

Saul Alinsky, community organizing and rules for radicals. Saul Alinsky's work is an important reference point for thinking about community organizing and community development. His books *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971) were both classic explorations of organizing and remain popular today. Mike Seal examines Alinsky's continuing relevance to the activities of informal educators, community organizers and animateurs.

Only two kinds of people can afford the luxury of acting on principle, those with absolute power and those with none and no desire to get any...everyone else who wants to be effective in politics has to learn to be 'unprincipled' enough to compromise in order to see their principles succeed. (Rogers 1990: 12)

Liberals in their meetings utter bold words; they strut, grimace belligerently, and then issue a weasel-worded statement 'which has tremendous implications, if read between the lines.' They sit calmly, dispassionately, studying the issue; judging both sides; they sit and still sit. (Alinsky 1971: 4)

The Radical may resort to the sword but when he does he is not filled with hatred against those individuals whom he attacks. He hates these individuals not as persons but as symbols representing ideas or interests which he believes to be inimical to the welfare of the people. (Alinsky 1946: 23)

Saul David Alinsky (1909-1972) was both a committed organizer and activist (founding the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago) and an influential writer. His books *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1972) were, and remain, important statements of [community organizing](#). Alinsky's ideas bear careful exploration and have a continuing relevance for informal educators and all those whose role involves trying to effect change in [communities](#). They are particularly useful for those who have to engage with local or national power structures and workers who wish to engage alienated or disparate communities and seek common cause between them.

His thoughts on the nature of work with communities are challenging, and yet relevant. In this article I want to expand on three areas. On:

- the place of principles and morality in [community work](#);
- what it is to be a liberal or a radical; and
- rules for how to engage with power structures effectively.

The three quotes above are meant to encapsulate his thinking on these subjects. I will go on to expand on the ideas that stem from them.

Saul Alinsky's life and work

Saul Alinsky was born in Chicago on 30 January 1909, the child of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. Saul Alinsky's parents divorced when he was 13 years old, and he went to live with his father who had moved to Los Angeles. At an early age he was interested in the dynamics of power and the interaction between those who are denied resources and those who deny. '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 earned a doctorate in archaeology from the University of Chicago in 1930. However, it was spending a summer helping dissident miners in their revolt against John L. Lewis's United Mine Workers that

influenced his future direction. Upon graduation he won a fellowship from the university's sociology department which enabled him to study criminology. He went to work for Clifford Shaw at the Institute for Juvenile Research and soon found himself working at the State Penitentiary (at which he stayed for three years). At this time he married Helene Simon, with whom he had a son and a daughter. He had met Helene while studying at the University and they married in 1932. As Horwitt (1989: 17) has commented, the Depression and the growing turbulence of the 1930s politicized both of them. Helene, a social worker, was a strong organizer and gained a considerable reputation in the labour movement.

In 1936 Saul Alinsky left his work at the Penitentiary to return to the Institute in Chicago. He appeared set for a career as a criminologist, however a growing concern to counter the threat of Fascism, and the development of more militant labour organizing (especially that linked to the development of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) grew in their appeal. Alinsky was particularly struck by the way in which John L. Lewis led the CIO (Horwitt 1989: 17). Clifford Shaw and Saul Alinsky were both convinced that it was the 'social milieu' that caused delinquency rather than some particular quality of individuals. It was the study of this – and in particular gang life – that took Alinsky to South Chicago and then to the Back-of-the-Yards (the slum area that Upton Sinclair had earlier written so movingly about in *The Jungle*). There Saul Alinsky found a number of people who wanted change. Joe Meegan, who had grown up in the area worked his way through De Paul University, and had become a teacher became a key ally and together they set up the Back-of-the-Yards Neighborhood Council. While historically an Irish-Catholic community, they were able to identify common interests that brought together previously hostile ethnic groups of Serbs and Croatians, Czechs and Slovaks, Poles and Lithuanians in the community and brought them into the organization. Alinsky also worked closely with local Catholic priests to build the council. The way they built the coalition meant that the council had great success in stabilizing the Back-of-the-Yards neighborhood and in advocating for that community.

In 1939 Saul Alinsky established the Industrial Areas Foundation to bring his method of reform to other [declining urban neighborhoods](#). He left the Institute to work for the Foundation. His approach depended on uniting ordinary citizens around immediate grievances in their neighborhoods and in protesting vigorously and outside of the 'established' ways of expressing dissent (see below). He concentrated on recruiting and training indigenous 'organizers' to take a lead in the communities. His first book *Reveille for Radicals* outlines the principles and practice of community organizing and just one month after its publication in 1946 it made the *New York Times* best-seller list (Horwitt 1989: 176).

