

Saul Alinsky

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Saul David Alinsky (January 30, 1909 – June 12, 1972) was an American community organizer and writer. He is generally considered to be the founder of modern community organizing. He is often noted for his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*.

In the course of nearly four decades of political organizing, Alinsky received much criticism, but also gained praise from many public figures. His organizing skills were focused on improving the living conditions of poor communities across America. In the 1950s, he began turning his attention to improving conditions in the black ghettos, beginning with Chicago's and later traveling to other ghettos in California, Michigan, New York City, and a dozen other "trouble spots".

His ideas were adapted in the 1960s by some U.S. college students and other young counterculture-era organizers, who used them as part of their strategies for organizing on campus and beyond.^[5] *Time* magazine wrote in 1970 that "It is not too much to argue that American democracy is being altered by Alinsky's ideas."^[6] Conservative author William F. Buckley Jr. said in 1966 that Alinsky was "very close to being an organizational genius".^[7]

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Biography

Early life

Saul Alinsky



Born	Saul David Alinsky January 30, 1909 Chicago, Illinois, U.S.
Died	June 12, 1972 (aged 63) Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, U.S.
Cause of death	Heart attack
Nationality	American
Education	University of Chicago, Ph.B. 1930 U. of Chicago Graduate School, criminology, 1930–1932
Occupation	Community organizer, writer, political activist
Known for	Political activism, writing, community organization
Notable work	<i>Rules for Radicals</i> (1971)
Spouse(s)	Helene Simon (m. 1932; d. ?) Jean Graham (m. 1952; div. 1970) Irene McInnis Alinsky (m. 1971)
Children	Katherine and David (by Helene)
Awards	Pacem in Terris Award, 1969

Notes

[1][2][3][4]

Saul David Alinsky was born in 1909 in Chicago, Illinois, to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, the only surviving son of Benjamin Alinsky's marriage to his second wife, Sarah Tannenbaum Alinsky.^[8] Alinsky stated during an interview that his parents never became involved in the "new socialist movement." He added that they were "strict Orthodox, their whole life revolved around work and synagogue ... I remember as a kid being told how important it was to study."^[4] He attended Marshall High School in Chicago until his parents divorced and then went to live with his father who moved to California, graduating from Hollywood High School^[9] in 1926.

Because of his strict Jewish upbringing, he was asked whether he ever encountered antisemitism while growing up in Chicago. He replied, "it was so pervasive you didn't really even think about it; you just accepted it as a fact of life."^[4] He considered himself to be a devout Jew until the age of 12, after which time he began to fear that his parents would force him to become a rabbi.

I went through some pretty rapid withdrawal symptoms and kicked the habit ... But I'll tell you one thing about religious identity...Whenever anyone asks me my religion, I always say—and always will say—Jewish.^[4]

At the same time, he was also an agnostic.^{[10][11][12]}

University of Chicago

In 1930, Alinsky graduated with a Bachelor of Philosophy from the University of Chicago, where he majored in archaeology, a subject that fascinated him.^[4] His plans to become a professional archaeologist were changed due to the ongoing economic Depression. He later stated, "Archaeologists were in about as much demand as horses and buggies. All the guys who funded the field trips were being scraped off Wall Street sidewalks."^[4]

Employment

After attending two years of graduate school at the University of Chicago, he accepted work for the state of Illinois as a criminologist. On a part-time basis, he also began working as an organizer with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). By 1939, he became less active in the labor movement and became more active in general community organizing, starting with the Back of the Yards and other poor areas on the South Side of Chicago. His early efforts to "turn scattered, voiceless discontent into a united protest" earned the admiration of Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, who said Alinsky's aims "most faithfully reflect our ideals of brotherhood, tolerance, charity and dignity of the individual."^[4]

As a result of his efforts and success at helping slum communities, Alinsky spent the next 10 years repeating his organization work across the nation, "from Kansas City and Detroit to the barrios of Southern California." By 1950 he turned his attention to the black ghettos of Chicago. His actions aroused the ire of Mayor Richard J. Daley, who also acknowledged that "Alinsky loves Chicago the same as I do."^[4] He traveled to California at the request of the San Francisco Bay Area Presbyterian Churches to help organize the black ghetto in Oakland. Hearing of his plans, "the panic-stricken Oakland City Council promptly introduced a resolution banning him from the city."^[4]

Community organizing and politics

In the 1930s Alinsky organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago (made infamous by Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, which described the horrific working conditions in the Union Stock Yards). He went on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) while organizing the Woodlawn neighborhood; IAF trained organizers and assisted in the founding of community organizations around the United States.

