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# Saul Alinsky: *Homo Ludens* for Urban Democracy

by Richard Luecke

Richard Luecke is director of studies at the Community Renewal Society in Chicago. This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, November 15, 1989, p. 1050. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org). This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

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## Book Review:

**Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky: His Life and Legacy, by Sanford D. Horwitt. Knopf, 640 pp., \$29.95.**

When Auxiliary Bishop Bernard J. Sheil of the Chicago archdiocese embraced labor leader John L. Lewis of the CIO at the founding convention of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council 50 years ago, it was not only high public theater but the beginning of community organization as we have come to know it. Working backstage and in the audience and planting interpretations in the press at that event was a second-generation American of Russian Jewish parents, a product of Chicago's West Side and the University of Chicago sociology department, who had a hang-tough presence, wire glasses and a way of speaking that both adopted and created a Chicago brogue: Saul Alinsky.

Five years later, in *Reveille for Radicals* (1945), Alinsky described the new community organizing strategy as "collective bargaining beyond the present confines of the factory gate." Only twice more would Saul Alinsky try to form community-labor alliances -- in the stockyard areas of Armourdale in Kansas City and South St. Paul. But the other elements of community organizing would come together again and again: the foot-slogging, one-on-one recruitment effort to form an organization of organizations, the struggle to get past ethnic differences, the taking of the public stage, the sequence of conflict-organization-power as the route to negotiation, and the critical relationship to other social movements -- which became a guarded relation to the civil rights movement.

The accomplishment of this big new book by Sanford Horwitt (his first), eight years in the making, is to put a multitude of Alinsky stories into historical sequence. It also tells lesser-known stories about Alinsky's parents, his lifelong ambivalence toward the university, his prison work,

his acceptance by mob figures, and his marriages. It takes us behind the scenes with friends kept and friends lost, including the seven notables composing his Industrial Areas Foundation. It describes his crisscrossing the country on lecture trips, fascinating college audiences and subduing hecklers, and refers to some little-known writings (including a biography of John L. Lewis and a play featuring two towering characters very like Lewis and himself) It records the perennial problem and occasionally decisive effects of funding. It recounts scenes made in restaurants and drops not a few vanities and some duplicities along the way. All this will prompt renewed interpretations and not a few psychobiographical speculations.

The concern here is with the public question this figure embodied. For to ask about the future of community and democracy in industrialized cities is to ask about Alinsky. And his experience with the churches is part of that question.

How do you become part of the city if, as was the case with black newcomers after the war, you are, practically speaking, invisible? The tactic, sometimes practiced and sometimes imagined, was to expose the very prejudices and inflexibility of the Man: eating watermelon outside a place of business, or coming all day in a circle to the employment office -- like movie Indians coming over the hill. You could speculate about ways of making it clear you were here to stay -- by, for example, occupying all the waterclosets at O'Hare airport during rush hour. Somebody always asks whether these things really happened. Well, you have to remember the strategic rule that a threat can be more effective than the deed.

Certainly when 46 buses carrying 2,500 black passengers from the Woodlawn Organization arrived at Chicago City Hall for voter registration, you could count on getting the desired unbelief and consternation, including police with machine guns. You had only to know what ethnicity and delivery of votes means in Chicago. At a city council hearing on schools, 50 people from Woodlawn could look like hundreds to the press. To the neighbors of a slumlord, a handful of picketers could look like an invasion.

Visibility made it easier to expose what others were doing, even when it came to confronting and negotiating with corporate giants. The University of Chicago's plan to expand southward over the Midway could be interpreted as a wish to keep Woodlawn people from coming northward. In Rochester, New York, where the issues were housing and jobs, Minister Florence of the FIGHT organization could put the word "plantation" on policies of the city housing commission and major corporations.

Obviously you can't gain power or standing if, having become visible, you are viewed only as objects or clients. The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council identified (Alinsky would say "froze") two natural enemies: the Kelly-Nash Democratic political machine and the social work establishment. After forming the Industrial Areas Foundation, Alinsky never again mentioned his work, with the Chicago Area Project for youth which had brought him to Back of the Yards. BYNC's first conflict was with a prestigious University of Chicago settlement house. Social work associations in Chicago, as later in New York, reacted predictably and obligingly with claims of professional expertise and prerogatives. "Welfare colonialism" became a charged Alinsky phrase used to break "the social work paradigm."