Alinsky was busy – and often on the road – and things looked promising. But in 1947 Helene drowned while on holiday with the children – and it hit him hard. He found it difficult to focus for many months; furthermore the financial position of the Foundation was not good. Saul Alinsky took on writing an 'unauthorized biography' of John L Lewis (which appeared in 1949) in part to stabilize his own finances. He also began working with Fred Ross around organizing Mexican-Americans in California. Significantly though, Saul Alinsky was not a casualty of the hysteria surrounding radicals and supposed communists in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Horwitt 1989: 240). He continued to have significant support from key figures in the Catholic Church and the press – and his combative style might well have backfired on any congressional investigation committee that called him before them (*op. cit.*).

Saul Alinsky had looked around for new writing projects (including proposing a joint book with [C Wright Mills](#)) – and although he started work on a biography of Monsignor John O'Grady it was not completed. The community organizing work – with the exception of the Back-of-the-Yards (under Joe Meegan) and California (Fred Ross) – was not developing. In 1952 Alinsky married Jean Graham (who had a debutante background and was divorced from an executive of Bethlehem Steel) (Horwitt 1989: 256). Jean did not have a strong interest in Alinsky's social and political work – but had rebelled against her family's upper-class elitism (*op. cit.*: 257). Sadly, though she was to become ill with multiple sclerosis not long after

they were married. New areas of work opened up including working in Woodlawn and beyond with Puerto Ricans (with Nicholas von Hoffman and the Catholic Church). He also looked to New York and began to develop work there with various organizations with mixed results. This took him away from home (and Jean).

The Industrial Areas Foundation gained a significant amount of money from the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1957 to undertake a study of the changes in local communities resulting from population shifts (in particular the growing African American) – and the tensions and discrimination involved. As part of the study a number of priests were to be trained in community analysis and organization. Saul Alinsky also worked to bring the first major modern civil rights effort to Chicago, which as Horwitt (1989: 363) has commented was the most segregated city in the North. He also continued to be active in more general community organizing – especially around Chicago. The work in Woodlawn, in particular, attracted attention with its focus on local organizing and its critique of ‘welfare colonialism’. As Charles Silberman noted in his best-selling study *Crisis in Black and White* (which appeared in 1964), Alinsky’s approach (through the work of the Temporary Woodlawn Association – TWO) was of great significance. It looked to put much more control in the hands of local people. Silberman recognized that large scale state intervention was needed in terms of schooling, job creation and health – but *how* these were to be brought about, ‘at whose direction and initiative, was critically important (Horwitt 1989: 449).

Press and media attention to Saul Alinsky grew significantly following the publication of *Crisis in Black and White*. He became something of a celebrity – for example featuring in a series of interviews in *Harper’s*. On the domestic front his relationship with Jean his wife had deteriorated. She was living in California for most of the time while Saul Alinsky worked out of Chicago. In 1966 Alinsky met and developed a relationship with Irene McInnis. Jean and Saul Alinsky divorced, amicably it is said, in 1969 – and he married Irene in 1971 (Horwitt 1989: 536).

Saul Alinsky became more critical of both the approach and the tactics of the 1960’s young radicals. ‘A guy has to be a political idiot,’ he told them, ‘to say all power comes out of the barrel of a gun when the other side has the guns.’ He was very distrustful of the charismatic elements of some of the new radical movements. For him both action and direction had to be rooted in the practical concerns of the masses. America’s *War on Poverty* saw the expansion of Saul Alinsky’s organisation and its influence. In New York he successfully organized local African American residents to pressure the city’s largest employer, the Eastman Kodak Company, to hire more African Americans and also to give them a role in recruitment.

However, he soon fell out further with both the establishment and more ‘radical elements’. He called President Johnson’s *War on Poverty* ‘a huge political pork barrel’ and found it increasingly difficult to work with local African American groups influenced by ‘Black Power’ who understandably did not want to function under white leadership. He remained active till his death, organizing white worker councils in Chicago, steelworkers in Pittsburgh, Indians in Canada, and Chicanos in the Southwest, where he influenced Cesar Chavez, who was later to found the first successful labor organization among California farm workers. Alinsky’s second book, *Rules for Radicals: A Political Primer for Practical Radicals*, published in 1971 was a reflection on the lessons he felt he had learned in this later period. It, like *Reveille for Radicals* was a publishing success – and has had a long-term appeal.

