

1-1-1984

Saul Alinsky in Retrospect

John F. Glass

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr>

 Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Glass, John F. () "Saul Alinsky in Retrospect," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol2/iss1/7>

This History of Clinical Sociology is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clinical Sociology Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Saul Alinsky in Retrospect

John F. Glass

Saul Alinsky was the best known and most controversial community organizer in the country — he was also a pioneer clinical sociologist, as shown by the preceding articles on his career as a criminologist and a community organizer.

I became acquainted with the Alinsky family in the 1950s as a teenager in Chicago. A youth group I belonged to sometimes met at the Alinsky's South Side home on Woodlawn Avenue in Kenwood, a couple of miles from the community where Alinsky's The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) took on City Hall and the University of Chicago. The last time I saw him was in the spring of 1966 at a seminar I had organized for him at UCLA, where I was a graduate student in sociology. Alinsky was a charismatic figure, portly, with a deep and commanding voice, who could display both brilliant wit and biting sarcasm. He was a lightning rod for controversy. Yet, under his gruff exterior there was a deeply compassionate man who genuinely liked people from all walks of life.

His many friends included corporation president George Romney, labor leader John L. Lewis (whose biography Alinsky wrote), and the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. He even had the grudging respect of conservatives like William F. Buckley and some of the politicians with whom he battled.

No one was neutral about Saul; he had as many critics as supporters. Much of the criticism of his work from both in and out of academia focused on his tactics and his failure to link local action to larger movements for social change. Alinsky held a dim view of academics, particularly social scientists, whom he dismissed as little more than head counters. He was an agitator, a self-styled professional radical, an urban populist. He was not a Marxist, communist, or revolutionary, as his enemies often insisted. His friend Carey McWilliams, long-time editor of *The Nation*, characterized Saul as a brilliant tactician and a radical democrat, a splendid latter-day example of an enduring American tradition.

In his first book, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946), Alinsky laid out his ideas on how to protect democracy from dictatorship by creating people's organiza-

tions. He distinguished liberals from radicals: "Liberals protest; Radicals rebel. Liberals become indignant; Radicals become fighting mad and go into action." He was critical of 1960s radicals who did not believe in our political system. His objective was to improve America, not tear it down. Rather than overthrow existing institutions, Alinsky sought to make them more democratic and responsive to people's needs. According to Charles Silberman, author of *Crisis in Black and White*, "The only difference between Alinsky and his enemies is that Alinsky really believes in democracy." Alinsky believed that change comes only through *power*, which he defined simply as the *ability to act*: for the powerless that means organization. He saw that people do not receive opportunities, freedom, or dignity as a gift of charity. These come about only when people take them through their own efforts. Consensus can come only after conflict.

In *Rules for Radicals* (1971), published the year before his death, Alinsky wrote: "There can be no darker or more devastating tragedy than the death of man's faith in himself and in his power to direct his future." He began this last book by saying: "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." "Mass power organizations" were the mechanisms through which this change would be effected. Yet, as an organizer, Alinsky started with the world as it was, not as he would like it to be. Working within the system and using the status quo as his best ally were his trademarks. His sometimes outrageous tactics became legendary; often the mere threat of using them would get the power structure to capitulate. For example, instead of filing housing complaints with the building inspector, the community organization spearheaded by Alinsky would drive forty or fifty black members to the suburban home of the slumlord to picket his house with signs reading "Your Neighbor is a Slumlord." This was designed to exploit racism (the status quo) for the community organization's ends. Predictably, the slumlord's white neighbors would get after him, saying "We don't care what you do for a living, but get these niggers out of here or you go." Repairs were quickly made! This example also illustrates one of Alinsky's tactical principles — the right things are almost always done for the wrong reasons.

Unlike some radicals, Alinsky never glorified the poor, on whose behalf he worked. Being poor, he commented, is not very complicated. It means not having any money. He also said that he had seen the have-nots become the haves and become just as crummy as the haves they used to envy. Still, he believed that this was their prerogative. He supported the right of the poor to aspire to and choose the values or life styles that many radicals saw as decadent.

Saul Alinsky grew up in the slums of Chicago, the son of poor Jewish immigrants. He lived in Los Angeles for a while after his parents were divorced,

and graduated from Hollywood High. He entered the University of Chicago in 1926, studying anthropology and sociology. His social action career dates back to his third year in college, when he and some fellow students became interested in a coal miners' dispute in southern Illinois. After graduating cum laude in 1930, Alinsky was awarded a graduate fellowship in criminology; after two years of graduate work at the University of Chicago, he left to work at Joliet State Prison.

Alinsky's dissatisfaction with psychological approaches to criminology formed the basis of his emphasis on local community groups as the locus for action to improve urban life. This emphasis on community carried over into the next phase of his professional life. In 1938 he turned down a position in Philadelphia as head of probation and parole and visiting lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, and chose instead to organize the poor. His distinctive style and philosophy emerged from his experiences as a labor organizer for the CIO. He was a pioneer in adapting tactics from the labor movement — boycotts, picketing, and strikes — to community organization.

In the late 1930s Alinsky began organizing Back of the Yards, near Chicago's stockyards, one of the worst urban slums in the nation. Back of the Yards became a stable neighborhood and a model working-class community through his efforts. With the backing of two prominent Chicagoans, publisher Marshall Field and Bishop Bernard Sheil, Alinsky set up the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which began to train organizers to apply the Alinsky method to communities across the country. Rochester, Kansas City, Buffalo, and Oakland are but a few of the cities where Alinsky's organizing efforts took place. In the late 1940s he supervised and aided Fred Ross in setting up the Community Service Organization (CSO) in East Los Angeles. It was through the CSO that Cesar Chavez, his best-known student, came to Alinsky's attention.

Toward the end of the 1960s, when whites were no longer as welcome in organizing blacks, Alinsky increasingly felt that no lasting reform was possible without involvement of a significant proportion of the middle class. He spent much time lecturing on college campuses, setting up a new school to train organizers, and promoting his shareholder proxy plan. Proxies for the People was a plan to solicit proxies to be used at stockholder meetings to pressure corporations to support such social causes as public transportation and the elimination of pollution.

Today, more than a decade after his death, Alinsky remains a controversial figure. His tactics have become commonplace among small neighborhood groups across the country. In Los Angeles, for example, the United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO) operates in the barrios largely on the Alinsky model of an issue-oriented mass membership organization to pressure business and government for change and action. The IAF still exists, but it is now based

in New York, and community leaders being trained there are becoming increasingly influential politically.

In a recent article Donald and Dietrich Reitzes (1982) suggest that Alinsky's work is as important today as it was in the 1960s. They feel that Alinsky's own impatience with formal theory and research hindered attempts to explore his underlying sociological orientation. They conclude their assessment of Alinsky's writings and community organization work with: "Alinsky remains a marvelous example of the sociological imagination and the creative application of a sociological perspective."

REFERENCES

Reitzes, Donald C., and Dietrich C. Reitzes.

- 1982 "Saul D. Alinsky: A Neglected Source but Promising Resource," *The American Sociologist* 17:47-56.