

Saul Alinsky

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Saul David Alinsky (January 30, 1909 – June 12, 1972) was an American community organizer, and writer. He is generally considered to be the founder of modern community organizing. He is often noted for his book *Rules for Radicals*.

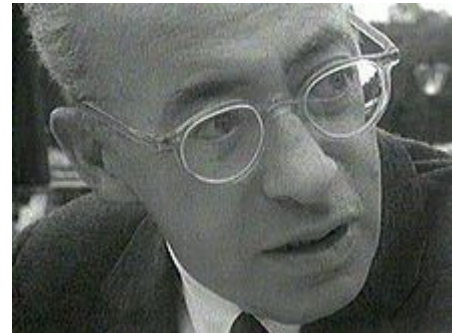
In the course of nearly four decades of political organizing, Alinsky received much criticism, but also gained praise from many public figures. His organizing skills were focused on improving the living conditions of poor communities across North America. In the 1950s, he began turning his attention to improving conditions in the African-American ghettos, beginning with Chicago's and later traveling to other ghettos in California, Michigan, New York City, and a dozen other "trouble spots".

His ideas were adapted in the 1960s by some US college students and other young counterculture-era organizers, who used them as part of their strategies for organizing on campus and beyond.^[5] *Time* magazine once wrote that "American democracy is being altered by Alinsky's ideas," and conservative author William F. Buckley said he was "very close to being an organizational genius."^[4]

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Saul Alinsky



Born	Saul David Alinsky January 30, 1909 Chicago, Illinois
Died	June 12, 1972 (aged 63) Carmel-by-the-Sea, California
Cause of death	Heart attack
Education	University of Chicago, Ph.B. 1930 U. of Chicago Graduate School, criminology, 1930–1932.
Occupation	Community organizer, writer, political activist
Known for	Political activism, writing, community organization
Notable work	<i>Reveille for Radicals</i> (1946); <i>Rules for Radicals</i> (1971)
Spouse(s)	Helene Simon of Philadelphia (m. June 9, 1932 – her death) Jean Graham (May 15, 1952 – 1970; divorced) Irene McInnis Alinsky (m. May 1971)
Children	Katherine and David (by Helene)
Awards	Pacem in Terris Award, 1969

Notes

[1][2][3][4]

Biography

Early life

Saul David Alinsky was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1909 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, the only surviving son of Benjamin Alinsky's marriage to his second wife, Sarah Tannenbaum Alinsky.^[6] Alinsky stated during an interview that his parents never became involved in the "new socialist movement." He added that they were "strict Orthodox, their whole life revolved around work and synagogue ... I remember as a kid being told how important it was to study."^[4]

Because of his strict Jewish upbringing, he was asked whether he ever encountered antisemitism while growing up in Chicago. He replied, "it was so pervasive you didn't really even think about it; you just accepted it as a fact of life."^[4] He considered himself to be a devout Jew until the age of 12, after which time he began to fear that his parents would force him to become a rabbi.

I went through some pretty rapid withdrawal symptoms and kicked the habit ... But I'll tell you one thing about religious identity...Whenever anyone asks me my religion, I always say—and always will say—Jewish.^[4]

At the same time, he was also an agnostic.^{[7][8][9]}

Education

He worked his way through the University of Chicago, where he majored in archaeology, a subject that fascinated him.^[4] His plans to become a professional archaeologist were changed due to the ongoing economic Depression. He later stated, "Archaeologists were in about as much demand as horses and buggies. All the guys who funded the field trips were being scraped off Wall Street sidewalks."^[4]

Early jobs

After attending two years of graduate school, he accepted work for the state of Illinois as a criminologist. On a part-time basis, he also began working as an organizer with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). By 1939, he became less active in the labor movement and became more active in general community organizing, starting with the Back of the Yards and other poor areas on the South Side of Chicago. His early efforts to "turn scattered, voiceless discontent into a united protest" earned the admiration of Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, who said Alinsky's aims "most faithfully reflect our ideals of brotherhood, tolerance, charity and dignity of the individual."^[4]

As a result of his efforts and success at helping slum communities, Alinsky spent the next 10 years repeating his organization work across the nation, "from Kansas City and Detroit to the barrios of Southern California." By 1950 he turned his attention to the black ghettos of Chicago. His actions aroused the ire of Mayor Richard J. Daley, who also acknowledged that "Alinsky loves Chicago the same as I do."^[4] He traveled to California at the request of the San Francisco Bay Area Presbyterian Churches to help organize the black ghetto in Oakland. Hearing of his plans, "the panic-stricken Oakland City Council promptly introduced a resolution banning him from the city."^[4]

Community organizing and politics

In the 1930s, Alinsky organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago (made infamous by Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, which described the horrific working conditions in the Union Stock Yards). He went on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation while organizing the Woodlawn neighborhood; IAF trained organizers and assisted in the founding of community organizations around the country.

