

# MORE ON POVERTY

*The following articles will extend the series of poverty reports which began last fall and continued with Vera Rony's article on Tennessee and Pat Watters' on Mississippi. Reports on various problems and areas of the Poverty Program will appear regularly in subsequent issues.—ED.*

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## **The Myth of Saul Alinsky**

It is most fascinating that Saul Alinsky's approach to community organizing is commonly regarded as a radical one and that a number of people with progressive and radical leanings are so strongly attracted to it. However, the Alinsky model neither implies a radical view of society nor calls for radical social change. What, then, are its essential ingredients of social action?<sup>1</sup>

The major goal is to build a powerful neighborhood organization. This organization is to include all elements in the community—the people, the clergy, businessmen's groups, PTA's, service groups, block groups, the "poor."<sup>2</sup> Essentially, it is to be a local united front, an organization of organizations, and, like a labor union, it attempts to maintain its status as the sole bargaining agent in the area. The local organization involves at most 2 per cent of the people in the community; its purpose is to shift power to itself by taking it away from the existing local groups that are most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

Alinsky's model organization is built largely through stirring conflict, "rubbing raw the sores of discontent," attempting to disorganize whatever community organization exists.<sup>4</sup> A continuous state of militancy is emphasized, and demonstrations, pickets, boycotts, direct action, and publicity are stressed in order to involve people in building the organization.

For example, in Alinsky's best-known group—The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago (TWO)—the aim was to expose and stop the exploitation of those neighborhood merchants who were overcharging. TWO got the cooperation of Woodlawn residents and community leaders and received a great deal of publicity. TWO also organized tenant groups trying to get slum landlords to repair building-code violations. If the landlords would not comply, TWO called rent strikes and picketed the homes of some landlords in white suburbs.

These are typical activities used all over the country by many different consumer, tenant, and civil rights groups to win specific gains. Alinsky attempts to use these tactics in order to develop local organization and power.

### **Sociotherapy for the Poor**

Writers like Charles Silberman and Warren Haggstrom have added a sociotherapeutic dimension to the Alinsky model, arguing that militant social action presumably transforms apathetic, dependent, poor people into independent, dignified citizens.<sup>5</sup> Haggstrom believes that poor people need power, not money, and that this power will make them feel able and competent. In discussing the sociotherapeutic implications of the Alinsky model, Sherrard and Murray comment:

It is assumed that aggression is a natural way for people who have been oppressed, mistreated, exploited or neglected to respond to those who have misused them, and that this [conflict] mode of organization will therefore overcome apathy and sustain participation among those who would not otherwise be willing to expend their energy on any social enterprise.

It is perhaps assumed that this stance of righteous anger attracts and holds certain kinds of people who seem to require more compelling and intensive involvement than they get attending meetings and engaging in community problem solving. A militant stance of this sort may also encourage the timid who have legitimate complaints and have suffered and have been exploited to come forward and air their grievances. . . .

This activity may indeed be therapeutic, if by acting out and giving vent to their hostilities these deprived individuals and groups attain subsequently a more stable and realistic relationship to their institutional environment. However, unless there is accompanying change in their environment, such activity may disrupt and further prevent the participants from making a new social adjustment. Any "therapy" must, above all, be realistic and honest at the same time that it raises aspiration and motivation—admittedly a difficult balance to achieve. It is yet to be proved that conflict organization is indeed therapeutic.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Are The Local Results?**

Apart from the fact that Alinsky offers no national program directed toward social change, what has he achieved locally through his model? He contends that his Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) has organized over 2 million people in 44 communities over the last 30 years. However, as Arthur Hillman comments, "Certainly if one out of every 100 people in the population are somehow enrolled or had recently been involved, the whole movement would have been much better known long before the recent publicity."<sup>7</sup> Alinsky offers no systematic evidence of any kind regarding the numbers of people he has organized. Moreover, it is very difficult even to locate the 44 communities now. A good many of them seem not to have survived for any period of time.

