Rules for Radicals

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Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals
is the last book published in 1971 by activist and writer Saul D.
Alinsky shortly before his death. His goal for the *Rules for
Radicals* was to create a guide for future community organizers
to use in uniting low-income communities, or "Have-Nots", in
order for them to gain social, political, legal, and economic
power.[1] Within it, Alinsky compiled the lessons he had learned
throughout his experiences of community organizing from 1939–
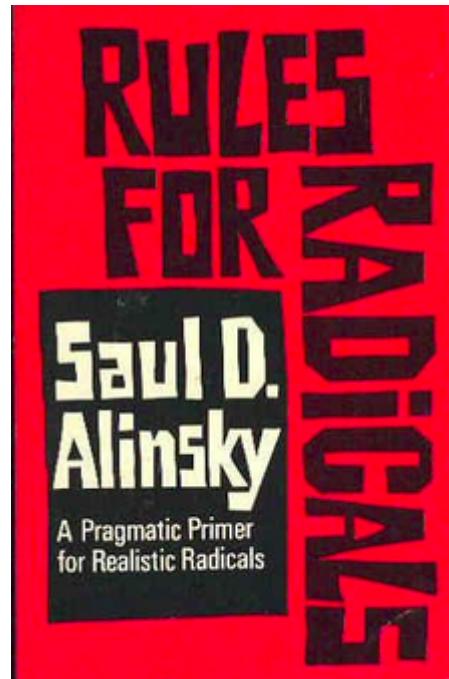1971 and targeted these lessons at the current, new generation of
radicals.[2]

Divided into ten chapters, *Rules for Radicals* provides 10 lessons
on how a community organizer can accomplish the goal of
successfully uniting people into an active organization with the
power to effect change on a variety of issues. Though targeted at
community organization, these chapters also touch on other
issues that range from ethics, education, communication, and
symbol construction to nonviolence and political philosophy.[3]

Though published for the new generation of counterculture-era
organizers in 1971, Alinsky's principles have been successfully
applied by numerous government, labor, community, and
congregation-based organizations, and the main themes of his
organizational methods that were elucidated upon in *Rules for
Radicals* have been recurring elements in political campaigns in
recent years.

Rules for Radicals

Author	Saul Alinsky
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Contents

Inspiration for *Rules for Radicals*

The inspiration for *Rules for Radicals* was drawn from Alinsky's personal experience as a community organizer.[1] It was also taken from the lessons he learned from his University of Chicago professor, Robert Park, who saw communities as "reflections of the larger processes of an urban society".[3] The methods Alinsky developed and practiced were described in his book as a guide on future community organizing for the new generation of radicals emerging from the 1960s.[3][4]

Alinsky believed in collective action as a result of the work he did with the C.I.O and the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago where he first began to develop his own, distinct method of community organizing. Additionally, his late work with the Citizens Action Program (CAP) provided some of his most whole and conclusive practices in organizing through the empowerment of the poor, though not well-known. Alinsky saw community structure and the impoverished and the importance of their empowerment as elements of community activism and used both as tools to create powerful, active organizations.[5] He also used shared social problems as external antagonists to "heighten local awareness of similarities among residents and their shared differences with outsiders".[3] Ironically, this was one of Alinsky's most powerful tools in community organizing; to bring a collective together, he would bring to light an issue that would stir up conflict with some agency to unite the group. This provided an organization with a specific "villain" to confront and made direct action easier to implement. These tactics as a result of decades of organizing efforts, along with many other lessons, were poured into *Rules for Radicals* to create the guidebook for community organization.[2]

Themes

Rules for Radicals has various themes. Among them is his use of symbol construction to strengthen the unity within an organization.[3] He would draw on loyalty to a particular church or religious affiliation to create a structured organization with which to operate. The reason being that symbols by which communities could identify themselves created structured organizations that were easier to mobilize in implementing direct action. Once the community was united behind a common symbol, Alinsky would find a common enemy for the community to be united against.

The use of common enemy against a community was another theme of *Rules for Radicals*, with nonviolent conflict as a uniting element in communities.[6]

Alinsky would find an external antagonist to turn into a "common enemy" for the community within which he was operating. Often, this would be a local politician or agency that had some involvement with activity concerning the community. Once the enemy was established, the community would come together in opposition of it. This management of conflict heightened awareness within the community as to the similarities its members shared as well as what differentiated them from those outside of their organization.[3] The use of conflict also allowed for the goal of the group to be clearly defined. With an established external antagonist, the community's goal would be to defeat that enemy.[3]

Symbol construction helped to promote structured organization, which allowed for nonviolent conflict through another element in Alinsky's teaching, direct action. Direct action created conflict situations that further established the unity of the community and promoted the accomplishment of achieving the community's goal of defeating their common enemy.[2] It also brought issues the community was battling to the public eye. Alinsky encouraged over-the-top public demonstrations throughout *Rules for Radicals* that could not be ignored, and these tactics enabled his organization to progress their goals faster than through normal bureaucratic processes.[3]

Lastly, the main theme throughout *Rules for Radicals* and Alinsky's work was empowerment of the poor.[5] Alinsky used symbol construction and nonviolent conflict to create a structured organization with a clearly defined goal that could take direct action against a common enemy. At this point, Alinsky would withdraw from the organization to allow their progress to be powered by the community itself.[3] This empowered the organizations to create change.[2]

