subjects of the city and its dynamics. There are many kinds of practices that could be considered as social movements that operate in a progressive Left tradition. There are many strands, many stripes, many projects, and many approaches. The deeper one looks, the more fragmented they will appear. It can be difficult to map them or get an image of what these dedicated people and organizations are doing and in what directions they are traveling. Yet such a map is essential for any strategic effort. This map, and the process of making it, can furnish an understanding of the full spectrum of actors and enable the mapmakers to assess the most effective sites for intervention and engagement.

If this seems a bit abstract, an illustration can assist here. Imagine a field, and then think about a political or social

question relevant to your background. Think about the variety of social and political actors working around that question than share similar goals. Then think about the larger 'group of groups' that share more loosely related goals. The pool gets bigger. Maybe the labor union in town has one tactic they use to work towards that goal. Perhaps there are some non-profits that do some combination of reform and community organizing around that goal. There are also politicians working from within the system to try and get to that place too, who are influenced and pushed along the way by these other actors. These are the obvious in this story, the social actors who inhabit the Held and who care urgently about the matter. Then there are self-organized groups, there are artists making culture that directly addresses the issue at hand, there are teachers who integrate the questions into their classroom work, and there are community groups that conduct popular education to try to understand how this issue is playing out in their hyper-local context. One could take this scenario further and identify more folks and organizations occupying places on the field.

An essential first step towards variety of strategic and long-term goals is developing the capacity to assess the spectrum of interrelated practices attempting to achieve similar outcomes using different tactics and methodologies. First, it helps in building strategic alliances that bring visibility to the issue and maximize the limited resources available to do the work (that is, avoiding redundancy). Secondly, it assists in identifying weak points where unity and collaboration across many different groups may be difficult, or where the movement is most susceptible to external disruption. Third, it helps to interpret the potential for currently existing groups to achieve their stated end-goals. Finally, it provides a vantage point for beginning a complex and critical evaluation of the efficacy of different ideas, actions, and forms of organization. It is a first step, though it is not a simple solution to resolving historical disputes, economic differences, or cultural tensions. It is also not an argument for an abstract 'multitude' rather, it is an argument for an honest assessment of the actually existing Left and the ideas and actions it produces.

We have used this methodology in the creation of our thematic magazines and events in order to enable the incredible diversity of people and groups who are invested in an issue to present their ideas together in a shared space.

Our methodology is quite simple: What is a pressing or challenging question in the pressing of challenging question in the city? What are people doing or not doing about it? Once that is identified, then a call for participation is circulated, and people from local networks associated with art, research, education, and activism formulate a response. That response is edited, designed, printed, and then circulated back out to the networks from which it came.

We've asked the following question in out publications:

What kind of infrastructure of services and resources do we need when our welfare state is in disrepair and being increasingly privatized? (AREA #1: *Private Parties and Public Services*)

What kind of food policy can we create to make sure that people of the city are healthy enough to pursue organization? (AREA #2: *After Winter Comes Spring -- A Look at Local Food Systems*)

What are the things we mean and want when we say 'we'? What are critical approaches to the commonplace political concept of solidarity? (AREA #3: *Solidarities*)

In contexts where more and more Chicagoans are entrapped in the expanding industry of mass incarceration, how can meaningful, visionary, and practical changes to the criminal justice system occur? (AREA #4: *No Justice, No Peace*)

What is the role of education and pedagogy in strengthening social movements? (AREA #5: *How We Learn*)

How do experimental policies turn the city into a social and economic laboratory? (AREA #6: *City as Lab*)

What kinds of logics and strategies do contemporary social movements inherit from their predecessors, especially the New Left and Counter-Culture Left of the late 1960s/early 1970s? (AREA #7: *68/08-On the Legacy of 1968 in Chicago*)

What connections can be made between ongoing struggles For economic justice and those conflicts which are arising out of the current economic recession? (AREA #8: *Everybody's Got Money Issues*)

Can our urban-centered politics and culture become more connected with those places on the geographic periphery, and more generally, can our narrow-minded culture and politics be influenced by ideas and people who are on the margins? (AREA #9: *Peripheral Vision -- Chicago From the Outside In*)

What infrastructures and institutions from the past do we need to maintain or rethink, and how can we critically create the new-ones to support our work? (AREA #10: *Community Infrastructures and Institutions*)

Through this approach of asking questions about the city, how it works, and where it is going, we have been able to learn a great deal. By soliciting the reflections of our city's activists and organizers, AREA Chicago has pieced together a map of the local Left. While it is incomplete and always evolving, we can better understand where local groups and initiatives are situated and where they might be going. These social and political actors are who and what we have to work with. So it is not merely a pluralist project to get everyone together and work towards the lowest common denominator Without debate or conflict; it is simply what we must understand in order to consider what directions we can feasibly move towards that can unite our idealism with the currently available material reality. The Left in its current composition is going to provide the basis and history for future forms of thought and social organization. So let's get to know each other and learn each other's history and desires, What we are still working on_and what we are always challenged by-is how to create a feedback mechanism that allows the final publication and events to serve as a starting point For larger strategic efforts.

