

## Who's Afraid of Saul Alinsky? Radical traditions in community organising

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**ABSTRACT** Community involvement too often becomes a patronising, paternalistic process designed and delivered by professionals to control rather than enable and empower. What alternatives are there? Pat Thomson argues that within the international radical tradition we have some important answers and urges us to draw once again on the work of people like Saul Alinsky who encouraged those made poor by economic, demographic and social changes can take an equal part in designing solutions for their problems. In addition to those wider solidarities she also reminds us of our own traditions of community organising that have deeper roots and more tangible relevance to local concerns and everyday lives than the 'manufactured civil society' we are in danger of creating.

Saul Alinsky is often said to be the 'father' of community organizing. In the 1930s, he took the methods that trade union organizers used in factories to collectivise the grievances of workers, and applied them to the problems of communities made poor by low wages and unemployment. Almost all community organising groups acknowledge a debt to Alinsky, although they also draw inspiration from other social movements such as the civil rights movement (USA) and the early women's movement (Australia, UK). As a young community development worker in the early 1970s in Australia, I was trained in Alinsky methods.

In this article, I suggest that there is still something to learn from the Alinsky tradition, in particular, the methods by which those made poor by economic, demographic and social changes can take equal part in designing solutions for their problems. I describe Alinsky and his work and indicate what this might mean for contemporary educational policy.

### **Saul Alinsky: a biographical sketch**

Saul Alinsky was born in 1909 in Chicago's impoverished South Side, and graduated in 1938 as a criminologist from the University of Chicago. At this time, Chicago was a city suffering the Great Depression and was controlled by a powerful combination of corrupt politicians and 'The Mob'. Alinsky's first job was at the Institute for Juvenile Research, and he was assigned to investigate gang activity. This took him to the Back-of-the-Yards area in Chicago, an

enormous slum adjacent to the immense Union Stockyard. There was no regulation of working conditions or wages and residents suffered extreme hardship. In an interview with *Playboy* in 1972 [1]he described the area:

It was the nadir of all slums in America. People were crushed and demoralized, either jobless or getting starvation wages, diseased, living in filthy rotting unheated shanties with barely enough food and clothing to keep them alive.[2]

His own experience of childhood poverty combined with his academic training led him to quickly recognize that gangland activities were borne out of this deprivation. Alinsky was a passionate believer in democracy and feared that such poverty left the entire community vulnerable to fascism and corruption. The remedy he sought was increased participation in the political process in order to achieve improved living and working conditions.

Borrowing techniques he learned from the Congress of Industrial Organisations, he worked to establish a community coalition. He began by convincing priests from the local Catholic Church that supporting their parishioners, rather than lecturing them about the dangers of Communism and Facism, would get them congregations and donations. But the local people needed a different approach. Alinsky told interviewer Eric Norden

You've got to remember that when injustice is complete and crushing, people very seldom rebel, they just give up. ... The first thing we have to do when we come into a community is to break down those justifications for inertia. We tell people. 'Look you don't have to put up with all this shit. There's something concrete you can do about it. But to accomplish anything you've got to have power, and you'll only get it through organization, Now power comes in two forms – money and people, You haven't got any money, but you do have people, and here's what you can do with them.[3]

After months of boycotts, strikes, picketing and sit downs, a voluntary coalition dubbed the Neighbourhood Council, made up of workers, local businesses, labor leaders and housewives, wrung concessions for the area: rent reductions, improvements to schools and services, more equitable bank loans and mortgages, lower food prices. Alinsky argued that the key to this victory became his overall strategy:

The central principal of all our organizational efforts is self determination; the community we're dealing with must first want us to come in, and once we're in we insist they choose their own objectives and leaders. It's the organiser's job to provide the technical know-how, not to impose his wishes or attitudes on the community: we're not there to lead, but to help and teach. We want the local people to use us, drain our experience and expertise, and then throw us away and to continue doing the job themselves.[4]

Alinsky went on to form the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)[5] with the financial assistance of a liberal millionaire. Subsequent successful and high profile campaigns covered the nation, from Detroit to Southern California. He worked with the exploited minority workforce of Rochester, successfully leading a share holder revolt against the major employer in the town, Kodak Eastman. It was from this experience that Alinsky formulated his plan to organize the middle classes, who he saw as a potentially untapped but significant force for justice. He was also sanguine about the conservative trajectories taken by some of the former activists in neighbourhoods where he had worked. He told Norden