Saul Alinsky died on June 12, 1972 in Carmel, California. He had been to visit Jean, gone to a bank, and then collapsed outside of a heart attack.

Alinsky on means and ends

Saul Alinsky had a particular take on the subject of means and ends, or in the terminology of informal

education, on process and product. He was specifically impatient with people who would not take action for reasons of principle. As he says in his chapter 'Of Means and Ends' in *Rules for Radicals*.

He who sacrifices the mass good for his personal conscience has a peculiar conception of 'personal salvation'; he doesn't care enough for people to 'be corrupted' for them. (Alinsky 1972: 25)

He thought that the morality of action needed not to be judged in or of itself but weighed against the morality of inaction. As Saul Alinsky states at the outset of the chapter:

The man of action views the issue of means and ends in pragmatic and strategic terms. He has no other problem; he thinks only of his actual resources and the possibilities of various choices of action. He asks of ends only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means, only whether they will work. To say that corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles. (Alinsky 1972: 24)

Alinsky then proceed to develop a set of rules regarding the ethics of means and ends. Given his take on morality the idea of a set of rules about them seems ironic and this was part of his idiosyncratic style. Saul Alinsky can seem very amoral in his statements. I think that it is helpful to treat them as questions upon which to reflect when considering the morality of means and ends. For him the point was not to dwell on the morals people should hold, but to understand the morals which guide people in practice.

Here I want to highlight the key elements of his approach – as outlined in *Rules*.

1) *One's concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one's personal interest in the issue, and one's distance from the scene of conflict* (Alinsky 1972: 26). Saul Alinsky was critical of those who criticized the morality of actions they were not involved in, were dispassionate about or were not touched by. For him, the further people are away from the conflict, the more they fuss over the moral delicacies. Furthermore, such moralising and distancing denies one's own culpability. He agreed with Peck that the demonizing of and moralising about the soldiers in the Mai Lai Massacre in the Vietnam War (where soldiers massacred 400 civilians) was hypocritical. For Alinsky the questions were how do people got to the point of committing atrocities, how people were socialised into the army, its cultures of responsibility, who becomes a soldier and ultimately why the war was being fought. Sadly such concerns are still relevant today.

2) *The judgement of the ethics of means is dependent upon the political position of those sitting in judgement* (Alinsky 1972: 26-9).

Our cause had to be all shining justice, allied with the angels; theirs had to be all evil, tied to the Devil; in no war has the enemy or the cause ever been gray. (Alinsky 1972: 3)

Yet nowadays, with the need for propaganda over, the declaration is still taken to be self evidently true. For Saul Alinsky, both parties in a dispute will claim, and need to claim, that the opposition's means are immoral and their own means are ethical and rooted in the highest of human values. This seems to be true of the wars in the Falklands, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq etc. We portray ourselves as fighting for reasons such as freedom, democracy, protecting the innocent and portray the 'insurgents' as displaying the opposite moral characteristics.

3) *In war, the end justifies almost any means* (Alinsky 1972: 29-30). For Saul Alinsky people are expedient in the moment, and then find ways to justify this as consistent and moral after the fact. For example,

Churchill was asked how he could reconcile himself to siding with the communists, given his stated opinions. He responded, 'I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby.' Yet prior to the war he said 'One may dislike Hitler's system and yet admire his patriotic achievements. If our country were defeated, I hope we should find a champion as admirable to restore our courage and lead us back to our place among the nations' – (Great Contemporaries: 1937). During the war the allies, and Britain in particular supported the communist led resistance in Greece. Yet after the war Churchill turned British guns on communist partisans who had fought with the allies in the second world war in the Greek Civil war and supported the return of a monarchy for Greece.

Saul Alinsky uses the example of the American Declaration of Independence to elaborate on this statement: To the Colonists who drafted it, the Declaration was self evidently true; to the British, it deliberately ignored the benefits of the British presence. The colonists recognized at the time that the document was not balanced and was to some extent propaganda.