In the better known communities that Alinsky has organized (or stimulated)—Chelsea in New York City, The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago, FIGHT in Rochester, Back of the Yards in Chicago, the Syracuse Community Action Training Project—there is considerable question as to their effectiveness and achievements. The Chelsea project in New York, organized in the 1940's, which is rarely referred to anymore, was a complete fiasco.<sup>8</sup> It ended with great bitterness, no results, and disorganization. The Back of the Yards project in Chicago remains well-organized, but has ultimately become anti-Negro. Alinsky resigned from the Syracuse project not long after the going got rough, and the Office of Economic Opportunity (which had founded the organization) required that the project be placed under the umbrella of the city-wide antipoverty agency. Alinsky seemed completely unable to develop tactics to respond to this condition. Moreover, the achievements in the Syracuse project (such as organizing tenants in public housing projects) were probably not any more outstanding than those of the great variety of far less militant community action projects developed through antipoverty funding. For example, the Lincoln Hospital Neighborhood Service Center Program also organized tenants, participated in voter registration campaigns and the welfare rights movement with far less fanfare.<sup>9</sup>

In Rochester, the Alinsky-inspired agency called FIGHT has developed an almost completely segregated Negro organization. FIGHT is presently engaged in negotiating with Eastman-Kodak for job training for Negro youngsters in the area. Recently, perhaps as a result of much criticism regarding his localism, Alinsky has been suggesting that the Eastman-Kodak issue in Rochester may spread to become a national

issue for every Negro ghetto in America and "revive the fading civil rights movement."<sup>10</sup>

There is no question that considerable press attention has been directed toward the Kodak issue: Stokely Carmichael has been introduced to Rochester; the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty has been investigating the issue; and the National Council of Churches has become involved. The question remains, however, whether it is more of a national newspaper issue than a movement. For example, "the national boycott of Kodak, which Carmichael promised to help organize, turned out to be a complete flop. Picketing scheduled in only nine cities actually occurred in four. At that only a few dozen showed up in New York, Detroit, Chicago and San Francisco and only five to seven in Atlanta."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps even more relevant is the fact that locally in Rochester the "White Friends of FIGHT" have been losing their enthusiasm, and two of their presidents have resigned. Direct anti-Semitism expressed by Rev. Florence, the head of FIGHT, has antagonized many supporters. The church support in Rochester is rapidly dwindling and FIGHT's isolation from other civil rights organizations is increasing. Moreover, Kodak, Xerox, and many other firms throughout the nation, are involved in providing on-the-job training for "hard-core poor." The demand is not unique to FIGHT, and it is achieving results without the militant rhetoric that characterizes FIGHT. To pretend that there is deep establishment resistance to this program of on-the-job training and that only some militant organization can break this resistance is patently absurd. Reverend Leon Sullivan has developed similar, far more successful projects (Opportunity Industrialization Centers) in over 20 cities with much less revolutionary rhetoric. And in San Francisco the Mayor has been involved by the "New Careers Movement," which includes non-professionals and professionals, in developing a program for 3,000 New Careers jobs and careers for poor people, without any of the publicity attached to the Alinsky model. Not only are jobs to be produced, but training, upgrading, career lines, and modifications in Civil Service provisions as well; in other words, a series of potential institutional changes.

Alinsky's most publicized organization is The Woodlawn Organization, TWO, in Chicago. Countless newspaper and magazine writers have visited this project to bring back glowing reports about the development of dignity in the people of the area, victories over local shopkeepers and slumlords, exciting tactics (truth squads, death watches), and presumably the organization of previously apathetic, uninvolved, hard-core poor people.<sup>12</sup> Various Chicago-based social-scientist observers, however,

present quite different reports. Sherrard and Murray, Arthur Hillman, and Philip Hauser all raise serious questions (see below) regarding the TWO project, and again it must be remarked that Alinsky has no systematic evidence whatsoever to back up the high-order publicity claims which have emerged.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Sherrard and Murray—who live, work, and conduct research in Chicago and along with Hillman have studied The Woodlawn Organization at close hand—seriously question the claim that TWO has reached the most deprived segment of the community. Hillman states: “Various kinds of evidence and the judgment of observers show that TWO’s leaders and principal participants are middle class or upwardly mobile lower class persons. They are definitely not the most deprived or depressed.”

