

Saul Alinsky and the dilemmas of race in the post-war *city

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Abstract

This dissertation, "Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race in the Post-War City," examines the ideas and experiences of America's most famous community organizer as a lens with which to explore both the potential and limits of neighborhood-based solutions to the problems of the post-World War II American city. By bringing together minority, poor and working-class urban citizens in territorially-based organizations, Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation strove to articulate and implement a democratic vision of the American city. In particular, Alinsky searched for local solutions to the problems of segregation, racial violence, urban decay, and white flight in his native Chicago by organizing both black and white residents through their churches, block clubs, and cultural institutions. I contrast Alinsky's attempt to create an 'racial geography' through a locally-based approach to residential integration and race relations with the emphasis of post-war racial liberals on the power of moral suasion and the rule of law, which fundamentally limited the ability of politicians and policymakers to understand and overcome both racial segregation and the deep connections between place, identity, and property in the American city. Ironically, however, Alinsky's emphasis on local organizing and territorial identity often strengthened these connections—which I refer to as "the politics of racial geography"—and made residential integration all the more elusive. The racialization of urban (and suburban) space in the American metropolis since World War II continues to limit the effectiveness of place-based solutions to urban problems even today, while reproducing the interests and identities that support its perpetuation. Alinsky's successes and failures in dealing with the politics of race and place in the postwar city not only help explain the social history of modern urban America; they speak to the enduring dilemmas embedded in the search for democratic, humane, and realistic solutions to the persistent problems of American cities. ^

Subject Area

History, United States|Political Science, General|Sociology, Ethnic and Racial Studies

Recommended Citation

Mark Edward Santow, "Saul Alinsky and the dilemmas of race in the post-war *city" (January 1, 2000). *Dissertations available from ProQuest*. Paper AAI9989649.

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