Composition: Fragmentation

We are flailing in these times. There is no compass, no rhyme or reason for what we do; it's like shooting in the wind. Anxiety explodes as we wonder if we are being effective or getting anything done, and this should not be the case. There is much to do and much to think about. There is much to be angry about and much to be excited about.

We are living in a historical moment when two things are happening regularly enough that we should be learning from them. The first is that our resistance is commodified: it is depoliticized, packaged, and sold back to us; sometimes we don't even know it happens. The second of these is that we are encouraged to work locally and marginally, while often starting our own organizations to accomplish massive undertakings. Solidarity has become an agreement of 'you do your thing, and I'll do mine, and if we write our names on each others' fliers, then we are bound.' This is ineffective. We are too weak and too marginal to constantly be starting our own splinter groups and initiatives without a strategic assessment of our role in the broader Left and the commodification of resistance. There are a handful of sweeping generalizations I use as the basis of my understanding of the current composition of Left and progressive social and political work in the United States. In order to get a generalized image of this complicated mess, it is absolutely necessary to step back and consider these major factors.

To the contemporary U.S. Left, one must consider two state-sponsored power plays, the first of which were the state disruption and counter-intelligence campaigns that decimated Left organizations. Most relevant to our time is the 1950s-era Red Scare, which was followed by the infiltration, assassination, imprisonment, and sabotage campaigns begun in the 1960s and extending well into the 1980s; these were directed mostly at various New Left, Nationalist, and anti-imperialist organizations. There are histories of state counter-intelligence and 'red-baiting' that precede this and that have followed since, but these two periods effectively destroyed much of the organizational infrastructure of the Left in the United States.

Secondly, the gradual dissolution of state-sponsored welfare programs that had stabilized economic growth in the U.S. following the Great Depression (with significant growth occurring directly following World War II) has also had a tremendous impact on the work of leftists in this country. This restructuring of state priorities and policies has meant that many of the gains won by previous generations of progressive social movements and reformers were swept away. On a more basic level, the gutting of welfare infrastructure has brought us to the point where the state doesn't do much for the major city of citizens, beyond keeping citizens on a short leash with their increased security and surveillance methods and imprisoning several million people in the process.

In turn, the people who cared about the livelihood of their neighbors -- people who in previous generations might have been a part of Leftist labor unions or political parties -- had to pick up the pieces. This means that agencies, groups, non-governmental organizations, collectives, websites, and magazines -- the potential organizational infrastructure of a Left social movement -- started doing the work that was previously paid for and, even if only partially, implemented by the State. The movements became service providers because that is what people needed. While this built on the informal role that people already played in helping their neighbors through a commitment to community, as well as the work of reformers like the Hull House, Settlement House, and neighborhood churches, this era signaled dramatic transformations in how people accessed basic resources. Through an absorption of this work previously done informally--into what has been called "the non-profit industrial complex," much of the political potency was stifled out of groups aiming to combine service and politics, as their work would come to be watched and, in many cases, contracted out by the governments.⁸

Composition: Social Networking As Organizing

One must also consider contemporary organizing tendencies that, combined with the aforementioned state disruptions, contribute to our collective marginalization: heavy reliance on rhetoric over strategy.

Today online social-networking is considered sufficient as a form of organizing and solidarity. As a result of being strapped for resources, we organize' via commodified forms of social networking such as online media platforms like Friendster, Myspace and Facebook. This 'narrowcasting' is more affordable, but if we really care about the ideas we are engaging in, then we

can find a way to saturate the visual landscape with our messages and visions. This will provide points of entry for those who are compelled by the ideas but outside of the narrowcast distribution systems.

While many instances of work towards and demands for solidarity are vacuous, there are just as many that really do challenge us to consider what it means to be in solidarity with one another. It is over-reliance on rhetoric as the overarching definition of the practice of solidarity that obscures and hinders new insights into the concept's meaning. In this confusing landscape of infinite online networking potential concurrent with a fragmented social reality, it is an imperative challenge to consider how we can find meaningful community and solidarity to support our long-term Work.