... the reason some people give up when they see that economic improvements don't make Albert Schweitzers out of everybody, is that too many liberals and radicals have a tenderminded, overly romantic view of the poor: they glamorise the poverty stricken slum dweller as a paragon of justice and expect him to behave like an angel the minute his shackles are removed. That's crud. Poverty is ugly, evil and degrading, and the fact that have-nots exist in despair, discrimination and deprivation does not automatically endow them with any special qualities of charity, justice, wisdom, mercy or moral purity, they are people, with all the faults of people... but that doesn't mean you leave them to rot.[6]

Alinsky's goal was to form a national organization of local neighbourhood councils and after his death in 1972, his work was carried on through the IAF and the generation of activists he had trained. He had considerable influence, Hillary Clinton for example studied and admired his work and Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, learnt organizing in a community self help group which followed Alinsky's principles.

### **Organising with Alinsky**

Alinsky wrote two books, *Revielle for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1972). In these he spelled out a philosophy and a set of technologies for working in, for, and with disadvantaged communities and networks. The premises were:

1. identify shared concerns across the neighbourhood;
2. identify community leaders to help build relationships and a large membership base which cuts across taken for granted boundaries;
3. establish a democratic governance structure through which an agenda for action can be developed;
4. build leadership among residents so that they can carry out the agenda through adult education, civic participation and public action;
5. grow local, public institutions, infrastructure and services; and

6. hold publicly funded and private organizations to account for delivery of fair and equitable goods and services.

Following these strategies Alinsky and his colleagues connected individual concerns with broader regional issues and encouraged residents to become members of a social polity. But he also advocated the use of particular kinds of oppositional tactics. Because he was particularly keen to expose the arrogance, mistakes and miscalculations of large organizations, he promoted the imaginative use of ridicule, goading, the making of outrageous claims, keeping up the pressure on opponents by shifting tactics, and using the rules of organizations against them. Such ideas got him jailed and also led many 'moderates' to reject his ideas.

But he also said

The first thing you've got to do in a community is listen, not talk, and learn to eat, sleep, breathe only one thing: the problems and aspirations of the community. Because no matter how imaginative your tactics, how shrewd your strategy, you're doomed before you even start if you don't win the trust and respect of the people; and the only way to get that is for you to trust and respect them. And without that respect, there's no communication, no mutual confidence, and no action. [7]

This approach has been taken up in countless community development training programmes – although it rarely appears in policy.

Alinsky's radical tradition can still be seen in Chicago, where reform continues to be driven by grassroots campaigning. Perhaps the most dramatic of such actions in recent times occurred in 2001 when eighteen residents of Chicago's Little Village went on a 19-day hunger strike to make the city live up to its promise to build a new neighbourhood high school.[8]

### **Learnings for School Reform**

Chicago based researchers Gold et al (2005) have supported and documented community based school reforms in the USA. They suggest that getting communities mobilized plays a critical role in school reform (see also for example Finn, 1999; Johnson et al, 2005; Noguera, 2003). They argue that educational schemes must shift away from patronising and paternalistic notions of needy communities that require coordinated services – as in the Comer (Comer et al, 1996) full service school model – designed and delivered by professionals. Instead they propose that school staff begin to shift asymmetrical power relations by assessing the community's assets and working to build trust based on mutual respect (c.f. McKnight, 1995; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996) – Alinsky's bottom line principle. They describe this as a move from parent *involvement* to parent *engagement*. In effect, this move means that school staff become community organisers.

Gold et al list eight indicators for understanding 'the contributions and accomplishments of community organising' (p. 244) viz:

- leadership development – building the skills of community to take up responsibilities and roles in developing an agenda for change
- community power – emerges when groups act together
- social capital – building networks and relationships across cultures, and boundaries
- public accountability – the development of collective understandings of the goals of public education to which officials are held accountable
- equity – increased access for students to strong academic programmes combined with the redistribution of resources
- school/community connections – schools become community *educational* resources
- positive school climate – there is a focus on inclusive teacher-student relationships, safety, and reducing school and class size
- high quality instruction and curriculum – there are challenges for all with the curriculum drawing on community cultures and knowledges in order to acquire the knowledge and skill that counts (pp. 245-246)

Jean Anyon (2005) agrees that such actions are important, but, she suggests, they are in themselves insufficient. She argues that broadly based social movements of parents and community members, such as those Alinsky advocated, are now the major hope for equitable school reform in the USA. Such movements must be more than local, she writes, and they must take up more than educational issues – they must deal with the economic and social issues that are the reality of everyday lives in urban locations. Naming the IAF as well as ACORN – the Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now [9]– as one of five separate but interrelated social movements [10] in the USA, Anyon argues for a national movement which would press for policies that: (1) marry more education funding with the financing of community employment and decent wages, (2) build small schools to assist in neighbourhood revitalization; and (3) address the residential segregation of minorities and low income families.