4) *The judgement of the ethics of means must be made in the context of the times in which the action occurred and not from any other chronological vantage point* (Alinsky 1972: 30-2). Saul Alinsky uses the example of the Boston Massacre to illustrate his point. Patrick Carr, one of the townspeople shot dead by the British, stated on his deathbed that the townspeople had been the aggressors and that the British fired in self-defence. This admission threatened to destroy the martyrdom that the Revolutionary Leader, Sam Adams, had invested in the townspeople. Adams thereby discredited Patrick Carr as 'an Irish papist who had died in the confession of the Roman Catholic Church.' For Alinsky it would be easy to condemn Adams, but as he says, we are not today involved in a revolution against the British Empire. Alinsky says we have to judge the act through the lens of the times.

5) *Concern with ethics increases with the number of means available* (Alinsky 1972: 232-34). Saul Alinsky said that moral questions may enter the equation when one has alternate means. If one lacks this choice, one will take what options one has. He was talking at a time when there was condemnation of the tactic of the Viet Cong of sending children to plant bombs in bars frequented by American soldiers. He would have probably have understood the actions of suicide bombers, or at least would have said the question is not 'how could anyone do this'? but what drove them to see these actions as their only effective tactics.

6) *The less important the end, the more one engage in ethical evaluations about means* (Alinsky 1972: 34). This is similar to Saul Alinsky's first point, the question being how people's moralizing changes according to how important the end is to them. As a parallel, many informal educators I have worked with moralise very differently about, for example, the young people they work with compared to their own children. With the young people they work with, they recognise that they will experiment with drugs, alcohol and sex as a part of their 'means' of growing up; and have ways of reacting to the young people when they do these things. However they react to their own children using drugs and alcohol and having sex quite differently! Such 'means' are not an options for them.

7) *Success or failure is a mighty determinant of ethics* (Alinsky 1972: 34).

Yesterday's immoral terrorist is today's moral and dignified statesman of high standing — *because he was successful*. Yesterday's moral statesman is sitting in front of a 'war crimes tribunal' today — *because he lost*. (Connachie 2001)

Saul Alinsky saw this as an extension of the old adage that history favours the winners. I am sure Churchill would be remembered very differently had we lost the war. He also identified 'winners' as those in power, not necessarily in a complimentary way, but simply in recognition that at present, those with power are

winning. From this perspective, whether groups are defined as terrorists or freedom fighters, is normally determined by those in power.

8) *The morality of a means depends upon whether the means is being employed at a time of imminent defeat or imminent victory* (Alinsky 1972: 34-5). This relates to point five and says that we should judge different acts differently at different points. If a person cheats because they are desperate, we should judge it differently than if they cheat when they are winning. Similarly if a person steals to feed their children, it is different from theft by someone who already has a lot of money. Interestingly, at present, for a first offence or a small amount, both are likely to receive a fine in the UK. This seems the opposite of Alinsky's principle in that the poor person would be less able to pay the fine, and have a greater (admittedly only financial) impact on them than on the richer person.

9) *Any effective means is automatically judged by the opposition as being unethical* (Alinsky 1972: 35-6). Alinsky sees one of the tactics of those in a battle is to judge the other side as being immoral. We will find ways to judge their methods as unethical even if they are also used by our side. We will, of course, be using them in a slightly different, more moral, way. As a youth worker I remember having a battle with a certain management committee about the use of the building, in particular about whether we needed the full-size snooker table that dominated one room – and which no young people used. At first they questioned whether I was being truly representative of the young people in their views about the table, despite this being my role in the meeting. When I brought the young people to express their own views to the management committee they said I had put them on the spot in a meeting, which was not appropriate, despite them having invited them. When the young people wrote in to express their views, the management committee said that while they were the young people in the club, they questioned whether they were representative of the young people 'in the community'. The snooker table stayed.

10) *You do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral garments* (Alinsky 1972: 36-45). Interestingly while this may seem the most morally redundant, Saul Alinsky uses the example of [Mahatma Gandhi's](#) concept of 'passive resistance' as an illustration. He points out that, perhaps 'passive resistance' was simply:

... the only intelligent, realistic, expedient program which Gandhi had at his disposal; and that the 'morality' which surrounded this policy of passive resistance was to a large degree a rationale to cloak a pragmatic program with a desired and essential moral cover.... Confronted with the issue of what means he could employ against the British, we come to the other criteria previously mentioned; that the kind of means selected and how they can be used is significantly dependent upon the face of the enemy, or the character of his opposition. Gandhi's opposition not only made the effective use of passive resistance possible but practically invited it. His enemy was a British administration characterized by an old, aristocratic, liberal tradition, one which granted a good deal of freedom to its colonials and which always had operated on a pattern of using, absorbing, seducing, or destroying, through flattery or corruption, the revolutionary leaders who arose from the colonial ranks. This was the kind of opposition that would have tolerated and ultimately capitulated before the tactic of passive resistance. (Alinsky 1972: 38, 41)

