

# MERE TOLERANCE IS NOT ENOUGH

*Excerpts from [Reveille for Radicals](#) by Saul Alinsky*

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The American people were, in the beginning, Revolutionaries and Tories. The American people ever since have been Revolutionaries and Tories regardless of the labels of the passed and present. Regardless of whether they were Federalists, Democrat-Republicans, Whigs, Know-Nothings, Free Soilers, Unionists or Confederates, Populists, Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Communists, or Progressives. They have been and are profiteers and patriots. They have been and are conservatives, liberals, and radicals.

The class of radicals, conservatives, and liberals which makes up America's political history opens the door to the most fundamental question of what is America? How do the people of America feel? It is in the feeling that the real story of America is written. There were and are a number of Americans -- few, to be sure -- filled with deep feeling for people. They know that people are the stuff that makes up the dream of democracy. These few were and are the American radicals and the only way that we can understand the American radicals is to understand what we mean by this feeling for and with people. Psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and other learned students call this feeling "identification" and have elaborate and complicated explanations about what it means. For our purposes it boils down to the simple question, How do you feel about people?

Do you like people? Most people claim that they like people with, of course, a "few exceptions." When the exceptions are added together it becomes clear that they include a vast majority of the people. It becomes equally clear that most people like just a few people, there kind of people, and either do not actively care for or actively dislike most of the "other" people.

You are white, native-born, and Protestant. Do you like people? You like your family, your friends, some of your business associates (not too many of them), and some of your neighbors. Do you like Catholics, Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, Mexicans, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and Chinese? Do you regard them with the warm feeling of fellow human beings or with a cold contempt symbolized in Papists, Micks, Wops, Kikes, Hunkies, Greasers, Niggers, Spics, and Chinks? If you are one of those people who think of people in these derogatory terms, then you don't like people.

You may object to this and say that you do not fall into this classification. You don't call people by such names. You are broad-minded and respect other peoples if they know their place -- and that place is not close to your own affections. You feel that you are really very tolerant. The chances are that you are an excellent representative of the great American class of Mr. But. Haven't you met Mr. But? Sure you have, You have met him downtown at civic lunches. You have met him at Community Fund meetings, at housing conferences, at political rallies, and most likely he has greeted you every morning from the mirror in your bathroom. Mr. But is the man who is broad-minded, sensible practical, and proud of his christianity. You have heard him talk many times, just as you have heard yourself talk many times. What does he say? Listen to the great American, Mr. But:

"Now nobody can say that I'm not a friend of the Mexicans or that I am prejudiced, BUT ---"

"Nobody can say that I'm anti-Semitic. Why, some of my best friends are Jews, BUT ---"

"Surely nobody can think of me as a reactionary, BUT ---"

"I don't think anyone in this room feels more sympathetic toward the Negroes than I do. I've always had a number of them working for me, BUT ---"

"It's perfectly all right for these people to have equal opportunities for work, and after all we are all Americans aren't we? BUT ---"

"Anybody knows that I would be the first to fight against this injustice, BUT ---"

"Labor Unions are all right, BUT ---"

"Sure, I say that all Americans should have the right to live any place they want to regardless of race, color, or creed, BUT ---"

You are very probably a typical Mr. But. You make "tolerant" jokes behind the backs of your fellow Americans, about their clothes, complexions, speech, manners, and names. You regard yourself as tolerant, and in that one adjective you most fittingly describe yourself. You really don't like people, you tolerate them. You are very tolerant, Mr. But. You leave a luncheon meeting at which you sat next to a Negro and talked with him (and you tell your friends about it for months to come). You are so flushed and filled with your own goodness that if the thought could father the deed you would take flight on your new angelic wings...

There were those few, and there will be more, who really liked people, loved people -- all people. They were the human torches setting aflame the hearts of men so that they passionately fought for the rights of their fellow men, all men. They were hated, feared, and branded as radicals. They wore the epithet of radical as a badge of honor. They fought for the right of men to govern themselves, for the right of men to walk erect as free men and not grovel before kings, for the Bill of Rights, for the abolition of slavery, for public education. And for everything decent and worthwhile. They loved men and fought for them. Their neighbors' misery is their misery. They acted as they believed.

So you are an Irish Catholic? The one who suffers from the white, native-born Protestant, Mr. But. You are the one who accuses him of prejudice! Let's take a good look at you. Do you like people? Of course you do. But what about Protestants? What about Jews? What about Negroes and Chinese? What about your fellow Catholics -- Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others? What about your fellow Irish? How many of you look down on them as inferior to yourselves? Don't you call your own illiterate and poor "Shanty Irish"? How many of your own frustrations how you rationalized by blaming it on "Catholic" prejudice? Is the Catholic Church so very important in your life because it represents a spiritual sanctuary or because it's a political power for jobs and material success. There are a few of you that have gone out to battle against narrow nationalism, anti-Semitism, Jim Crow, and for the bettering of the economic conditions of all mankind. Those few did this because they were devoted to the welfare of all of their fellow man. To them Catholicism was a living everyday faith and way of life. They were real Catholics in spite of the disapproval of parts of the formal church. There were your radicals. They are your proud heritage.