Alinsky could stretch this target to include "liberals" of many stripes -- whose moral indignation and sense of commitment, he often observed, varied "inversely with their proximity to the scene

of conflict." He took issue with other movements. For followers of Martin King in the South, no doubt, passive resistance was a necessary tactic; in the North you needed something more sophisticated -- stable -- disciplined, mass-based organizations. New Left students romanticized the poor; their dream of "participatory democracy" was merely quaint without urban-adapted organization; they wanted "revelation not revolution." (Alinsky was brusque with student leaders. He never met with King.)

Federal programs for the poor, designed when the Kennedys discovered "the other America" through Michael Harrington, were seen as the work of distant planners who, in Alinsky's phrase, failed to see "the difference between the world as it is and the world as we would like it to be." The Community Action Program of the War on Poverty with its slogan "maximum feasible participation of the poor" might at first sight appear inspired by Alinsky. He called it "political pornography." To imagine that municipal officials would sit idly by while federal agencies paid communities to skirt patronage and fight City Hall was to imagine something "that never was nor ever will be." "Maximum feasible misunderstanding" was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's phrase for it, who credited Alinsky with "a near-perfect prognosis." From church charities to foreign aid, assistance programs became acceptable only when the self-interest on all sides was clear.

Many of these schemes found a future in post-Minsky organizations. Today IAF, steered by Ed Chambers (Alinsky's choice) and four area coordinators, has organizations in 23 cities. They have achieved electoral and infrastructure victories in San Antonio, engineered school reforms in Baltimore, and built "Nehemiah Plan" housing in East Brooklyn. Gale Cincotta, who grew up in Chicago's Austin community and fought with an IAF organization against block-busting and panic-peddling, now runs the National Information and Training Center which carries the action to national policies affecting finance, investment and housing.

"Specifically American" is what Jacques Maritain (revealed in this book as Alinsky's friend and confessor) said of *Reveille for Radicals*, which was a bestseller. Harry Boyte, who seeks a usable past in people's organizations, places Alinsky in an American populist tradition and sees a future in which empowered communities come together to address common goods ("common wealth") - - which are both the means and ends of public communication.

The Urban Training Center in Chicago was a national boot camp for clergy and organizers during the '60s and early '70s. Alinsky was a regular lecturer there, along with other community theorists and practitioners: Richard Hauser, Milton Kotler (usually accompanied by Pastor Leopold Bemhard, then at First Lutheran in Columbus, Ohio), SDS neighborhood organizers, SCLC clergy from many cities, SNCC organizers, Maulana Ron Karenga of black nationalist work in California, Ivan Illich of Puerto Rican New York and Cuernavaca, Mexico. Twenty years later we'd have to say it is Alinsky whose stories are most remembered and whose effects are most in evidence.

It was Alinsky who aroused the most controversy in the churches, partly by making himself a sign that was spoken against. Horwitt cites the many individuals and groups who found themselves offended religiously, morally or aesthetically by Alinsky's espousal of self-interest and power, his "rubbing raw the sores of discontent," his irreverence and vulgarity. These included writers in *The Christian Century*, and a denominational urban specialist and founder of UTC, who left his church office and the UTC board for a post at HEW.

Others moved forward on the waves Minsky made, and helped make more waves by releasing funds for organizational efforts. A minister with migrant workers could be called to a metropolitan council of churches; involved local pastors could move to denominational commissions (and help create UTC) More than one seminary president ascribes his organizational skills to Alinsky training.

