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Saul Alinsky: A Recollection

Jonathan A. Freedman

At the time of our encounters during the 1960s, I certainly did not see myself as a clinical sociologist and Saul Alinsky had almost no patience for those with academic pretensions. In retrospect, I see that some but not all of Saul Alinsky's approach fits with clinical sociology as it now is emerging. He emphasized a set of rules for community organizing based on the value of empowerment — "power to the people." As a basis for strategy, he used a practical sociological model that emphasized conflict between social classes: the powerful with their elite organizations versus the poor with their citizens' organizations. He used a sociogram approach to discover natural leadership for his organizations. He understood and used racial and ethnic factors as keys to organizing. He had a sense of social change, with his effectiveness coming from a careful building of an organizational structure based on the involvement of the grass roots.

I had watched Saul Alinsky from a distance a few years before I met him. I was involved in street-corner juvenile delinquency research when the Industrial Areas Foundation directed by Alinsky was in the midst of creating community organizations in Chicago: northside, southwest side, and then a powerful black organization, The Woodlawn Organization (TWO). My closest friend, Sol Ice, became a community organizer in Woodlawn; frequently, he and other organizers, including Nicolas Von Hoffman (now a syndicated columnist), came by my apartment late in the evening after long days and evenings of work.

I learned about strategy secondhand, but I learned also about a master strategist who usually had the respect of his organizers, who knew how to build powerful coalitions. I was a delegate from a specially created white organization to the founding convention of TWO. There I saw Saul Alinsky for the first time. To me he was a master composer, not on center stage but off to one side, orchestrating the convention, with his staff of organizers working closely with (or perhaps manipulating) members of a poor community, molding them into a powerful structure with leadership that he would clearly

influence or possibly control. I did not meet him in Chicago. I was intimidated by his power and the controversy that surrounded his methods.

The first paper I wrote as a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University was on community organizing and power, using what I witnessed in Chicago as material. Four years after that an opportunity arose to be a senior researcher on a poverty program project using the Alinsky model to train community organizers and create people's organizations in Syracuse, New York. Alinsky was to be the consultant and major instructor on this project, the Community Action Training Center of Syracuse University. When I finally met him in the project office, he had just finished talking with a member of the research staff whose presentation of self was somewhat unusual. His first salvo after a brief introduction was, "Under what rock did you find your staff?" I tried to justify the value of this staff member from a "one down" position but to no avail.

The Community Action Training Center was surrounded by controversy. One problem was that trainees could not see the relevance of the training they were receiving from Alinsky. He taught practical empowerment through community organizing, but he used as a reference point the setting of Back of the Yards, a Chicago community that he organized before World War II, a neighborhood that maintained its white ethnicity even when surrounding communities changed to black population. Organizer trainees, especially those who were black or Hispanic, had considerable difficulty with this.

I personally found Alinsky's history lessons valuable. He was teaching what he believed to be the universal principles of community organizing by using an exemplary model from his past experience and trying to put his trainees back into that situation. History perhaps acted as an antidote to the trainees' sense that only their present organizing activity had meaning, that the past was irrelevant. (A competent clinical sociologist learns how to relate the past to the present program.) The project leaders were also totally caught up in their immediate efforts to organize the poor in Syracuse. They began to feel that they knew more than Alinsky, who soon found himself with time on his hands during his consultation trips to Syracuse. I was asked to spend time with him, probably to keep him out of the way of the leadership of the project, who were busy devising strategies that seemed to fail quickly. I ended up having two afternoons of private consultation with Alinsky. I do not remember a great deal about these conversations, but one thing stands out: as we talked, his demeanor changed from his usual public presentation of an egocentric curmudgeon to that of a more sensitive, caring person. After our meetings, however, his public style quickly returned. While my encounters with him were short and probably not very important to him, they remained with me.

If one examines the public biography of Saul Alinsky, he emerges as a criminologist and then as a community organizer before the Second World

War. He then reemerges about 1950 with organizing attempts on the West Coast where Fred Ross was his major organizer (he discovered Cesar Chavez), and in the Midwest, especially Chicago. During World War II Alinsky stated that he was a special troubleshooter for President Roosevelt, trying to handle labor disputes at factories that were critical to the war effort. He also spent time with his wife, who was ill and eventually died. He went back to organizing after the war ended.

We do not have to accept all of Alinsky's goals and values in order to see him as a clinical sociologist. The nature of his impact on community organizing is still being debated. The two articles printed here show a practitioner at work — sociological theory and concepts were essential to his approach to social change.