

How Is Democracy Corrupted or Resurrected? The Possibilities of Civic Engagement through Practices of Community Organizing in the United States

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“Can democracy be saved? I am old; it is up to you.”
Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 2004, 342.

Abstract

This article presents Saul Alinsky’s theory and practice of community organizing as a model for current participatory democracy. Alinsky shows how the community organizer can function as an interventional political actor in the U.S. to address issues surrounding disaffected voters, declining trust in government, and a widening gap between citizens and governments. Alinsky and his successors at the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) have a realistic approach to enhance civic engagement and influence the policy-making process at the city level through rigid top-down structures and strong leadership of organizers. In the present study, I discuss the ambiguities of civic engagement and the ways community organizers act to strike a balance between spontaneous participation and mobilization.

Key Words: participatory democracy, community organizing, Saul Alinsky

Introduction

Saul Alinsky is one of the most celebrated and controversial community organizers in the United States. Although Alinsky is criticized as an “agitator,” or “radical left” in American history, he contends that his practices are based on democracy. From his early days as organizer in the 1940s, he often cites Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in his papers, books, and speeches. His belief is that democracy can only truly function when, besides having marginalized neighborhoods organized and their interests reflected in the existing political system, the people also transcend personal interests and engage with general problems in the public sphere. In other words, for him, democracy is not just an abstract idea, but a living practice that must be improved through the engagement of ordinary people. For instance, in his second book, *Rules for Radicals*, he emphasizes that civic engagement undergirds democracy, citing Tocqueville’s warning:

People cannot be free unless they are willing to sacrifice some of their interests to guarantee the freedom of others. The price of democracy is the ongoing pursuit of the common good by *all* of the people. One hundred and thirty-five years ago Tocqueville gravely warned that unless individual citizens were regularly involved in the action of governing themselves, self-government would pass from the scene. Citizen participation is the animating spirit and force in society predicted on voluntarism (Alinsky 1971[1989]).

Here Alinsky seems to subscribe to contemporary developments in the theory of participatory democracy, and advocate for more involvement by the people. Ideas of participatory democracy, ranging from deepened civic engagement (e.g. Pateman 1970) to the transformation of the liberal-democratic system (e.g. Barber [1984] 2003), have made their way into theories of radical and deliberative democracy. These ideas share the limitations of representative democracy, recognizing political participation by the people as a democratic ideal. This ideal goes back to the original meaning of democracy – the rule (*kratein*) of the people (*demos*). Although these theories about democracy have generally centered around participation, evidence shows that there is a gap between congress and public opinion, which undermines representative democracy. Reconsidering her own previous research, Hanna Pitkin warns:

Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather, administers – passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them (Pitkin 2004: 339).

She laments that the citizens, the supposed agents of democracy, fall into cynicism and inactivity because representatives are mere means to promote the interests of the privileged. Benjamin Barber is also critical of representative democracy. He writes:

A well-known adage has it that under a representative government the voter is free only on the day he casts his ballot. (...) The representative principle steals from individuals the ultimate responsibility for their values, beliefs, and actions. (...) Representation is incompatible with freedom because it delegates and thus alienates political will at the cost of genuine self-government and autonomy (Barber 2003:145).

These studies are all concerned with “the rule of the people” based on the crisis of liberal democracy. Also, these authors have one ideal in common: that more engagement by the people could lead to a healthier liberal democracy that guarantees individual freedom. However, current social theory suggests that individual identity is no longer self-evident, and that people are fundamentally insecure, lacking the political agency that existed in the past (e.g. Beck 1992; Bauman 1999). Baumann argues that the lack of

shared memories and strong bonds among individuals leads to the disappearance of tight-knit communities. The uncertainty associated with gloomy predictions for the future of people in precarious situations does not unite them in their suffering, but rather divides them. Despite some considering community organizing to be an alternative practice of democracy (Warren 2001; Skocpol 2003:270-271), we cannot ignore the possibility that all organizations risk their legitimacy, efficacy, and longevity as long as their constituents are insecure individuals.