In *Rules for Radicals* (his final work, published in 1971 one year before his death), Alinsky wrote at the end of his personal acknowledgements:

Lest we forget at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgment to the very first radical: from all our legends, mythology, and history (and who is to know where mythology leaves off and history begins or which is which), the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom – Lucifer.^[13]

In the book, he addressed the 1960s generation of radicals, outlining his views on organizing for mass power. In the opening paragraph Alinsky writes:

What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be. *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.^[13]

Alinsky did not join political parties. When asked during an interview whether he ever considered becoming a Communist Party member, he replied:

Not at any time. I've never joined any organization—not even the ones I've organized myself. I prize my own independence too much. And philosophically, I could never accept any rigid dogma or ideology, whether it's Christianity or Marxism. One of the most important things in life is what Judge Learned Hand described as "that ever-gnawing inner doubt as to whether you're right." If you don't have that, if you think you've got an inside track to absolute truth, you become doctrinaire, humorless and intellectually constipated. The greatest crimes in history have been perpetrated by such religious and political and racial fanatics, from the persecutions of the Inquisition on down to Communist purges and Nazi genocide.^[4]

He did not have much respect for mainstream political leaders who tried to interfere with growing black–white unity during the difficult years of the Great Depression. In Alinsky's view, new voices and new values were being heard in the U.S., and "people began citing John Donne's 'No man is an island.'"^[4] He observed that the hardship affecting all classes of the population was causing them to start "banding together to improve their lives" and discovering how much in common they really had with their fellow man.^[4]

Alinsky once explained that his reasons for organizing in black communities included:

Negroes were being lynched regularly in the South as the first stirrings of black opposition began to be felt, and many of the white civil rights organizers and labor agitators who had started to work with them were tarred and feathered, castrated—or killed. Most Southern politicians were members of the Ku Klux Klan and had no compunction about boasting of it.^[4]

Alinsky's tactics were often unorthodox. In *Rules for Radicals* he wrote:

[t]he job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a 'dangerous enemy.' [According to Alinsky], the hysterical instant reaction of the establishment [will] not only validate [the organizer's] credentials of competency but also ensure automatic popular invitation.^[14]

As an example, after organizing FIGHT (an acronym for Freedom, Independence [subsequently Integration], God, Honor, Today) in Rochester, New York,^[15] Alinsky once threatened to stage a "fart in" to disrupt the sensibilities of the city's establishment at a Rochester Philharmonic concert. FIGHT members were to consume large quantities of baked beans after which, according to author Nicholas von Hoffman, "FIGHT's increasingly gaseous music-loving members would tie themselves to the concert hall where they would sit expelling gaseous vapors with such noisy velocity as to compete with the woodwinds".^[16] Satisfied with his threat yielding action, Alinsky later threatened a "piss in" at Chicago O'Hare Airport. Alinsky planned to arrange for large numbers of well-dressed African Americans to occupy the urinals and toilets at O'Hare for as long as it took to bring the city to the bargaining table. According to Alinsky, once again the threat alone was sufficient to produce results.^[16] In *Rules for Radicals*, he notes that this tactic fell under two of his rules: Rule #3: Wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy; and Rule #4: Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.

Alinsky described his plans for 1972 to begin to organize the white middle-class across the United States, and the necessity of that project. He believed that many Americans were living in frustration and despair, worried about their future, and ripe for a turn to radical social change, to become politically active citizens. He feared the middle class could be driven to a right-wing viewpoint, "making them ripe for the plucking by some guy on horseback promising a return to the vanished verities of yesterday".^[4] His stated motive: "I love this goddamn country, and we're going to take it back."^[4]

Death

Alinsky died at the age of 63 from a heart attack near his home in Carmel, California, on June 12, 1972. He was cremated in Carmel and his ashes were interred at Mt. Mayriv Cemetery (the cemetery is now included in Zion Gardens Cemetery) in Chicago.^{[17][18]} Shortly before his death he had discussed life after death in *Playboy*:^[4]

ALINSKY: ... if there is an afterlife, and I have anything to say about it, I will unreservedly choose to go to hell.

PLAYBOY: Why?

ALINSKY: Hell would be heaven for me. All my life I've been with the have-nots. Over here, if you're a have-not, you're short of dough. If you're a have-not in hell, you're short of virtue. Once I get into hell, I'll start organizing the have-nots over there.

PLAYBOY: Why them?

ALINSKY: They're my kind of people.