Sherrard and Murray note in regard to the Chicago projects (and they are referring to all four of Alinsky’s groups in Chicago), that “these church sponsored organizations have introduced a number of persons into political and city-wide prominence, but they have not become city-wide leaders. Organizational preoccupation with local self-interest and hostility toward citywide institutions severely limits their municipal leadership potential.”

The question has also been raised as to whether pressure on offending merchants and slumlords forces changes that endure for any length of time. The recent supermarket boycott by women in various cities in the United States and Toronto probably stimulated the reduction of prices for a short time, but whether these prices will long remain at the new level is an open question. Tenant groups throughout the country, without the organization and funding of Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation, have conducted rent strikes and have won gains with regard to housing repair, etc. There is no evidence in Alinsky’s TWO or any of his other projects that their gains are greater than those of comparable communities in Chicago or other cities. Again, there is a lack of hard data.

The limitations of Alinsky’s model in Chicago are particularly outstanding because he has organized four different groups in this city and yet appears to have had no significant influence on the Daley machine—an avowed enemy. Martin Luther King, through a few large demonstrations in Chicago last summer, was able to wrest concessions from Mayor Daley which Chicago’s four church-sponsored Alinsky groups have never been able to win from the city.

When antipoverity organizations produce as little as Alinsky’s groups, they receive no end of criticism. But the Alinsky facade continues to enchant the press and thereby the public.

Alinsky constantly poses as anti-establishment, but the question is: which establishment is he opposed to? The organization of organizations that he produces in the local community often seems to become a new local establishment. He does not in any fundamental way challenge the city-wide or national establishments.

Perhaps more to the point, Alinsky's approach has not led to anything in the way of development, movement, national program, or national organization. It is possible to argue, of course, that some other group may come along and organize those people who have been aroused by Alinsky's organizers; but this does not seem to have occurred, an interesting fact in itself. Perhaps, the Alinsky model fundamentally diverts people from the idea of larger organization. In his opposition to large programs, broad goals and ideology, Alinsky diverts and confuses even the small masses that are included in his organization. This is most evident in the groups he has organized over the last 30 years; but even in TWO, his most positive example, there does not seem to be any significant movement toward a larger program. Recently, TWO has been moving toward job training and psychiatry for the poor, etc.—hardly programs of large social significance.

Alinsky's great concern that the people in the local neighborhood should develop their own goals by themselves leads further to the possibility of a localist agenda, because it is the organizer-strategist-intellectual who should provide the connections, the larger view that will lead to the development of a movement. This is not to suggest that the larger view should be imposed upon the local group; yet, it certainly should be developed, in part, by nationally-oriented leadership. It still can then be vetoed, amended, or accepted by the local population.

Many people who are not major supporters of Alinsky believe that he plays a valuable role in aiding less "radical" groups in the society to make more extreme demands. The argument goes: if a group makes powerful, extreme demands, the establishment is more likely to accede to the milder demands of liberals and other less militant forces. There is no question that sometimes this argument holds true, but it requires a careful analysis of the conditions under which it does and under which it does not. For example, it is fairly clear that the "Black Power" movement in the United States is not making the struggle of the other civil rights groups easier—to the contrary! Some years ago the militant posture and activity of Mobilization for Youth so highly sensitized the local governmental systems that any attempts by public-sponsored agencies to become involved in social action were thereafter looked at askance. Some people mistakenly believe that the violence and the riots

in various ghetto areas has led to new programs related to these areas. But there is no evidence for this. What happens is that money will be spent for riot control and temporary programs to keep youngsters off the streets. Typically, the money is taken from one program and simply transferred to another. There is no evidence of any expanded programming in relation to riots that have occurred, other than perhaps permitting the turning-on of hydrants in hot weather.