In *Rules for Radicals* (his final work, published in 1971 one year before his death), Alinsky addressed the 1960s generation of radicals, outlining his views on organizing for mass power. In the opening paragraph Alinsky writes,

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."^[10]

Alinsky did not join political parties. When asked during an interview whether he ever considered becoming a Communist party member, he replied:

Not at any time. I've never joined any organization—not even the ones I've organized myself. I prize my own independence too much. And philosophically, I could never accept any rigid dogma or ideology, whether it's Christianity or Marxism. One of the most important things in life is what Judge Learned Hand described as 'that ever-gnawing inner doubt as to whether you're right.' If you don't have that, if you think you've got an inside track to absolute truth, you become doctrinaire, humorless and intellectually constipated. The greatest crimes in history have been perpetrated by such religious and political and racial fanatics, from the persecutions of the Inquisition on down to Communist purges and Nazi genocide.^[4]

He did not have much respect for mainstream political leaders who tried to interfere with growing black–white unity during the difficult years of the Great Depression. In Alinsky's view, new voices and new values were being heard in the U.S., and "people began citing John Donne's 'No man is an island.'"^[4] He observed that the hardship affecting all classes of the population was causing them to start "banding together to improve their lives," and discovering how much in common they really had with their fellow man.^[4]

Alinsky once explained that his reasons for organizing in black communities included:

Negroes were being lynched regularly in the South as the first stirrings of black opposition began to be felt, and many of the white civil rights organizers and labor agitators who had started to work with them were tarred and feathered, castrated—or killed. Most Southern politicians were members of the Ku Klux Klan and had no compunction about boasting of it.^[4]

Alinsky's tactics were often unorthodox. In *Rules for Radicals* he wrote,

[t]he job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a 'dangerous enemy.'" According to Alinsky, "the hysterical instant reaction of the establishment [will] not only validate [the organizer's] credentials of competency but also ensure

automatic popular invitation."^[11]

As an example, after organizing FIGHT (an acronym for Freedom, Independence [subsequently Integration], God, Honor, Today) in Rochester, New York,^[12] Alinsky once threatened to stage a "fart in" to disrupt the sensibilities of the city's establishment at a Rochester Philharmonic concert. FIGHT members were to consume large quantities of baked beans after which, according to author Nicholas von Hoffman, "FIGHT's increasingly gaseous music-loving members would hie themselves to the concert hall where they would sit expelling gaseous vapors with such noisy velocity as to compete with the woodwinds."^[13] Satisfied with his threat yielding action, Alinsky later threatened a "piss in" at Chicago O'Hare Airport. Alinsky planned to arrange for large numbers of well-dressed African Americans to occupy the urinals and toilets at O'Hare for as long as it took to bring the city to the bargaining table. According to Alinsky, once again the threat alone was sufficient to produce results.^[13] In *Rules for Radicals*, he notes that this tactic fell under two of his rules: Rule #3: Wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy; and Rule #4: Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.

Alinsky described his plans for 1972 to begin to organize the white middle class across America, and the necessity of that project. He believed that what President Richard Nixon and Vice-President Spiro Agnew then called "The Silent Majority" was living in frustration and despair, worried about their future, and ripe for a turn to radical social change, to become politically active citizens. He feared the middle class could be driven to a right-wing viewpoint, "making them ripe for the plucking by some guy on horseback promising a return to the vanished verities of yesterday."^[4] His stated motive: "I love this goddamn country, and we're going to take it back."^[4]

Legacy and honors

The documentary, *The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy*, states that "Alinsky championed new ways to organize the poor and powerless that created a backyard revolution in cities across America."^[14] Based on his organizing in Chicago, Alinsky formed the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. After he died, Edward T. Chambers became its Executive Director. Hundreds of professional community and labor organizers, and thousands of community and labor leaders have been trained at its workshops. Fred Ross, who worked for Alinsky, was the principal mentor for Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Other organizations following in the tradition of the Congregation-based Community Organizing pioneered by IAF include PICO National Network, Gamaliel Foundation, Brooklyn Ecumenical Cooperatives, founded by former IAF trainer, Richard Harmon and Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART).^{[15][16][17]}

Several prominent American leaders have been influenced by Alinsky's teachings,^[16] including Ed Chambers,^[14] Tom Gaudette, Ernesto Cortes, Michael Gecan, Wade Rathke, and Patrick Crowley.^{[18][19]} Alinsky is often credited with laying the foundation for the grassroots political organizing that dominated the 1960s.^[14] Jack Newfield writing in *New York* magazine included Alinsky among "the purest Avatars of the populist movement," along with Ralph Nader, Cesar Chavez, and Jesse Jackson.^[20]