Legacy and honors

The documentary, *The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy*, states that "Alinsky championed new ways to organize the poor and powerless that created a backyard revolution in cities across America."^[19] Based on his organizing in Chicago, Alinsky formed the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. After he died, Edward T. Chambers became its Executive Director. Hundreds of professional community and labor organizers, and thousands

of community and labor leaders have been trained at its workshops. Fred Ross, who worked for Alinsky, was the principal mentor for Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Other organizations following in the tradition of the Congregation-based Community Organizing pioneered by IAF include PICO National Network, Gamaliel Foundation, Brooklyn Ecumenical Cooperatives, founded by former IAF trainer, Richard Harmon and Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART).^{[20][21][22]}

Several prominent American leaders have been influenced by Alinsky's teachings,^[21] including Ed Chambers,^[19] Tom Gaudette, Ernesto Cortes, Michael Gecan, Wade Rathke, and Patrick Crowley.^{[23][24]} Alinsky is often credited with laying the foundation for the grassroots political organizing that dominated the 1960s.^[19] Jack Newfield, writing in *New York* magazine, included Alinsky among "the purest Avatars of the populist movement", along with Ralph Nader, Cesar Chavez, and Jesse Jackson.^[25]

Although Alinsky held little respect for elected officials,^[26] he has been described as an influence on several notable politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In 1969, while a political science major at Wellesley College, Hillary Clinton chose to write her senior thesis on Alinsky's work, with Alinsky himself contributing his own time to help her.^{[27][28]} Although Rodham defended Alinsky's intentions in her thesis, she was critical of his methods and dogmatism.^{[27][29]} (Years later when she became First Lady, based upon a White House request, the school did not make the thesis publicly available.^[30])

According to Alinsky biographer Sanford Horwitt, U.S. President Barack Obama was influenced by Alinsky and followed in his footsteps as a Chicago-based community organizer. Horwitt asserted that Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was influenced by Alinsky's teachings.^[31] Alinsky's influence on Obama has been heavily emphasized by some of his detractors, such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck. Historian Thomas Sugrue writes, "as with all conspiracy theories, the Alinsky-Obama link rests on a kernel of truth".^[26] For three years in the mid 80s, Obama worked for the Developing Communities Project, which was influenced by Alinsky's work, and he wrote an essay that was collected in a book memorializing Alinsky.^{[26][32]} Newt Gingrich repeatedly stated his opinion that Alinsky was a major influence on Obama during his 2012 presidential campaign, equating Alinsky with "European Socialism", although Alinsky was U.S.-born and was not a Socialist.^[33] Gingrich's campaign itself used tactics described by Alinsky's writing.^[34]

Adam Brandon, a spokesman for the conservative non-profit organization FreedomWorks, one of several groups involved in organizing Tea Party protests, says the group gives Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* to its top leadership members. A shortened guide called *Rules for Patriots* is distributed to its entire network. In a January 2012 story that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, citing the organization's tactic of sending activists to town-hall meetings, Brandon explained, "[Alinsky's] tactics when it comes to grass-roots organizing are incredibly effective." Former Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey also gives copies of Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals* to Tea Party leaders.^[35]

In 1969, Alinsky was awarded the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award, an annual award given by the Diocese of Davenport to commemorate an encyclical by Pope John XXIII.^[36]

See also

- Community development
- Community education
- Community practice

- Community psychology
- Critical consciousness
- Critical psychology
- Organization workshop

Works

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- *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Random House, 1971.
- *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*. Bernard E Doering (ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

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Further reading

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- Frank Riessman, "The Myth of Saul Alinsky," *Dissent*, vol. 14, no. 4, whole no. 59 (July–Aug. 1967), pp. 469–478.
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- Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Nation Books, 2010

External links

- "Saul Alinsky collected news and commentary". *The Wall Street Journal*.
- *Democratic Promise* (<http://archive.itvs.org/democraticpromise>), a documentary about Alinsky and his legacy
- *Encounter with Saul Alinsky* (http://www.nfb.ca/film/encounter_with_saul_alinsky_part_1/), National Film Board of Canada documentary
- Saul Alinsky, The qualities of an organizer (<http://www.panarchy.org/alinsky/organizer.html>) (1971)



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- Santow, Mark Edward (1 January 2000). *Saul Alinsky and the dilemmas of race in the post-war city* (Dissertation abstract).
- Saul Alinsky's FBI files (<https://archive.org/details/nsia-fbi-alinsky>) on the Internet Archive
- Saul Alinsky (http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/59314.Saul_D_Alinsky) at Goodreads

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