In this paper, I delve into why and how Alinsky developed the concept of community organizers as a catalyst in modern mass society. The intervention of community organizers is, strictly speaking, incompatible with participatory democracy, which is based on direct civic engagement. Community organizers, having more authority and being better educated, take on leadership roles that create artificial relationships between diverse constituents to consolidate interests. This role is based on the elitist premise that civic engagement should be minimized. This paper addresses issues of grassroots participation by examining Saul Alinsky's own practices and those of organizations that continued his legacy. The primary goal is to discuss their implications for participatory democracy.

1. Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation

Alinsky was born in 1909 in Chicago to Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrants. He received a scholarship for his graduate studies at the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago, specializing in criminology. He was not merely a "controversial activist," he also had a background in sociology.

Over a wide range of academic fields, scholars commonly invoke the "Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)," which Alinsky established in 1940, as a prime example of community organizing (Sandel 1996:336; Warren 2001; Skocpol 2003:271; William Julius Wilson 1999:85-93). IAF still has affiliates nationwide today, and is categorized as a "broad-based organization" because its groups rely not only on religious congregations, but also on secular institutions such as parent-teacher associations, school districts, and even labor unions.

The goal of community organizing in the U.S. is to solve everyday problems in socially and economically marginalized neighborhoods by empowering individuals. It is expected to cultivate a sense of citizenship (Sandel 1996) and recreate dynamic forms of participation in democratic politics without professionally managed advocacy groups (Warren 2001; Skocpol 2003). In addition, critical historians see the potential for community organizing to build a multiracial coalition at the grassroots level around religious faith (William Julius Wilson 1999). Although scholars argue that the religious left is difficult to describe, as it is anything but a unified political movement (e.g. Matthew Wilson et al., 2007) and religious traditions are inseparable from race and class (Emmerson and Smith 2000), some expect that faith/congregation-based community organizations can compete at the national level with evangelical groups such as the Christian Coalition (Orr et al. 2003; Hart 2001).

Wood and Fulton show that faith-based community organizations contribute to diversity by improving the quality of life of poor, working-class, and middle-class families (Wood and Fulton 2015). They demonstrate that these organizations tend to have greater mobilizing capacity as well as political access (Fulton and Wood 2018:1076).

Alinsky, referring to the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) he organized in 1940, writes in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1946:

Community organizational enterprises have traditionally confined themselves to coordination of professional formal agencies which are, first, superimposed upon the community and, second, play a superficial role in the life of the community. It is a rare phenomenon today to discover a community organization in which the indigenous interest and action groups of the community not only participate but also play a fundamental role in that organization. (...) A survey of the possibilities for community organization of the residents of the Back of the Yards neighborhood reveals two basic social forces which might serve as the cornerstone of any effective community organization which would, first, be representative of the people of community and, second, by the very virtue if such representation, possess the necessary strength to effect constructive changes in life of Back of the Yards neighborhood (Alinsky 1946: 797-799).

Alinsky makes a clear sociological argument for the need to change community organizing from top-down social work to bottom-up participation. He criticized the settlement movement as “hypocritical” social work because it diminished people’s autonomy. After the death of the great social worker Jane Adams in 1935, social work as a movement became dominated by “academic specialists” of the poor, who observed and supported marginalized neighborhoods from outside. In the Back of the Yards – the slum depicted in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* – residents were predominantly “new immigrants” from Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine, Slovakia, and Poland. They were generally Catholics who worked in the meat-packing industry and, as non-native speakers of English, were still discriminated against as “unassimilated” up until the late 1930s.

Alinsky supported the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which successfully organized unskilled workers in the early New Deal Era. Neighborhood organizations complemented work-based union organizing. However, during the Great Depression, Alinsky gradually came to the realization that it was in fact the neighborhood Catholic churches, not political or charitable organizations, these addressed the problems of local residents and provided them with important resources within each separate parish. For him, improving people’s daily lives was the most important: “What does it avail the working man to fight for a raise in pay if this raise is accompanied by increased cost of rent, food, clothing, and medical care?” (Alinsky 1946[1989]: 34) He also emphasizes that “the divorce of the people from the routine daily functions of citizenship becomes the heartbreak of democracy” (Alinsky 1971[1989]: xxvi).