### **UK Implications**

Such arguments seems a long way from current UK policy.

The Blair government has separated out the economic from the social in discussions of inclusion (Byrne, 1997). It has dismantled the apparatus of the Welfare State, but maintained an old fashioned welfarist approach [11] to deprived areas (Lister, 1998; Prideaux, 2001) and particular 'demonised' groups such as pregnant teenagers (Bullen et al, 2000) and working class boys.[12]

This welfarism has not only failed to produce democratic engagement (Crozier, 2000; Power & Gewirtz, 2001; Vincent, 2000) but at worst could simply perpetuate dependency and powerlessness (Hodge, 2005). School-

community relations are now enshrined in notions of 'joined up thinking' and 'integrated services' in which professional agendas may well dominate (Gilles, 2005), unless the professionals involved consciously try to work other-wise. A focus on job creation is replaced by a re-emergence of workfare, vocational education for the 'non academic' and basic skills training for unemployed adults (Daguere, 2004; McDowell, 2000; Mizen, 2004; Tight, 1998). Poverty is something that happens in Africa [13] not at home – class is a policy unmentionable (Taylor-Gooby, 1997). The idea of respect, so dear to Alinsky, has also fallen prey to an Orwellian reinterpretation such that it now means a focus on civil obedience not civic participation.

Work for justice requires very different approaches in both policy and practice.

The UK does have its own history and traditions of community organizing. Adult and community education, the cooperative movement, urban farms, community media, and independent record labels all sprang from self help and community development projects. There are also cases of the same kinds of community organising that Alinsky practiced: Sylvia Pankhurst and her colleagues' work in the East End of London being just one example. Some of these exemplars belong to an era dismissed by contemporary policymakers as nothing but woolly-headed progressivism, and some from opposition to conservative Tory imposts. But these are experiences and skills within recent memory.

And, at a time when the Blair government is considering how to bring civic participation closer to local concerns and everyday lives [14] it is surely timely to reconsider native traditions of community organising. The dangers of a 'manufactured civil society' (Hodgson, 2004), in which participation equates to texting responses to push polling and participating in projects that have goals and outcomes determined far away from the people they are meant to benefit, cannot be discounted. As Alinsky reminds

People don't get opportunity or freedom or equality or dignity as an act of charity, they have to fight for it ... [15]

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### **Notes**

[1] The entire interview is available on <http://www.progress.org/2003/alinsky.htm>. Accessed August 12, 2004.

[2] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/alinsky8.htm>

[3] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/aliknsky8.htm>

- [4] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/aliknsky8.htm>
- [5] See <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org>
- [6] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/alinsky9.htm>
- [7] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/alinsky9.htm>
- [8] See <http://www.lrna.org/league/PT/PT.2001.07/PT.2001.07.03.html>. Accessed April 15, 2005.
- [9] See <http://www.acorn.org>
- [10] The five are: (1) community organizing for economic justice in cities; (2) a movement of education and parent organizers in urban neighbourhoods; (3) progressive labour unions whose members are immigrant and minority workers; (4) a living wage movement ; and (5) an organized movement of inner city youth (p. 154)
- [11] There is a long standing critique of welfarism and weak communitarianism as band-aiding rather than dealing with causes of immiseration (e.g. Fraser, 1997; Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Wilson, 1977)
- [12] The banning of 'hoodies' in shopping malls and streets is just one example of the public scape-goating of particular groups of young men.
- [13] I am not arguing here against action to reduce debt foisted on developing nations. I am suggesting that such work also need to go on 'at home'.
- [14] Demos head Tom Bentley is now warning of a crisis in civic participation. *The Guardian* (31/5/07, p. 7) reports that Downing Street is looking at more direct forms of consultation with electors.
- [15] From <http://www.progress.org/2003/alinsky11.htm>

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