

LESSONS FROM THE FRIENDSHIP OF JACQUES MARITAIN WITH SAUL ALINSKY

C.J. Wolfe

Claremont Graduate University

This essay looks into the paradoxical friendship of Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher, and Saul Alinsky, a radical community organizer. Commentators Bernard Doering and Charles Curran have used the fact of this friendship to draw the erroneous conclusion that Maritain approved of Alinsky's philosophy. However, a closer look at their respective writings shows that Maritain and Alinsky retained profound disagreements on basic philosophical issues. Particular attention is paid to Maritain's letter in response to Alinsky's Rules for Radicals, in which Maritain raised objections to many of Alinsky's ideas. Thus, Maritain did not compromise his Christian worldview.

Introduction

Saul Alinsky was a man full of surprises. The famous social activist from Chicago was renowned for the practical jokes and crass humor he would employ to shame and coerce communities into giving money to minorities. His ruthless methods in Chicago and across the country made his Industrial Areas Foundation an organization feared by local governments and businesses, and he taught many others his methods through his books and the Training Institute for Organizers. For these reasons, he is considered to be the “godfather of community organizing” to this day.

One fact about Alinsky's life should be particularly surprising for American Catholics: Alinsky was close friends with the prominent Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain. On the surface, Maritain was the opposite of Alinsky, but neither man allowed apparent differences to stand in the way of what turned out to be a thirty-year friendship. Maritain's personality was gentle and understanding, Alinsky's was brash and irreverent, but both had a courage and practicality that they admired in each other.

They met in the early 1940s (the exact date is unknown), after Maritain emigrated from France, through their mutual friend George Shuster. Shuster was an editor of the lay-run Catholic magazine, *Commonweal*, and a board member of Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation. Alinsky and Maritain apparently struck up a great conversation when they met, and Alinsky followed up the exchange with

a letter asking Maritain for an autographed photo of himself. Maritain sent the photo along with words of encouragement for Alinsky's projects, particularly the book that he was writing, *Reveille for Radicals*. In his next letter, Alinsky wrote that Maritain should "always look upon me as a devoted friend,"¹ and indeed they were friends from then on.

In the next few years the two visited often and discussed issues of social justice with their friends, Msgr. John Egan and Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago. When Maritain moved to Rome in 1945 to serve as French Ambassador to the Holy See, he continued to write Alinsky letters, mainly pertaining to *Reveille for Radicals*, which became a bestseller. The other topic the two discussed while Maritain was in Rome was the terrible drowning accident that took the life of Alinsky's first wife Helene. Maritain moved back to America in 1948 to take a professorship at Princeton, and the two friends visited and wrote each other often. This continued until the death of Maritain's wife, Raissa, in 1960, which was a turning point in his life. Alinsky wrote Maritain expressing his sincere regrets, but the effect of Raissa's loss was such that Maritain fled public life to live in a monastery in France run by the Little Brothers of the Poor. Maritain and Alinsky corresponded sporadically until Alinsky's death in 1972, and Maritain died not long afterward in 1973.

Maritain and Alinsky's correspondence was published in a collection of 74 letters edited by Bernard Doering, who aptly titled it *The Philosopher and the Provocateur* (1994). Doering, Professor of French at the University of Notre Dame, tracked down the various letters from Alinsky and Maritain's papers and figured out their chronology. Doering is the leading scholar on the Maritain-Alinsky friendship and has written on the subject in several places. The majority of Doering's writing is sound historical information.

However, some of Doering's editorial commentary distorts the amount of agreement between Alinsky and Maritain on deep philosophical issues. Doering's view is that there is almost no substantive difference between the two men with regard to ethics and politics. In Doering's defense, there are several points of agreement between their views. It is true, as Doering writes, that, "In the practical functioning of Alinsky's community organizations and neighborhood councils Maritain found a near-perfect embodiment of those subsidiary, mediating structures he had called for in *Integral Humanism*."² Maritain did think that Alinsky's community organizations were doing great work for the inner-city poor of America. He also approved of Alinsky's radical methods as outlined in *Reveille for Radicals*. But where Maritain did not agree with Alinsky was on the philosophical principles that undergirded

and motivated the methods expressed in the later book, *Rules for Radicals*. Doering's interpretation suggests that Maritain agreed with these principles, but that is not correct.