It is an interesting question whether Gandhi's passive resistance would have stood a chance against a totalitarian state. What we do know, as Saul Alinsky points out, is that eight months after securing independence, the Indian National Congress outlawed passive resistance, making it a crime. In conclusion on the subject of the morality of means and ends, as Alinsky writes: 'Means and ends are so qualitatively interrelated that the true question has never been the proverbial one, 'Does the End justify the Means?' but always has been 'Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means?' (Alinsky 1972: 47).

Alinsky on liberalism and radicalism

As we can see from the opening quote, Saul Alinsky was contemptuous of the kind of liberal thinking that led to inaction. Indeed, he devoted a significant part of *Reveille for Radicals* comparing the radical and liberal orientations. He was also equally contemptuous of what he termed 'suicidal' or 'rhetorical' radicals. He starts the prologue to *Rules for Radicals* by addressing what he sees as the new generation of radicals, and the folly of some of their approaches.

The Revolutionary force today.. are reminiscent of the idealistic early Christians, yet they also urge violence and cry, 'Burn the system down!' They have no illusions about the system, but plenty of illusions about the way to change our world. It is to this point that I have written this book. (Alinsky 1972: xiii).

He then goes on to analyse how the radicals of his generation, to a large extent, either did not survive, or did not move beyond the dialectical materialism of orthodox Marxism, a set of beliefs that he also thought had had their day. He also had sympathy for the new radicals, and the rejection of the lifestyles they had settled for that lead their parents to tranquilizers, alcohol, long-term-endurance marriages, or divorces, high blood pressure, ulcers, frustration and the disillusionment of the 'good life,'. He then gives some quite poignant analysis of the 'generation gap' between radicals, and how they fail to communicate with each other. He has some sympathy with why the new radicals have rejected the standpoint of their older comrades. However, he is also scathing of some of the tactics employed by some of the new radicals as alternatives.

.... Some panic and run, rationalizing that the system is going to collapse anyway of its own rot and corruption and so they're copping out, going hippie or yippie, taking drugs, trying communes, anything to escape. Others went for pointless sure-loser confrontations so that they could fortify their rationalization and say, 'Well, we tried and did our part' and then they copped out too. Others sick with guilt and not knowing where to turn or what to do went berserk. These were the Weathermen and their like: they took the grand cop-out, suicide. To these I have nothing to say or give but pity – and in some cases contempt, for such as those who leave their dead comrades and take off for Algeria or other points. (Alinsky 1972: xvii).

He particularly lamented their lack of communication, and alienation of the bulk of the masses who might otherwise have supported them. At the time there was trend for burning the American flag, something he saw as going outside of, and alienating the bulk of the masses. 'The responsible organizer would have known that it is the establishment that has betrayed the flag while the flag, itself, remains the symbol of America's hopes and aspirations,. He takes the analogy further saying that the radical needs to work within the experience of his or her community. He built this, and other ideas into his 'rules for radicals' saying that while 'there are no rules for revolution any more than there are rules for love or rules for happiness there are certain central concepts of action in human politics that operate regardless of the scene or the time' (Alinsky 1972: xviii). Before I expand on these rules, it is worth noting that, for Saul Alinsky it is important that the radical, at least in the first instance, works within the system. This is important as it was a challenge to many radical groups who were quite separatist at the time, advocating communities, or even just the active militants in a community, withdraw and organize internally. He again liked the approach to the distinction between being a realistic and a rhetorical radical.

As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be – it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system. (Alinsky 1972: xix).

He postulated that for radical change to happen the great mass of people need to be in favor, even passively of change. However he also thought people are naturally fearful of change and that unless they feel 'so frustrated, so defeated, so lost, so futureless in the prevailing system that they are willing to let go of the past and chance the future', revolution will not happen. He called for alliances between radicals and 'blue collar', or 'hard hat' workers, who may still have an investment in the system, even if this meant a compromise on ones goals. Otherwise,

They will not continue to be relatively passive and slightly challenging. If we fail to communicate with them, if we don't encourage them to form alliances with us, they will move to the right. Maybe they will anyway, but let's not let it happen by default. (Alinsky 1972: xx).