Re-Composition: A Different "We"?

In its nearly five years of existence, AREA's impact is as difficult to assess as much of our work. We have created a methodology for roving the city and attempting to be city-wide in our approach. Nearly all of our events have taken place in unique locations, creating a process of discovery and celebration that shows people the special hubs of culture and politics in the city that they might not have otherwise known about. The same practice takes place in our publication, with an ongoing effort to bring new people into the project as authors or interview subjects -- oftentimes people with lots to say, but without very much experience expressing what they outside of the constraints of fifteen-second media blips or the fluffy language of grant applications.

While there has undoubtedly been some apprehension on the part of groups and organizations to contribute to the publication or participate in events, our slow-building process of demonstrated patience and commitment has convinced people from most sectors of our relevance. The first two years were certainly more reliant on the informal social networks of the key organizers, while in years since, contributions from people who had previously not engaged with us have increased significantly. We have certainly struggled to find ongoing engagement with people, especially more professionalized activists as well as organizers of color, despite our occasional successes in bringing them to the table. Some groups confused by our non-explicit ideological approach have still found value in our potential to convene unexpected and diverse collaborators. A Marxist reading group, the Chicago Political Workshop, even went so far as to propose that they take the eclectic contributions of the eighth issue of AREA Chicago and write an "afterword" that responded to the texts and made proposals for how greater coherence could be cultivated between the diverse and divergent practices. This was an instance of integrating critique into the project itself in a constructive manner, putting the critique and the objects of critique the practices discussed in our publication -- in direct conversation with each other. The group has since developed at reading group inspired by AREA, which illustrates one of our objectives, to inspire critical self-education while not necessarily having to own or control all of the outcomes of our work.

Over the years, we have successfully illustrated and documented the existing and potential networks of our city, creating a common ground for anarchist farmers, social justice educators, hard-line Marxist academics, teenage slam poets, socially-engaged artists, social workers, and more. The process we now have to embark on is to move that network into a new phase of cohesion. We cannot just celebrate our differences by laying them out on the page, or by staging events that bring disparate voices together in symbolic unity. Our networks must move into a phase of community, a new "we," in order to forge the trust, understanding, and commitment that will move us to a better world.

Notes

1. The AREA Chicago database can be found online at [HTT://AREACHICAGO.com/P/AUTHORS](http://AREACHICAGO.com/P/AUTHORS) (accessed January 29, 2010).
2. John Grimmond, "A Success Story," *The Economist*, March 16, 2006.
3. Pauline Lipman, "Whose City is it Anyway?" in AREA 1, "Private Parties and Public Service" 2005, available online at [HTTP://LEARNINGSITE.INFO/NeoThrashing.PDF](http://LEARNINGSITE.INFO/NeoThrashing.PDF) (accessed January 29, 2010).
4. Nancy Thomas, "Looking For Greens," in AREA 2, "After Spring Comes Winter -- A Look at Local Food Systems" 2006, available online at [HTTP://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/ISSUE-2/LOOKING-FOR-GREENS](http://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/ISSUE-2/LOOKING-FOR-GREENS) (accessed January 29, 2010).
5. Julien Ball, "The \$7 Million Dollar Whitewash," in AREA 4, "No Justice, No Peace," 2007, available online at [HTTP://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/ISSUE-4/SEVEN-MILLION-DOLLAR-WHITE-WASH](http://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/ISSUE-4/SEVEN-MILLION-DOLLAR-WHITE-WASH) (accessed January 29, 2010).
6. Jesse Mumm, "City Interview about What Has Changed and What Has Stayed The Same," in AREA 6, "City As Lab," available online at [HTTP://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/CITY-AS-LAB/CITYWIDE-INTERVIEW](http://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/CITY-AS-LAB/CITYWIDE-INTERVIEW) (accessed January 29, 2010).
7. Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner, Nik Theodore, "City as Policy Lab," in AREA 6, "City As Lab," available online at [HTTP://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/CITY-AS-INTERVIEW/CITY-POLICY-LAB](http://AREACHICAGO.COM/P/ISSUES/CITY-AS-INTERVIEW/CITY-POLICY-LAB) (accessed January 29, 2010).
8. The notion of the "non-profit industrial complex" is explored in: INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (eds.),

The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (Boston: South End Press, 2007).