But Alinsky's eye was on parish pastors. To a young Father John Egan on his first visit to the IAF office, Alinsky gave this advice: "Decide early whether you want to be a bishop or a pastor - everything follows from that." For Egan, later assigned to work with parishes associated with Alinsky organizations and to supportive work with Alinsky staff, everything did. At UTC, as elsewhere, Alinsky pointed to the Bible as an organizer's training manual and to Moses and Paul as organizers. Without Paul, where would the Jesus movement be? A paper by Nicholas von Hoffman, "Finding and Making Leaders," became a near-canonic text on how to enter a community and make your way to the indigenous persons who really call the shots. "Action-reflection," a procedural term in urban training, became something more than a buzz phrase for clergy and seminarians who sat with organizer Tom Gaudette between engagements of a community organization, sometimes to 4 A.M. (hours preferred also by Alinsky)

Beyond the prospect of saving a parish neighborhood from fright and flight, clergy found the very experience of a neighborhood organizing effort fruitful for ministry. Where people can't act much at all, they can hardly be expected to act in faith -- or unfaith. Clergy and congregations were alleged to know something about community creation, interpretation, polity, organization and reorganization. Why could not some of these disciplines be transferred to participation in the wider community (using, to be sure, somewhat different terms) ? In addition to IAF, there are today training groups in a half-dozen cities that work with both organizers and clergy.

Then as now the unresolved issue was race. Alinsky's idea was that community organization was the instrument for overcoming racial conflict. If excluded people acquired a place to stand, if mutually suspicious people could deal with one another on the basis of common problems, maybe *then*. IAF organizers were attuned to keeping issues of race from emerging abstractly and dividing nascent organizations.

It remains an unsettled question, however, whether deep racial divisions can be transcended in this way. Back of the Yards managed to set aside ethnic differences between Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Irish and Germans only to use this combined power to keep out blacks. (It was time, Alinsky said, to organize on the outside.) Looking back on a similar story in the Organization of Southwest Communities, von Hoffman laid this result squarely at the door of the clergy -- who, he complained, were "practically a caricature, a cartoon, of the sins of omission and commission." "Somebody is finally going to have to speak bluntly about these appointments." When Ed Chambers first arrived on that scene, Alinsky worried that the young seminarian would try to talk theology to the pastors, "which of course they would not understand."

Many congregations and clergy spent their time asking whether Alinsky organizations were "acceptable." But the real question was what could be done from inside such organizations.

Civilization has been described as a contest between *homo seriusus* and *homo rhetoricus* and elsewhere. "Serious" people assume that their own thought matches up with things as they are

and their counsels with things as they should be. Experts tend to be "serious." The churchman who left UTC because of conscientious objections to Alinsky was "serious."

"Rhetorical" people, on the other hand, use speech not to identify things but to constitute and reconstitute subjects in terms of interest, to take up roles within the social drama, to focus, to score, and to win. Life becomes a game which any number can play. The line between fact and fiction is softened: you can learn a lot from "fiction," and "facts" are, as the word implies, "made" by those who use them. Seriousness becomes a matter of suspicion since it can be used to patronize, suppress and exclude. To be serious about racism is to dignify it. A more appropriate response is a pie in the face (Alinsky did this literally) "When they're serious," Fanny Bryce used to say, "you know they're lyin'."

At the outset of *Rules for Radicals* (1971) Alinsky announced his intent to be a Machiavelli for the "have-nots" -- what the have-nots don't have is power. Exactly here is where serious people raise serious questions. "But does the end always justify the means?" For this Alinsky had more than one answer. To groups who in his view stood to be done in by such serious questions, Alinsky would say, "People who always ask about ends and means are people who always sit on their ends and never have any means. To others he would ask, "What *else* justifies them?"

From Horwitt's reading of Alinsky's strategies we learn also that means should be commensurate with ends. You do not adopt measures that foreclose the possibility of communicating in the future -- a point Minsky roared at ethnic nationalists. On college campuses he cited *The Federalist* on the need for power in all sectors of society -- power was as "American as cherry pie."

The very exercise of power tends toward discovery. Machiavelli wrote not only *The Prince* but *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, in which he went on to develop citizen rights and the institution of tribunes to protect them. Acting with scheme and artifice to get and hold power can lead the actors toward forming a genuine polity.

Horwitt calls Alinsky "a swashbuckling Renaissance man." The Renaissance was as noted for rhetorical flourish and public drama as for enlivened preaching in pulpits and streets. In this sense -- in a way different from Thomas Jefferson, who was a son of the Enlightenment with its catalogs and methods -- Alinsky might indeed qualify as our recent Renaissance man. He took Jefferson's question about the fate of democracy in urbanized populations and translated it into the language of the country's most avoided neighborhoods and caused it to be writ large in our industrialized cities. He brought the American experiment to the modern city -- unseriously, of course.