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Essay: Radical Saul Alinsky: Prophet of Power to the People

Radical Saul Alinsky: Prophet of Power

SAUL ALINSKY has possibly antagonized more people—regardless of race, color or creed—than any other living American. From his point of view, that adds up to an eminently successful career: his aim in life is to make people mad enough to fight for their own interests. "The only place you really have consensus is where you have totalitarianism," he says, as he organizes conflict as the only route to true progress. Like Machiavelli, whom he has studied and admires, Alinsky teaches how power may be used. Unlike Machiavelli, his pupil is not the prince but the people.

It is not too much to argue that American democracy is being altered by Alinsky's ideas. In an age of dissolving political labels, he is a radical—but not in the usual sense, and he is certainly a long way removed from New Left extremists. He has instructed white slums and black ghettos in organizing to improve their living and working conditions; he inspired Cesar Chavez's effort to organize California's grape pickers. His strategy was emulated by the Federal Government in its antipoverty and model-cities programs: the poor have been encouraged to participate in measures for their relief instead of just accepting handouts.

A sharing of power, thinks Alinsky, is what democracy is all about. Where power is lacking, so are hope and happiness. Alinsky seeks power for others, not for himself. His goal is to build the kind of organization that can dispense with his services as soon as possible. Nor does he confine his tactics to the traditionally underprivileged. Although he has largely helped the very poor, he has begun to teach members of the alienated middle classes how to use power to combat increasingly burdensome taxes and pollution.

In his view, the end of achieving power justifies a wide range of means. "To get anywhere," Alinsky teaches, "you've got to know how to communicate. With city hall, the language is votes, just as with a corporation it's stock power. This means that they never hear with their ears but only through their rears." He knows how to kick. To force slumlords, corporations or city officials to clean up buildings, provide jobs or stop cheating consumers, he resorts to picketing, boycotts, rent strikes and some imaginative dramatic stunts.

He had garbage dumped on an alderman's driveway to make the point that collections were inadequate in the slums; ghetto rats were ceremoniously deposited on the steps of city hall. If the occasion requires, Alinsky's forces will not refrain from spreading rumors about an antagonist or indulging in something that comes very close to blackmail. "Our organizers," he says, "look for the wrong reasons to get the right things done." He has only contempt for liberals who appeal to the altruism of their opponents: "A liberal is the kind of guy who walks out of a room when the argument turns into a fight."

Help from the Establishment

In order to succeed, Alinsky believes, a community organization must confront or conjure up an enemy of impressive stature. In the early '60s, he was having trouble organizing the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago until the University of Chicago presented itself as a fat target. Planning to tear down part of Woodlawn to make room for an expansion program, the university committed the tactical error of attacking Alinsky as a provocateur. That convinced the suspicious Woodlawn blacks that Alinsky was on their side. When he started organizing the Negro ghetto in Rochester in 1965, Alinsky found another suitable opponent in the Eastman Kodak Co., which refused to deal with Alinsky's organization, FIGHT (Freedom, Independence, God, Honor—Today), thereby enhancing its appeal to Negroes. Ultimately, the company was badgered into providing more jobs for the ghetto unemployed. Says Alinsky: "I can always depend on the Establishment to do the wrong thing at the right time."

Even Alinsky's everyday habits and gestures are intended to demonstrate the uses of power. Once, while addressing students at an Eastern college in the campus chapel, he lit up a cigarette. The college president rose to tell him that smoking was not allowed, whereupon Alinsky started to leave. "No smoking, no speech," he announced. The embarrassed president at once relented: though having made his point, Alinsky refrained from smoking. He upholds the public's right to good service in restaurants; to get attention, he will throw a glass on the floor or bellow insults at the waiter.

When he is not performing, however, Alinsky hardly fits the radical stereotype.

The gruff public harangue gives way to gentle, witty cajolery. The four-letter words that normally shock become almost terms of endearment.

He compulsively seeks out

companionship because he unabashedly likes people—all kinds of people, from waiters and airline stewardesses to journalists and even corporation presidents. Alinsky seems genuinely to enjoy life, as if he had discharged all residue of guilt and resentment in purposeful action. The notorious agitator begins to seem more like a secret philosopher whose model is Socrates rather than Lenin.

Alinsky deliberately cultivates his split personality; he believes that a well-developed case of schizophrenia is essential to successful radicalism. The radical knows in his heart that life is tragic, men are complex, and every course of action involves a choice of evils. Nevertheless, he must act as if he were utterly convinced of the righteousness of his cause. Only by so doing can he rally his supporters and intimidate the opposition. The Founding Fathers, Alinsky points out, were well aware of the benefits that England had bestowed on the colonies. But what impact would the Declaration of Independence have had, if it had given King George credit for his good deeds? Yet once a radical has achieved a position of power, insists Alinsky, he must negotiate on the basis of the world as it is: "Compromise is a noble word that sums up democracy." Alinsky claims to be doing nothing more un-American than following the precepts of the Founding Fathers. In the Federalist papers, James Madison warned against allowing any class or faction to acquire too much power. In his own way, Alinsky is trying to redress the balance of power within contemporary America. If the desire to preserve basic American principles makes one a conservative, then he indeed qualifies. His more boisterous exploits may have endeared him to Yippie Abbie Hoffman, but his efforts to reconstruct a viable society have won the respect of Nixon Aide Pat Moynihan. He surely offers proof—if any is needed—that significant change can be accomplished within the American system.