In an essay titled "Maritain and America- Friendships" (1987), Doering admits that Maritain was "somewhat disturbed by Alinsky's praise of self-contradiction" in *Rules for Radicals*.³ The point that Doering misses is that Maritain was not disturbed so much by Alinsky's "self-contradiction" as by his moral relativism. Doering's essay downplays this moral disagreement by making it appear to be a disagreement over consistency. In his introduction to *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, Doering argues that "for both Maritain and Alinsky, the relation between means and ends determines the morality of any revolution."⁴ That is true of Maritain, but in *Rules for Radicals* Alinsky claimed that good ends justified the use of corrupt means. Doering admits that Maritain expressed "fear" that Alinsky's discussion of means would be subject to "misinterpretation,"⁵ but ignores the fact that Maritain directly disagreed with Alinsky on this important topic.

Another mistake that Doering committed in his commentary was expressing approval for Charles Curran's interpretation of the Alinsky-Maritain friendship, which is clearly wrong. Charles Curran, a Catholic priest and theologian who was disciplined by the Vatican in 1986 because of his dissent from Church teaching, wrote on the Alinsky-Maritain connection in his 1985 book, *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics*. In it, Curran uses the relationship between Alinsky and Jacques Maritain as evidence that the Catholic understanding of the political order is compatible with Alinsky's:

Intrinsic evidence thus shows that Alinsky's basic theory is in accord with the Catholic understanding of the political order. In addition, what might be called external evidence also supports this basic compatibility. I refer here above all to the relationship between Alinsky and Jacques Maritain, the most famous Catholic philosopher in the Thomistic tradition in the twentieth century.⁶

Curran specifically bases this claim on an anachronism, writing that Maritain's chapter on means in his 1951 book *Man and the State* gives "implicit approval, at least in general, to Alinsky's approach in this area." However, Curran's "implicit approval" claim is impossible since Alinsky did not publish *Rules for Radicals* until 1971. In a non-committal statement Curran posits, "I for one would not agree with all that Alinsky writes in his chapter on means and ends in *Rules*, but the disagreements

are few. Again one must remember that Alinsky is not writing primarily for ethicists or philosophers.”⁷ Relativism of Alinsky’s type has effects not only on politics but also on ethics and philosophy, but Curran turns a blind eye these implications. The fact remains that Alinsky’s writings on means contradicts the Catholic moral tradition on the matter, and whatever “external evidence” Curran gleans from the fact of Maritain’s friendship is baseless. Maritain’s philosophy of means was completely different than Alinsky’s.

In truth, a vast difference exists between Maritain’s moral, Christian approach to means and the amoral approach to means that Alinsky espoused in *Rules for Radicals* (1971). This difference has been downplayed by Doering and Curran, but it is real. The last known letter we have between the two friends on September 19, 1971 was Maritain’s direct critique of *Rules for Radicals*. That letter will be examined in light of Alinsky and Maritain’s individual writings on this topic.

Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*

In a letter written on March 1st, 1957, Saul Alinsky gave Jacques Maritain some editorial advice on the manuscript of his book, *Reflections on America*. At one point, Alinsky chided Maritain for a word choice, saying: “The fact that I constantly use simple, pithy gutter language is no excuse for you using it. After all, our positions are a bit different!”⁸ Just how different Maritain and Alinsky’s positions were appears most starkly in *Rules for Radicals* (1971), Alinsky’s last and best-known book. Alinsky’s earlier *Reveille for Radicals* (1946), was also considered revolutionary when it was published, but for different reasons than was *Rules for Radicals*. *Reveille* describes Alinsky’s methods of community organizing without going into much detail about the philosophical principles guiding those actions. *Rules*, in contrast, details his own motivations and those of other organizers, which might best be characterized as *libido dominandi*. In that book Alinsky wrote that “The organizer is in a true sense reaching for the highest level for which man can reach—to create, to be a ‘great creator,’ to play God” (61).⁹

From their correspondence, Maritain apparently thought Alinsky had different motivations than the ones espoused in *Rules*. On several occasions, Maritain wrote Alinsky praising him for his love of all men, a compliment that is not consistent with Alinsky’s motivations in *Rules*. Another controversial element of *Rules* is Alinsky’s clear statement about the nearly total depravity of human nature. Alinsky wrote that “life is a corrupting process from the time a child learns to

play his mother off against his father in the politics of when to go to bed” (25). In their earlier correspondence Maritain had assumed that Alinsky shared his views about the goodness of humanity. It is clear that either Alinsky changed his views in the interlude between *Reveille* and *Rules*, or Maritain did not fully understand his friend’s philosophy. Alinsky’s earlier book contained appeals to social justice that Christians could accept, but Alinsky denies any concept of justice in his later book. *Rules* is a clearly Machiavellian book, and should be thought of in those terms.