Furthermore, he felt that people should not underestimate the room to manoeuvre in democratic systems. Saul Alinsky did not deny government harassment, but still felt that the system had potential to be reformed. More to the point unless the masses thought that these avenues had been exhausted, they would not embrace change. He felt that many of the new radical movements, erroneously, wanted to skip the organising phase and go straight for revolution, turning potential allies, and even those communities they were meant to be representing, against them. For Alinsky, to take such a suicidal approach means 'there is no play, nothing but confrontation for confrontation's sake – a flare-up and back to darkness' (*op. cit.*). He saw the involvement and active participation of citizens in issues where they had real concerns, as the key, both to radicalism and democracy. He was cynical about easy sloganeering, especially when some of the heroes of the day were cited.

Spouting quotes from Mao, Castro, and Che Guevara, which are as germane to our highly technological, computerized, cybernetic, nuclear-powered, mass media society as a stagecoach on a jet runway at Kennedy airport. (Alinsky 1972: xxv).

Tactics for radicals

The bulk of the rest of *Rules for Radicals* is concerned with tactics, which he sometimes also refers to as the rules of power politics. I will expand on each in turn. I will also give examples from Mark Thomas, a UK-based socialist comedian who I think uses these techniques in his show.

1) *Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have* (Alinsky 1972: 127). In the book he says that if one has mass support, one should flaunt it, if one does not one should make a lot of noise, if one cannot make a big noise, make a big stink. Mark Thomas uses this technique frequently. When complaining about the tube privatization he formed a band of famous names and asked them to perform on the tube singing protest songs about it.

2) *Never go outside the experience of your people* (Alinsky 1972: 127). Mark Thomas makes extensive use of such techniques as getting the public to ring up their elected representatives or have mass letter writing campaigns. He will also put familiar mechanisms to other uses. When complaining about the use of organophosphates he put up yellow appeals for witness signs to draw attention to the public. When investigating Crown immunity to murder, when a person was run over by an army Landrover he put up tiredness kills signs all over the front of the army base.

3) *Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy* (Alinsky 1972: 127). Mark Thomas would continually try and dumbfound people. When complaining about the building of a dam that was to displace 15,000 people in Turkey he built an ice sculpture of a dam in front on the headquarters of the company building it.

4) *Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules* (Alinsky 1972: 128). This is one of Mark Thomas's favorite tactics. He found out that people who inherited expensive paintings could avoid inheritance tax by allowing the public to have access to the painting. He got the public to ring up numerous people who had done this and request to see the paintings. When they refused, or refused everyone he managed to get the law changed.

5) *Ridicule is man's most potent weapon* (Alinsky 1972: 128). Mark Thomas was complaining about the exporting of guns to Iran, where the government had claimed that they did not know the pipes were going to be used for that purpose because they had been put down as something else for export terms, despite the fact that they could not have been used for that purpose. He protested by painting a tank pink, put a plastic ice-cream cone on the top of it and tried to export it as an ice cream van.

6) *A good tactic is one that your people enjoy* (Alinsky 1972: 128). When some pensioners had arranged to have, what could easily have been a boring meeting with a health minister, he got them to ask questions in the form of a dance routine. He also got a group of people to protest against GM crops by wearing radioactive protection gear and running around with Geiger counters.

7) *A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag* (Alinsky 1972: 128). Mark Thomas confesses to using a series of 'stunts', to make his points. He tends to use a lot of small actions, as illustrated about, rather than a prolonged action. This approach leads into the eighth rule.

8) *Keep the pressure on* (Alinsky 1972: 128). Saul Alinsky says not to rest on ones laurels if one has a partial victory. He says we should keep in mind Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to a reform delegation, 'Okay, you've convinced me. Now go on out and bring pressure on me!' For Alinsky, action comes from keeping the heat on. When protesting about the use of human protein in baby milk by Nestle Mark Thomas asks questions in a public meeting with the CEO presentation about corporate responsibility, he has a protest at an international conference, he writes letters to the board, he interviews specialists and the scientists from the company, he has protests with animal impersonators, visits the farm where the herd of cows being used are kept and drives round to the ministry of agriculture in a milk tanker and starts cleaning the windows with the milk.