It is not possible to offer here a full analysis of the conditions under which a more extreme movement makes it easier for a less extreme movement to achieve gains. Suffice to say, however, that the extreme movement should probably possess genuine power which is more than locally-based and should be able to have some relationship, short of complete disparagement, with the less militant groups. The civil rights movement in its earlier phase was illustrative. At that time, when the more militant groups such as CORE and SNCC were able to have an influence on the other civil rights groups and frequently coalesced with them, the movement had much greater influence as a whole.

The question has to be asked repeatedly, and not only as to whether an opposite effect occurs in response to an extreme demand, but also whether the goals would be achieved, independent of this type of demand. We must always ask, "What are the alternatives if the Alinsky position were not offered?" "How is Alinsky distracting and diverting from more significant programs of social change?" "Does he politicize the area, or does he simply direct people into a kind of dead-end local activism?"<sup>14</sup>

#### ***Radical Rhetoric vs. Radical Goals***

In some cases, Alinsky probably does break a local stalemate and provides a door opener where nothing has been happening. The existing political power structure in Rochester, for example, responded to the coming of Alinsky by making counter-promises, etc. Frequently, however, as much energy is directed into exposing Alinsky, and little real change takes place. This, of course, is not a necessary condition, but it seems to happen frequently, probably largely because Alinsky is concerned with developing counter-organization rather than large-scale political change; his tactics, therefore, are in this direction and there is an under-emphasis on methods of influencing the local power groups that cannot be directly attributed to the power of the Alinsky organization.

It is difficult to understand why Alinsky should be accepted as a radical by people knowledgeable about radicalism, since he has no

basic critical analysis of American society, no program for large-scale institutional changes, and no national program whatsoever.

(The titles of Alinsky's books are most revealing with regard to the man who calls himself a "professional radical." He published *Reveille for Radicals* in 1945, and for some time he has talked about a book to be published called *Rules for Revolution*.)

Alinsky has developed no organization outside of local areas, and he eschews ideology which he equates with dogma; he has no plan to assist the poor to become non-poor and to leave poverty. He has never developed any national coalition with other major forces. Groups he has organized sometimes actually develop reactionary orientations (for example, the anti-Negro orientation of the Back of the Yards group in Chicago). He provides no analysis of new developments taking place in the society that might have relevance for a long-range strategy.

The Alinsky formula assumes some kind of bootstrap magic by which individual neighborhoods can solve their problems through an almost Mao-like belief in the magic or efficacy of unaided human will. It seems doubtful in the extreme whether local communities can make up for an inadequate national growth rate, and, in many if not most cases, the local economy is a reflection of factors beyond its individual control. The Alinsky model may thus lead to profound conservatism in practice in which radical slogans and rent strikes serve as a substitute for co-ordinated programmatic national action. Neighborhood organization without adequate theory may produce no more than piecemeal noble gestures.<sup>15</sup>

Essentially, then, it is clear that what is radical about Alinsky's approach is its rhetoric—its emphasis on militant posture, and its anti-establishment mystique. Why, then, does such an approach appeal to many American progressives and radicals?<sup>16</sup> There seem to be at least three reasons:

- 1) There is a powerful underdog, anti-establishment tradition in America which can easily be transformed into a mystique of the poor in which there is little careful understanding of what significant, progressive roles an underclass can play in a national movement, if united with other forces, such as intellectuals and strategists. European history is replete with leaders who knew how to unite intellectuals and the underclass. American intellectuals are not especially politically sophisticated. They have few ideological traditions and little experience with the development of national political movements. Strachey, Laski, Bernstein, Lenin, Marx, and countless others developed strategy, tactics, ideology, and program. But Alinsky has only glamorous tactics, and *ultimately tactics without strategy become bad tactics.*



- 2) There is a bias in America for a kind of mindless, anarchic, pragmatic action, and a leader who ruthlessly calls for "getting things done," not talking a lot of bull, may have considerable appeal.
- 3) Finally, progressives and intellectuals in our society, nostalgic for the 30's, awakened by the civil rights movement of the 60's, and impressed by the activism of the young Left, have been searching for models to complete their early, unfulfilled radicalism.