Saul Alinsky knew when he wrote *Rules* that the book would be interpreted as Machiavellian; he wrote Maritain that his publisher, Random House, wanted to call the book “*The Poor Man’s Machiavelli*.”¹⁰ In the same letter Alinsky observes that “it will be a most controversial book, but I have never done anything in my life which has not been controversial.” Some of the shocking lines from *Rules*—such as the often quoted dedication to Lucifer, the “first radical”—were likely intended merely for their rhetorical shock value, and are not constitutive parts of Alinsky’s philosophy. Lucifer is not even mentioned for the remainder of the book, so it is unlikely that the dedication was anything more than a jest. An important aspect of Alinsky’s method was, after all, to shock average Americans by zany antics and rhetoric, thereby making them pay attention to social problems. However, *Rules* contains some other disturbing lines that *were* intended seriously, and are in direct opposition to a Christian worldview.

Comparison of lines from Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* and Machiavelli’s *Prince* reveals a strong connection between the two books. Machiavelli espoused the following premises: “look to the end, the means will always be judged honorable” (*The Prince*, XV), “it is better to be feared than loved” (*The Prince*, XVIII), “a man who wants to make a profession of good must come to ruin among so many who are not good” (*The Prince*, XV). In short, Machiavelli claimed that the ends justify the means, fear is more powerful than love, and that good guys always finish last. For all of these Machiavellian premises, a similar premise can be found in Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*. Alinsky wrote: “to say corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles. The real arena is corrupt and bloody” (*Rules for Radicals*, 24), “love is a human frailty the people mistrust. It is a sad fact of life that power and fear are the fountainheads of faith” (99), and “This is the low road to morality. There is no other” (23). Saul Alinsky’s most important contribution to community organizing was to recognize that “in the arena of action a threat or a crisis becomes almost a precondition to communication” (*Rules*, 89); or, as Rahm Emanuel would say, “Never let a crisis go to waste.” The overall aim of both

Machiavelli and Alinsky seems to be to “strike and beat down” fortune through skilled action (*The Prince*, XXV), since it is “better to die on your feet rather than live on your knees” (*Rules*, 3). Like Machiavelli, many of Alinsky’s arguments in *Rules for Radicals* have a certain hidden appeal to justice that make them attractive, but ultimately their moral relativism and low view of human life make them untenable for Christian philosophers such as Jacques Maritain.

Jacques Maritain’s Critique of Machiavelli

Jacques Maritain is one of the few commentators on Machiavelli who directly engages and delivers persuasive arguments against his claims. Maritain wrote at least two statements on this topic; one can be found in *Man and the State* and the other is an essay called “The End of Machiavellianism.” These texts reveal that throughout his entire career, Maritain adhered to a Christian view directly antithetical to the Machiavellian precepts of Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*. Maritain’s critiques of Machiavelli should be kept in mind when reading Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*.

Maritain argues that Machiavellianism is a purely technical rationalization of the choices made in public life.¹¹ A different way of rationalizing political life is a moral rationalization, to which Maritain adheres. A technical rationalization puts the political decision of a “prince” at a supramoral level, apart from good and evil. The means used in politics are only submitted to rules of production as opposed to rules of ethics, and so they are considered amoral. Alinsky espouses this same dismissal of morality for technical rationalization when he says in *Rules* that “morality is rhetorical rationale for expedient action and self-interest” (13). Maritain acknowledges that there are two pieces of evidence which might compel some to accept the Machiavellian position: first, the possible historical fact that a prince gains more victories by employing evil means, and second, the idea that a justice-respecting nation is doomed to lose to nations that are willing to “fight dirty.” Maritain replies to these objections by claiming that in reality Machiavelli is wrong, and that there are historical examples of nations with brains and strength acting out of justice. In *Man and the State*, Maritain cites as an example the recent defeat of Nazi Germany by allied forces in World War II. He writes, “the power of nations struggling for freedom can be even greater than that of nations struggling for enslavement.”¹² The strength of democracies in particular depends on justice, since democracies are made up of free men and not slaves. The other reply that Maritain addresses to the Machiavellian position is that

there is a natural tendency of evil nations to destroy themselves, because of the internal human yearning for justice that external technical force cannot remove.¹³

At the same time as he denies Machiavellianism, Maritain also denies hypermoralism. Hypermoralism is the failure of a leader to take a just action due to the fear that it might taint his conscience.¹⁴ Maritain acknowledges that the use of force is sometimes necessary, because evil is a fact of life. It is necessary sometimes for a leader to choose the lesser of evil choices, such as the decision in World War II to fight and kill German soldiers in order to save Europe. But Maritain's denial of hypermoralism does not commit him to an amoralist Machiavellian concept of means, because leaders who make prudential decisions still have some weight of guilt on their consciences and still think about the ethics of their decision.