Biographer Sanford Horwitt has claimed that U.S. President Barack Obama was influenced by Alinsky and followed in his footsteps as a Chicago-based community organizer. Horwitt asserted that Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was influenced by Alinsky's teachings.^[21] Thomas Sugrue of Salon.com writes, "Obama worked for the Developing Communities Project (DCP) of the Calumet Community Religious Conference (CCRC), a group on Chicago's South Side whose tactics ... were inspired by Alinsky."^[22]

Adam Brandon, a spokesman for the conservative non-profit organization FreedomWorks, one of several groups

involved in organizing Tea Party protests, says the group gives Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* to its top leadership members. A shortened guide called *Rules for Patriots* is distributed to its entire network. In a January 2012 story that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, citing the organization's tactic of sending activists to town-hall meetings, Brandon explained, "his [Alinsky's] tactics when it comes to grass-roots organizing are incredibly effective." Former Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey also gives copies of Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals* to Tea Party leaders.^[23]

In 1969, Alinsky was awarded the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award.

Death

Alinsky died at the age of 63 of a sudden, massive heart attack in 1972, on a street corner in Carmel, California. Two months previously, he had discussed life after death in his interview with *Playboy*:^[4]

ALINSKY: ... if there is an afterlife, and I have anything to say about it, I will unreservedly choose to go to hell.

PLAYBOY: Why?

ALINSKY: Hell would be heaven for me. All my life I've been with the have-nots. Over here, if you're a have-not, you're short of dough. If you're a have-not in hell, you're short of virtue. Once I get into hell, I'll start organizing the have-nots over there.

PLAYBOY: Why them?

ALINSKY: They're my kind of people.

See also

- Community organizing
- Category:Community activists
- Community development
- Community education
- Community practice
- Community psychology
- Critical Psychology
- Conscientization
- Grassroots organizing
- Organization Workshop

Works

- *Reveille for Radicals*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.
- *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography*. New York: Putnam, 1949.
- *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Random House, 1971.

- *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*. Bernard E Doering (ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

Footnotes

1. ^ "Saul David Alinsky" (http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=BIC2&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CBT2310018941&mode=view&userGroupName=fairfax_main&jsid=54c6a81d3412d08cbf13446347868042). *Dictionary of American Biography* (fee, via Fairfax County Public Library). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1994. Gale Document Number: BT2310018941. Retrieved September 7, 2011. Gale Biography in Context.
2. ^ "Saul David Alinsky Collection" (<http://library.trincoll.edu/research/watk/manuscripts/alinsky.htm>). Hartford, Connecticut: The Watkinson Library, Trinity College. Retrieved September 7, 2011.
3. ^ Brooks, David (March 4, 2010). "The Wal-Mart Hippies" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/opinion/05brooks.html>). *New York Times*. Retrieved September 8, 2010. "Dick Armey, one of the spokesmen for the Tea Party movement, recently praised the methods of Saul Alinsky, the leading tactician of the New Left."
4. ^ *a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q* "Playboy Interview: Saul Alinsky". *Playboy Magazine*. March 1972.
5. ^ *Alinsky, Saul David* (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3407700363/alinsky-saul-david.html>) (Fee). *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2nd ed.) (The Catholic University of America via Gale). 2003. 15 vols.
6. ^ Horwitt, Sanford D. (1989). *Let them call me rebel: Saul Alinsky, his life and legacy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 3–9. ISBN 0-394-57243-2.
7. ^ Nicholas Von Hoffman (2010). *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky*. Nation Books. pp. 108–109. ISBN 9781568586250. "He passed the word in the Back of the Yards that this Jewish agnostic was okay, which at least ensured that he would not be kicked out the door."
8. ^ Charles E. Curran (2011). *The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective*. Georgetown University Press. p. 32. ISBN 9781589017436. "Saul D. Alinsky, an agnostic Jew, organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago in the late 1930s and started the Industrial Areas Foundation in 1940 to promote community organizations and to train community organizers."
9. ^ Deal Wyatt Hudson (1987). Deal Wyatt Hudson, Matthew J. Mancini, ed. *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*. Mercer University Press. p. 40. ISBN 9780865542792. "Saul Alinsky was an agnostic Jew for whom religion of any kind held very little importance and just as little relation to the focus of his life's work: the struggle for economic and social justice, for human dignity and human rights, and for the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor and downtrodden."
10. ^ Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals*.
11. ^ Philip Klein (25 January 2012), "A Saul Alinsky Republican?" (<http://campaign2012.washingtonexaminer.com/article/newt-gingrich-saul-alinsky-republican/338701>), *Washington Examiner*
12. ^ Hill, Laura Warren. "Rochester Black Freedom Struggle Online Project: Oral Histories" (<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=4489>). University of Rochester Libraries.
13. ^ *a b* Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky* Nation Books, 2010 p. 83-4
14. ^ *a b c* "The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy" (<http://archive.itvs.org/democraticpromise>). Itvs.org. July 14, 1939. Retrieved February 26, 2009.

