Conventionally, analysts of social change perceive organizing initiatives in binary terms: projects are seen as being either top-down or bottom-up; local culture is seen as being either modern or traditional. Challenging this restrictive dualism, this important book argues that social change emerges in a non-linear, circuitous, and dialectic process of struggle. In support of their approach, the authors:

- identify four dialectic tensions as being central to the process of organizing for social change: control and emancipation, oppression and empowerment, dissemination and dialogue, and fragmentation and unity;
- argue for a dialectic approach which acknowledges that contradictory tensions can and do co-exist (for example, a project can control beneficiaries with tough conditionalities even as it emancipates them); and
- draw upon case studies set in various contexts—social justice, academic, corporate, artistic, and others—from both developing and developed countries.

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