So, do ends then justify the means for Maritain? Only in extremely limited circumstances in which leaders are required to make hard choices to use measures that they would not use normally. These exceptional situations do not eliminate the normal morality that leaders ought to follow; they are exceptions, and are still driven by principles of morality. Some corrupt measures should never be used, specifically those that undermine the mission of peace and justice of a nation. Maritain in fact would agree that "corrupt means corrupt the ends," the position that Alinsky ridiculed in *Rules for Radicals*. Maritain's realistic view of politics holds that a regime ought to aim at justice (*pace* the Machiavellians) and also ought not to demand perfect justice in this life (*pace* the hypermoralists).

Jacques Maritain's Critique of *Rules for Radicals*

Jacques Maritain disagreed with his friend Saul Alinsky's book, *Rules for Radicals*, and this is consistent with his earlier philosophical criticisms of Machiavelli. Maritain wrote a letter from Kolbsheim in 1971, responding to Alinsky's book, despite the fact that he was very ill. Doering comments that it was "a surprisingly long letter, considering his condition," and that "he was under the continual care of doctors who tried to limit his activities."¹⁵ To correct someone when he is wrong is the duty of a friend; Jacques Maritain sought to do this to the best of his ability with his friend Saul.

In his usual way, Maritain opened the letter by praising Alinsky for his good work in alleviating the plight of the poor. Maritain particularly appreciated the humor of Alinsky's book and his plan to get middle class people to "develop a sense of and a will for the common

good.”¹⁶ After this paragraph, Maritain proceeded to some criticisms: “now let me point out a few philosophical views with which your book had not to be explicitly concerned.” This sentence suggests that Maritain had expected Alinsky’s book to simply be an update on the methods used in *Reveille*, not the Machiavellian discussion of human nature that he found in *Rules*. The next sentences of Maritain’s letter are a bit complicated, and require some unpacking:

I think you detest Hegel as much as I do. And I am aware of the fact that your praise of self-contradiction has nothing to do with Hegel. Seeking one’s own intellectual liberation in an infinite proliferation of antinomies is madness on the level of philosophical thought. But on the level of pure action a kind of boldness in practical self-contradiction is probably, as you suggest, the sign of a healthy and fecund mind. Yet it makes me jumpy.¹⁷

The “proliferation of antinomies” Maritain refers to could apply to numerous passages in *Rules for Radicals*. One is the section where Alinsky writes that “an organizer knows that life is a sea of changing desires, changing elements, of relativity and uncertainty.”¹⁸ In his books Maritain also discussed the connection between Machiavellian politics and Hegelian philosophy. James Schall wrote that Maritain saw Machiavellianism as a political philosophy that “eventually leads to a form of Hegelianism that becomes a metaphysics. That is, it turns into an explanation of what is and what must be, a form of what-is-done must be what-is-rightly-done.”¹⁹ Where there are deep antinomies in philosophy, there is no rational basis for morality, and Maritain rightly observed that such views are madness.

In the next paragraph, Maritain told Alinsky that he “appears to me as an incurable idealist... who, at the same time, desperately busies himself in playing the part of the cynic.” In essence, Maritain is trying to convince Alinsky that he knows better than to make some of the claims he did. The claims Maritain particularly disliked were: “we are motivated by self-interest but determined to disguise it” and “in war the end justifies almost any means.” Maritain asked whether war justifies “torture? Indiscriminate bombing? Annihilation of cities? OK for Hitler and the like?” The last is an especially poignant criticism, considering that both men despised Nazism.