Alinsky grew up in Chicago, experiencing many of the same frustrations that now embitter the city's blacks. The son of a Jewish tailor from Russia, he burned as a youth with the need to compensate for his own lack of power. "I never thought of walking on the grass," he recalls, "until I saw a sign saying 'Keep off the grass.' Then I would stomp all over it." He studied archaeology at the University of Chicago, but what really excited him was spending a summer helping dissident miners in their revolt against John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers. Later he wrote a biography of Lewis, who became a close friend and mentor. After graduation, he received his first lesson in the realities of power when, as a graduate fellow in criminology, he studied Al Capone's gang. He learned that in the Chicago of the 1930s, crime was the Establishment. "When one of those guys got knocked off, there wasn't any court. Most of the judges were at the funeral, and some were pallbearers."

It was hatred of Hitler that first impelled Alinsky to try his hand at organization. In the so-called Back of the Yards section of Chicago in the late '30s, fascism was making many converts among the jobless, bitterly frustrated slumdweller. "This was not the slum across the tracks," recalls Alinsky. "This was the slum across the tracks from across the tracks." By organizing a series of sitdowns and boycotts, he forced the neighborhood meat packers and slumlords to meet the demands of the community for a better life. Alien ideologies lost their force, and Back of the Yards became the model of a stable neighborhood.

The Yards gave Alinsky a name. The Chicago Democratic machine was upset that he had challenged its iron control of the city, but Publisher Marshall Field and Roman Catholic Bishop Bernard J. Sheil gave him enough backing to set up the Industrial Areas Foundation, an organization that seeks to apply the Alinsky methods to other slums. Operating on a \$150,000-a-year budget, I.A.F. has a basic staff of eleven; other organizers are put on the payroll when the need arises. I.A.F. has gone into Rochester, Buffalo and Kansas City, Mo., and has set up Mexican-American organizations in California. Not all of Alinsky's endeavors have succeeded. In the Chelsea district of New York City and in Kansas City, I.A.F. suffered significant defeats.

Local groups became so obsessed with conflict that they could not agree among themselves and wound up more bitterly divided after Alinsky left than before he came.

Willingness to Surrender

The community-power movement, in fact, has taken a turn not originally envisioned by Alinsky. He has always tried to make sure that demagogues did not get control of his organizations. But by building up such a fierce sense of group solidarity and resentment of the outsider, he may have unwittingly contributed to a new kind of racism. Today, Back of the Yards is under attack for keeping Negroes out; Alinsky threatens to organize the neighborhood all over again. In Rochester, FIGHT became tainted with black racism and whites have been discouraged from joining. In an updated version of his 1946 textbook on organization, *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky wonders how white liberals can believe in the dignity of all races when they are so willing to surrender their own by submitting to outrageous attacks from blacks. "During the trial of Black Panther Leader Huey Newton, many liberals wore buttons reading 'Honkies for Huey!' " he notes. "Can you imagine, if a white civil-rights leader were on trial, that blacks would go about with buttons reading 'Niggers for so-and-so'?"

Alinsky is equally impatient with white student radicals because of their innocence about power. "You never take an action," he says, "without first figuring out the reaction. Periodic mass euphoria around a charismatic leader is not an organization." He feels that Utopian militants are just as much dropouts from society as hippies, because both "dogmatically refuse to begin with the world as it is." He has little faith in the staying power of some of the more belligerent radicals; often they are the first to give up when the going gets rough. "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the champagne cocktail."

Threat of Paranoia

Despite his interest in helping the poor to help themselves, Alinsky believes that no durable reform is possible without the backing of at least a substantial portion of middle-class Americans. Today they are ripe, he feels, for his kind of power-oriented organization. They are squeezed by taxes and inflation, bewildered by the revolt of youth against everything they stand for. "Their fears and frustrations at their helplessness," says Alinsky, "amount to a political paranoia, which can demonize them to turn to the law of survival in the narrowest sense."

One Alinsky proposal to help the middle class seize its share of power is Proxies for People, a group that will solicit proxies to be used at stockholders' meetings. This organization would put pressure on corporations to stop polluting the environment or to support such social causes as better mass transportation. If enough concerned stockholders show up at annual meetings, contends Alinsky, corporations will eventually have to rent Yankee Stadium to accommodate them all and will hardly be able to ignore their demands. Proxies for People, he thinks, would restore an "adventure in living to the dead

majority, and might even bridge the generation gap, since both parents and children would be fighting the same problems from different angles."

Proxies for People demonstrates Alinsky's unsurpassed flair for the dramatic gesture. Some fault him, however, for lack of follow-through, for jumping too quickly from one project to the next. His reply is that he pulls out as soon as he can to give local leadership a chance. It is true, though, that he is spread perilously thin. Operating on his I.A.F. income of \$25,000 a year, he seems to live at airports as he speeds from one speaking engagement to the next. At 61, having suffered personal disasters (his first wife, by whom he had two children, drowned; he recently divorced his second), Alinsky has a keen sense of mortality and seems to find more satisfaction in the pursuit than in the attainment of a goal. No ultimate Utopia lies over the horizon for him. "Every time you resolve a problem," he says, "you create another. My life is a quest for the unexpected." After life? "They'll send me to hell, and I'll organize it."

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