The Rules

1. "Power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have." Power is derived from 2 main sources – money and people. "Have-Nots" must build power from flesh and blood.
2. "Never go outside the expertise of your people." It results in confusion, fear and retreat. Feeling secure adds to the backbone of anyone.
3. "Whenever possible, go outside the expertise of the enemy." Look for ways to increase insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty.
4. "Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules." If the rule is that every letter gets a reply, send 30,000 letters. You can kill them with this because no one can possibly obey all of their own rules.
5. "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon." There is no defense. It's irrational. It's infuriating. It also works as a key pressure point to force the enemy into concessions.
6. "A good tactic is one your people enjoy." They'll keep doing it without urging and come back to do more. They're doing their thing, and will even suggest better ones.
7. "A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag." Don't become old news.
8. "Keep the pressure on. Never let up." Keep trying new things to keep the opposition off balance. As the opposition masters one approach, hit them from the flank with something new.
9. "The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself." Imagination and ego can dream up many more consequences than any activist.
10. "The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition." It is this unceasing pressure that results in the reactions from the opposition that are essential for the success of the campaign.
11. "If you push a negative hard enough, it will push through and become a positive." Violence from the other side can win the public to your side because the public sympathizes with the underdog.
12. "The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative." Never let the enemy score points because you're caught without a solution to the problem.
13. "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." Cut off the support network and isolate the target from sympathy. Go after people and not institutions; people hurt faster than institutions.

Criticisms

Alinsky received criticism for the methods and ideas he presented. Robert Pruger and Harry Specht noted that much of his instruction has only been effective in urban, low-income areas.[7] Pruger and Specht also criticized his broad statement that *Rules for Radicals* is a tool for organizing all low-income people. Further, Alinsky's use of artificially stimulated conflict has been criticized for its ineffectiveness in areas that thrive on unity.[7] According to Judith Ann Trolander, in several Chicago areas in which he worked, his use of conflict backfired and the community was unable to achieve the policy adjustments they were seeking.[2]

Much of the philosophy of community organization found in *Rules for Radicals* has also come under question as being overly ideological. Alinsky believed in allowing the community to determine its exact goal. He would produce an enemy for them to conflict with, but the purpose of the conflict was ultimately left up to the community. This idea has been criticized due to the conflicting opinions that can often be present within a group.[7] Alinsky's belief that an organization can create a goal to accomplish is viewed as highly optimistic and contradictory to his creation of an external antagonist. By producing a common enemy, Alinsky is creating a goal for the community,

the defeat of that enemy. To say that the community will create their own goal seems backwards considering Alinsky creates the goal of defeating the enemy. Thus, his belief can be seen as too ideological and contradictory because the organization may turn the goal of defeating the common enemy he produced into their main purpose.[7]

Legacy

The scope of influence for *Rules for Radicals* is a far-reaching one as it is a compilation of the tactics of Alinsky. It has been influential for policymaking and organization for various communities and agency groups, and has influenced politicians and activists educated by Alinsky and the IAF, and other grassroots movements.

Direct impact

After Alinsky died in California in 1972, his influence helped spawn other organizations and policy changes. *Rules for Radicals* was a direct influence that helped to form the United Neighborhood Organization in the early 1980s.[3] Its founders Greg Galluzzo, Mary Gonzales, and Pater Martinez were all students of Alinsky.[3] The work of UNO helped to improve the hygiene, sanitation, and education in southeastern Chicago.[3] Additionally, the founders of Organization of the North East in Chicago during the 1970s applied Alinsky's principles to organize multiethnic neighborhoods in order to gain greater political representation.[3]

Rules for Radicals have been dispersed by Alinsky's students who undertook their own community organizing endeavors. Students of Alinsky's such as Edward T. Chambers used *Rules for Radicals* to help form the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Queens Citizens Organization, and the Communities Organized for Public Service. Another student of Alinsky's, Ernest Cortez, rose to prominence in the late 1970s in San Antonio while organizing Hispanic neighborhoods. His use of congregation-based organizing received much acclaim as a popular method of Alinsky's by utilizing "preexisting solidary neighborhood elements, especially church groups, so that the constituent units are organizations, not individuals."[5] This congregation-based organizing and symbol construction was taught to him by Edward Chambers and the IAF during his time studying under both.

The methods and teachings of *Rules for Radicals* have also been linked to the Mid-America Institute, the National People's Action, the National Training and Information Center, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations, and the Community Service Organization.[5]

Later influence

The methods from *Rules for Radicals* have been seen in modern American politics. The use of congregation-based organizing has been linked to Jesse Jackson when he was organizing his own political campaign.[8] The book was praised and used as an organizational guide by the Tea Party conservative group FreedomWorks during Dick Armey's tenure as chairman.[9][10]

Publication data

- *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (1971) Random House, ISBN 0394443411; Vintage books paperback: ISBN 0679721134

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Further reading

- Hedgbeth, Jeff (2012). *Rules for Radicals Defeated*. CreateSpace. ISBN 1475192037. OCLC 913210254.

External links

- *Rules for Radicals* (http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/102748) at Goodreads

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