15. ^ Dick Meister, "A Trailblazing Organizer's Organizer" (<http://www.dickmeister.com/id73.html>)
16. ^ ^a ^b Slevin, Peter (March 25, 2007). "For Clinton and Obama, a Common Ideological Touchstone" (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/24/AR2007032401152.html>). *The Washington Post*.
17. ^ Siegel, Robert; Horwitt, Sanford (May 21, 2007). "NPR Democrats and the Legacy of Activist Saul Alinsky" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10305695>). *All Things Considered*. Npr.org. Retrieved 2011-09-08. "Robert Siegel talks to author Sanford Horwitt, who wrote a biography of Saul Alinsky called *Let Them Call Me 'Rebel'*. The book traces Alinsky's early activism in Chicago's meatpacking neighborhood."
18. ^ Flora, Cornelia Butler; Flora, Jan L.; Fey, Susan. *Rural Communities* (http://books.google.com/books?id=U-vXATPRi38C&pg=PA335&lpg=PA335&dq=Wade+Rathke+and+Alinsky&source=web&ots=kY4parFD0R&sig=wNrvMwXA_UmM7clakvsomqwaRIE&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=9&ct=result). Westview Press. p. 335. Retrieved February 26, 2009.
19. ^ Jerzyk, Matt (February 21, 2009). "Rhode Island's Future" (<http://www.rifuture.org>). Rifuture.org. Retrieved February 26, 2009.
20. ^ Jack, Newfield (July 19, 1971). *New York Magazine*. Missing or empty |title= (help)
21. ^ Cohen, Alex; Horwitt, Sanford (January 30, 2009). "Saul Alinsky, The Man Who Inspired Obama" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100057050>). *Day to Day*. NPR. Retrieved April 17, 2011. "about his book *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky His Life and Legacy*"
22. ^ Sugrue, Thomas (January 30, 2009). "Saul Alinsky, The Man Who Inspired Obama" (http://www.salon.com/2012/02/07/saul_alinsky_the_activist_who_terrifies_the_right/). *Saul Alinsky: The activist who terrifies the right*. NPR. Retrieved February 7, 2012.
23. ^ Williamson, Elizabeth (January 23, 2012). "Two Ways to Play the 'Alinsky' Card" (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204624204577177272926154002.html>). *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved January 26, 2011.

Further reading

- P. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*. New York : Paulist Press, 1984.
- Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky: His Life and Legacy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Frank Riessman, "The Myth of Saul Alinsky," *Dissent*, vol. 14, no. 4, whole no. 59 (July–Aug. 1967), pp. 469–478.
- Marion K. Sanders, *The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
- Herb Schapiro, *The Love Song of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Samuel French, 2007. —Play.
- Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Nation Books, 2010.

Video

- Bruce Orenstein (co-producer), *The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy*, Chicago Video Project (<http://www.chicagovideo.com/library.htm>), 1999.

External links

- Works by or about Saul Alinsky (<http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-39875>) in libraries (WorldCat catalog)
- Saul Alinsky (<http://topics.wsj.com/person/A/saul-alinsky/6880>) collected news and commentary at *The Wall Street Journal*
- *Democratic Promise* (<http://archive.itvs.org/democraticpromise>), a documentary about Alinsky and his legacy
- *Encounter with Saul Alinsky* (http://www.nfb.ca/film/encounter_with_saul_alinsky_part_1/), National Film Board of Canada documentary
- Saul Alinsky, The qualities of an organizer (<http://www.panarchy.org/alinsky/organizer.html>) (1971)
- Santow, Mark Edward (1 January 2000). *Saul Alinsky and the dilemmas of race in the post-war city* (<http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI9989649/>) (Dissertation abstract).
- Behrent, Michael C. (10 June 2008). "Saul Alinsky, la campagne présidentielle et l'histoire de la gauche américaine" [Saul Alinsky, the presidential campaign, and the history of the American left] (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Saul-Alinsky-la-campagne.html>) (in French). *La Vie des Idées*. Retrieved September 8, 2011.
- Saul Alinsky's FBI files, hosted at the Internet Archive: part 1 (https://archive.org/details/foia_Alinsky_Saul-HQ-1), part 2 (https://archive.org/details/foia_Alinsky_Saul-HQ-2)



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