So you are a Jew. Maybe you're one of the few living on Park Avenue, or in the upper 60s. You bitterly resent anti-Semitism and regard prejudiced people as uncivilized, irreligious, and definitely un-American. Let's take a look at you. How do you feel about the frock-coated Jews in Williamsburg section of Brooklyn? You don't like them. You think of them as loud, uncouth, and dirty. You don't like the way they smile or the way they talk. You say it is bad for the Jews. Maybe you are a Spanish Jew and you look down on the German Jew, or you are a German Jew and you look down with utter contempt upon the Russian and Polish Jew. Maybe you're so intent on social prestige, becoming accepted in the best clubs, living in the more exclusive residential sections, fraternizing with so-called best people, that you reject all Jews. On the other hand, many of you may be fighting valiantly the prejudice in parts of the American system that is centred against you and your fellow Jews. While you are fighting are you thinking of the same un-American hatred that is aimed at Negroes, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and all other minorities? If you think only of yourself, then in the last analysis you too are a Mr. and Mrs. But. There are very few of you, just as there are very few of the Protestants and Catholics, who really like people -- the few who fought on the picket line, through

the printed page, before the crumbling walls of Madrid, and in the South against the lynch mobs and for the sharecroppers. They fight for all. They, as radicals, resent injustice to any man. Many Jews have pointed out that the radicals from their group are few and far between. That is true. It's as true as it is for any other group. For after all, the people who really like their fellow men are few and far between.

So you're a Negro. You're a Negro and you deeply resent the hypocrisy and the bigotry of the whites. You hate Jim Crow with all your heart. You live in a prison of prejudice. Your home is in the worst section of the city. You don't have an equal chance for a job. You go to college and when you graduate you're given a job as a doorman. You're barred from the best jobs and the house next door, and you live in just plain unadulterated hell. Your life is still what one little Negro schoolgirl wrote when asked by the teacher to write an essay on punishment for Hitler: "Dress him up in a black skin and make him live in the United States." You have white friends who pride themselves on not being prejudiced. They meet with you at various civic affairs, pat you on the back, and underneath it all still hold you off at arm's length and regard you as a Negro. They talk in terms of patience and say that there will come a time in the mystical future when we will all sit together and eat pie in the sky. It's the difference between Northern Jim Crow and his Southern brother. One may be more subtle but every bit as cruel. They're both part of the same iniquitous family. You resent all that, but how do you reconcile fighting against prejudice and being prejudiced? You are predominantly protestants. How do you feel about Jews? How do you feel about Catholics? How do you feel about your own people? You have a gradation of color wear light-skinned people feel superior to dark-skinned. You refer to one another in anger with the same hateful adjectives you resent when they are used by whites. Many of your so-called leaders are servile to white interests. When some of your own have fought for decency, dignity, equality, and every principle embodied in the revolutionary rites of America, some of you have stamped him a radical. Because that fighter incurs the displeasure of the ruling whites, some of you have become apprehensive of white retribution and so you have turned on him with terrible bitterness and refused to follow. You don't like people any more than do those who don't like you. You too have your share of Mr. But's.

So you're a Pole. You hate being called a Hunkie. You resent being assigned menial jobs -- common labour. You resent being looked down upon as slow-witted -- good only for manual work and living across the tracks. You denounce these prejudices as un-American and undemocratic. How do you feel about people in your Catholicism to the extent that you want your own special churches. You resent the Irish domination in churches and politics and hate the Irish for it. How do you feel about Jews? Many of you hate them with an unparalleled bitterness. That hatred is illustrated in many little sayings. You have a proverb that "when a Pole has no money he comes to church and when he does he goes to the Jews". You say it with the same feeling that you say he goes to the devil. Many of you hate Negroes too, just as deeply. You too how had your great radicals, those few who really liked all people. Those who fought the battles of others -- only they never thought in terms of "others"; they couldn't because they were real radicals.

So you're a Mexican. You are segregated and subjected to many of the indignities of the Negro. You are set apart and looked down upon. You resent this. But how do you feel about people? Many of your Mexican leaders in Southern California resisted the efforts of the Negroes to unite in a common bond against segregation. They said that the Negroes were trying to pull them down to their level. They take pleasure in referring to themselves as Spanish-Americans, and bitterly resent the feeling on the part of North Americans that Mexicans are not "white." From one corner of their mouths they protest segregation and discrimination and argue forthrightly for justice and equality, and from the other corner they condemn the Negro as an inferior race. Those Mexicans who tried to organize against the destructive American forces that are responsible for inequality of opportunity, economic insecurity, and lack of educational opportunities have been hated as radicals and many of the respectable Mexican leaders, including the religious leaders, have denounced them as radicals. These radicals have fought for union with all other minority groups; as a matter of fact, with all peoples. They have fought because they like people, all people...

America's radicals are to be found wherever and whenever America moves close to the fulfillment of its democratic dream. Whenever America's hearts are breaking, there American radicals were and are. America was begun by its radicals. America was built by its radicals. The hope and future of America lies with its radicals.

What is the American radical? The radical is that unique person to whom the common good is the greatest personal value. He is that person who genuinely and completely believes in mankind. The radical is so completely identified with mankind that he personally shares the pain, the injustices, and the sufferings of all his fellow men.

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#### NOTES:

- For the purposes of reviewing and editing, the original text has been modified to purposely include spelling and grammatical errors. For this we apologize to the author, BUT understand that the process of review and editing is a learning exercise.
  - First published in 1946, the book from which this excerpt is taken has views that may be very different from those of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Take this into account in your review process.
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