To do this successfully, however, we will have to reappraise the potential trends and possibilities of the 60's. Through combining our goals with these trends, we will be able to shape new radical programs and strategies different from those of the 30's.

Frankly, we believe that many of the groups concerned with a radical program in America are caught up in stale images and biases. Thus, many radicals today one-sidedly emphasize conflict and demonstration tactics with little realization of the need to develop these into broader political tactics; they overlook the important cleavages within the establishment and the significance of many sub-establishments, possess a simplistic, finite view of power, and underestimate the significance of the expanding public sector of the economy. There is also a failure to grasp the dialectics of leadership, and hence too many radical-minded leaders in community action simply follow the new trends of the ghetto rather than provide the leadership that would come from large vision, national understanding, and theory.

The radicals of the 60's have little to learn from Alinsky because he is not concerned with goals and trends, nor with how to formulate new positions. Alinsky offers sociotherapy (action as therapy) without direction, but action which has no direction ultimately becomes non-therapeutic. In essence, Alinsky's approach represents tactics without strategy, protest without program. An anti-establishment activism is equated with radicalism; but they are by no means the same, and sometimes the activism can be harmful to the radicalism.

<sup>1</sup> See Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945. Alinsky, "The Urban Immigrant," in T. T. McAvoy, ed., *Roman Catholicism and the American Way of Life*; Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960. Alinsky, "Citizen Participation and Community Organization in Planning and Urban Renewal," address to National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, Chicago, January 1962.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas D. Sherrard and Richard C. Murray, "The Church and Neighborhood Community Organization," *Social Work*, Vol. 10, No. 3, July 1965, pp. 3-14.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas von Hoffman, the principal Alinsky organizer in Woodlawn wrote, "It is an organization of perhaps two per cent of the people. Those who talk about

organizing 'all the people,' or 'the masses,' or 'the great majority of the people,' are talking unrealizable balderdash." "Finding and Making Leaders," Ann Arbor: Students for Democratic Society, 1964, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> See Saul Alinsky, "From Citizen Apathy to Participation." Paper presented at the Association of Community Councils of Chicago, October 1957, pp. 4 and 6.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*; New York: Random House, 1964, Chapter 10. (This is essentially the same as "Up from Apathy—The Woodlawn Experiment," *Commentary*, Vol. 37, No. 5, May 1964.) Warren C. Haggstrom, "The Power of the Poor," *Mental Health of the Poor*, edited by Riessman, Cohen, Pearl; New York: Free Press, 1964, pp. 205-212.

<sup>6</sup> Sherrard and Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication from Arthur Hillman, Director of the National Friends Service Training Center, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>8</sup> E. C. Parker, "How Chelsea Was Torn Apart," *Christian Century*, February 3, 1960, p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> See Emanuel Hallowitz and Frank Riessman, "The Role of the Indigenous Non-professional in a Community Mental Health Neighborhood Service Center Program," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 1967, in press.

<sup>10</sup> See: Barbara Carter, "The Fight Against Kodak," *The Reporter*, pp. 28-31, April 27, 1967.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Articles about Alinsky have appeared in *Harper's*, *Commentary*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *Reporter*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, *New Republic*, *Time* etc.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. Cit.*; Philip Hauser, "Conflict vs. Consensus," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 13, 1964, Section II, pp. 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Feldman, "The Pathos of Black Power," *DISSENT*, January-February 1967, pp. 69-80.

<sup>15</sup> From "Politics of Social Welfare," paper prepared for Columbia University Conference, November 1965.

<sup>16</sup> This critique of American radicals who are influenced by Alinsky does not exclude myself. In an earlier article on Alinsky, though highly critical and never presuming him to be radical, I was to some extent taken in by magazine claims regarding his effectiveness. More recent events, further information, and analysis have led to the present position which sees him as highly ineffective and diversionary. See Frank Riessman, "Self-Help Among the Poor: New Styles of Social Action," *Transaction*, September-October 1965, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 32. Also, "A Comparison of Two Social Action Approaches: Saul Alinsky and the New Student Left," by F. Riessman, in *New York State Psychologist*, Vol. 18, No. 2, April 1966.