Maritain pointed out two other truths for Alinsky to consider, a philosophic truth and a truth of human experience. The philosophic truth is that “on the moral level, self-defense is not a murder or assassination,

it's an act of justice, which is morally good... it seems to me that in your book the philosophical truth, essential as it may be, is hardly emphasized or taken into consideration." Maritain referenced a passage where Alinsky uses killing in self-defense as evidence to show that justice does not exist according to nature (*Rules*, 34). This philosophical truth from Maritain undoes many of Alinsky's arguments for moral expediency. The part that Alinsky gets right, in Maritain's view, is the truth of human experience, that "moral justifications and moral pretexts are, in an immense number of cases, but a mask used to hide merely egoistic motivations." This truth of experience does not, however, eliminate the philosophical truth that justice exists. Maritain tells Alinsky that "this second truth you see with such keenness, and you emphasize it so strongly that it seems sometimes to be the only one compatible with a realistic approach," however, "the fact is that nothing has ever been accomplished for justice in the world if not by men burning with real love."²⁰

These are the errors of Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals*, according to Jacques Maritain.

The Value of Their Friendship

The lasting value of Jacques Maritain's friendship with Saul Alinsky should not be measured purely by their philosophical differences. The discussion of *Rules for Radicals* was one of their few disagreements, and they shared insights and advice on many other things. There is much evidence to suggest that their friendship was a great blessing to both men, affecting them in a positive way.

In particular, their friendship was important during times of loss, both when Alinsky's wife Helene died in a swimming accident and when Maritain's wife Raissa died of old age. Alinsky was shaken to the core when he lost Helene, but the words of Maritain consoled him. In a letter sent to Alinsky on October 4, 1947, roughly a month after the accident, Maritain advised him to work and sacrifice his life for God's people, just as Helene had sacrificed her life to save two drowning children. Alinsky was moved by the letter, saying he "wept" over it, and placed it "in a special folder where I can always look at it."²¹ Many years later, Alinsky still recognized the impact Maritain's letter had had on him. Alinsky wrote a fascinating paragraph to Maritain about this on May 15, 1962:

As you know (and you are one of the very few who does know it) the major change within me which resulted from Helene's

death was that I learned to accept emotionally my own mortality... once having accepted this fact, most of the values of life such as status, money and other forms of materialism ceased having any worth... In essence, what I am trying to say is that if one takes the last line of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, “and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life,” and omit[s] the word “eternal” (as you know, I have never been convinced of the evidence pro and con and am still searching) then the words reading “and it is in dying that we are born to life” become those of profound wisdom, for once you accept your own death, then you are suddenly free to live; completely emancipated from the shackles of values and fears of the world about us. I strongly believe that this is one of the points which you hoped for and expressed in your wonderful letter to me which you sent at the time of Helene’s death. The other hope which you strongly wrote about is one which, as I indicated, I am still in search of and can only find by myself.²²

The “other hope” Alinsky mentions was undoubtedly Maritain’s hope that he would find faith in God and His mercy. Alinsky’s reflection on death and the passing nature of material goods is reminiscent of the priest in the book of Ecclesiastes shouting, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” Certainly some aspects of Alinsky’s life fit with this outlook.

In the final analysis, Jacques Maritain should be praised for his friendship with Saul Alinsky and for not compromising his Christian philosophical outlook. Bernard Doering and Charles Curran’s commentary sought to downplay the differences between the two friends, but it is important to remember them. From the evidence provided here, it is fair to conclude that Maritain retained disagreements with Alinsky, but still attempted to “speak the truth in love”²³ to him as friend. Maritain’s letter responding to *Rules for Radicals* in essence says, “You know better than that, Saul.” Taking this approach treats people who are in error not as enemies to be hated, but as confused, good people.

Notes

1. Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 4.
2. *Ibid.*, xxvii.
3. Bernard Doering, "Maritain and America-Friendships," in *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, eds. Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), 54.
4. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
5. *Ibid.*, xxv.
6. Charles Curran, *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 168.
7. *Ibid.*, 170.
8. Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 71.
9. See also *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 5. In an early letter, Alinsky told Maritain that "There are people I not only do not love but hate with a cold fury that would stop at nothing. I hate people who act unjustly and cause many to suffer. I become violently angry when I see misery and am filled with a bitter vindictiveness toward those responsible. That is not good and I know it. I know just as well that I shall continue to feel and act as I have." It appears that Alinsky's hatred got the better of him when he wrote *Rules*.
10. *Ibid.*, 89.
11. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 56.
12. *Ibid.*, 60.
13. *Ibid.*, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, 62.
15. Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 113.
16. *Ibid.*, 110.
17. *Ibid.*, 110.
18. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: a Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), 107.
20. James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: the Philosopher in Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 4.
21. Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The*

Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 112.

22. *Ibid.*, 35.

23. *Ibid.*, 90.

24. Ephesians 4:15.