9) *The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself* (Alinsky 1972: 129). When Saul Alinsky leaked word that large numbers of poor people were going to tie up the washrooms of O'Hare Airport, Chicago city authorities quickly agreed to act on a longstanding commitment to a ghetto organization. They imagined the mayhem as thousands of passengers poured off airplanes to discover every washroom occupied. Then they imagined the international embarrassment and the damage to the city's reputation. Again, when challenging the avoidance of inheritance tax, Mark threatened to have more and more people requesting to see the paintings if a change did not happen.

10) *The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition* (Alinsky 1972: 129). Such pressure is necessary, Saul Alinsky argued, in order to get reaction from the opposition. He argued that 'the action is in the reaction' (*op. cit.*).

11) *If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counterside* (Alinsky 1972: 129). Essentially, this is to not give up and be afraid to concentrate on the negative aspects. In many cases Mark's pushing of the negative aspects led to changes, such as a change in the law for the paintings, Nestle reconsidering their production of milk and Channel Four producing a website for posting up MEP's interests (which is compulsory in other countries). He also succeeded in getting some serious questions asked about corporate killing in Parliament.

12) *The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative* (Alinsky 1972: 130). This is the other side of the previous rule. If one does push the other party through to changing one has to offer some kind of solution. This would be one of my criticisms of Mark Thomas; he rarely offers solutions to the issues that he raises. It probably highlights the difference between an entertainer and a community organizer. It would also be one of Saul Alinsky's main criticisms and goes back to the distinction he made between a real and a rhetorical radical. He had little time for some on the ultra left who knew what they were protesting against, but had little idea what they were fighting for. It is noticeable that Mark Thomas does achieve concrete things, when he has concrete demands.

13) *Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it* (Alinsky 1972: 130). This is perhaps Saul Alinsky's most controversial rule and is the counter to the common idea that we should not make things personal. When pursuing the changes in the inheritance law for paintings he targets one individual. He will often find out who the CEO is in a company and hound that person. In the organophosphates debate it is one scientist that he targets and the validity of his findings.

Conclusion

Saul Alinsky's ideas could be seen as controversial, but he was effective and practical as a community activist, and his work and writing deserves to be more widely known among those involved in informal education, community development work and social pedagogy. Not that his principles and rules are unquestionable or right for every situation, but they are a practical toolkit to effect change through leverage in those with power, potentially of great worth to those engaged in community work and education. In addition, next time one hears someone make a moral judgment about another, or make a claim to be a radical, I would encourage the reader to think about Saul Alinsky's ideas.

Further reading and references

Alinsky, Saul D. (1946) *Reveille for Radicals*. (1969 edn.), New York: Random House. Written in Alinsky's catchy style, this influential text includes chapters around purpose; means and ends; words; the education of an organizer; communication; beginnings; tactics; the way ahead.

Alinsky, Saul D. (1971) *Rules for Radicals. A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals* (1972 edn), New York: Vintage. 196 + xxvi pages. Focuses on the building of people's organizations with chapters on programmes; leadership; community traditions; tactics; popular education; and psychological observations on mass organization.

Sanford D. Horwitt (1989) *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy*. New York : Knopf. The major study of Alinsky's life and contribution.

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Websites

[Interview with Saul Alinsky, published in Playboy in 1972](#). The interview is in twelve parts. The entire text is copied onto one page, [here](#).

[Website devoted to a documentary about Saul Alinsky and his legacy, Democratic Promise](#).

[Some excerpts from Reveille for Radicals](#).

[Mark E. Santow: Saul Alinsky and the dilemmas of race in the post-war city – ScholarlyCommon@Penn](#) (University of Pennsylvania).

[‘Problem of the Century,’](#) in TIME (book *Reveille for Radicals* reviewed by Whittaker Chambers, published February 25, 1946)

[‘Democrats and the Legacy of Activist Saul Alinsky’](#). The NPR host Robert Siegel discusses Alinsky’s legacy with biographer Sanford Horwitt. At issue is that Democratic Presidential candidates Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama claim to be influenced by Saul Alinsky.

[Saul Alinsky and the industrial areas foundation](#) (progress.org)

[Saul Alinsky, The American Radical](#) from the Free Range Activism Website

[Saul Alinsky](#) – latter-rain.com – reproduces the prologue from *Rules for Radicals*.

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How to cite this article: Seal, Mike (2008) Saul Alinsky, community organizing and rules for radicals’, *the encyclopaedia of informal education*. [www.infed.org/thinkers/alinsky.htm].