As Slaton argues, BYNC members became agents of democracy, exercising citizenship through not labor unions, interest groups, or even political parties, but through the community (Slaton 1989). Alinsky himself insisted that the community organizer should not be a leader but a catalyst; "...the organizer cannot state certain general principles during the initial stage of organization...that kind of program can and must only come from the people themselves..." (Alinsky 1946[1989]:54-55). However, it must be noted that BYNC succeeded in the establishment of community organizing based on the *de facto* representation of small organizations such as social athletic and parish clubs, women's and youth organizations, and CIO's affiliations, including the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee. In BYNC's monthly committees, they held a constitutional convention in which delegates debated each article until unanimous approval was given. In this instance, it was not the case that direct democracy simply supplemented representative democracy; rather, by pursuing the collective interests of the community, delegates upheld the legitimacy of representative democracy (and thereby pluralism).

By virtue of Alinsky's position among influential religious leaders, Catholic churches and their clergy played a central role in organizing, leading the BYNC towards social justice and social inclusion (Bretherton 2015). BYNC achieved, among other goals, wage raises as well as hot lunch and milk programs in public and private schools, and became a symbol of democratic unity above ethnic conflicts, even overcoming the hostility between churches and the left-wing CIO. Instead of focusing on ethnic identity, BYNC members exercised their full American citizenship by learning to put in action the principle of self-governance and addressing issues pertinent to their neighborhood (Slaton 1989; Fisher 1994; Jacobs 1992[1961]; Horwitt 1989). As Agnes Meyer described in the *Washington Post* in 1946, although BYNC members went on strike and marched for improvement of living conditions, their political activities were not necessarily spontaneous, but rather an "orderly revolution."¹

More importantly, Alinsky decided that organizers must leave the community once self-governance was established. Organizers should not be leaders or even mentors of the organizing process, but act as catalysts for civic engagement. The reason for which he favored on-the-ground, grassroots mobilizing was that he was constantly wary of becoming too reliant on charismatic leaders and dogmatism. This approach is also different from recent leaderless movements based on non-hierarchical structures, such as Occupy Wall Street.

1-2. Alinsky's Thought: Doubt about *Demos*, Hope for *Demos*

As BYNC gradually excluded Black families through committees during the 1950s, Alinsky expressed his frustration with this decision. Historically, BYNC's change can be convincingly explained within the framework of whiteness studies (e.g. Roediger 1991), according to which, formerly

1 Agnes E. Meyer, "Orderly Revolution: 1--The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 1945, 7.

marginalized residents gained a privileged status as a white community. However, few studies have examined Alinsky's thought process within the broader scope of community organizing. Most importantly, his acute awareness of Tocqueville's warnings about the tyranny of the majority led him to create and strengthen the role of the community organizer.

Tocqueville observed during his visit to the U.S. that, compared to Europeans, Americans had become increasingly egalitarian and democratic. The power of the democratic majority arises from the assumption that individuals are capable of leading their own lives and are politically equal to each other; as such, the greatest legitimate power will always be with the majority. Besides, Tocqueville argued that Americans voluntarily gathered in associations to further the interests of the group and, thereby, to serve their own interests. Using "self-Interest rightly understood" (Tocqueville 2002) to describe this concept, he combined the right of association with the virtue to do what is right. This concept of enlightened self-interest discussed in *Democracy in America* was key to Alinsky's thought.

For Alinsky, however, associations were no longer spontaneously formed in 20th-century cities, as he already suggests in his paper in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*:

In our modern urban civilization, multitudes of our people have been condemned to urban autonomy—to living the kind of life where many of them neither know nor care for their own neighbors. They find themselves isolated from the life of their community and their nation, driven by social forces beyond their control into little individual worlds in which their own individual objectives have become paramount to the collective good. Social objectives, social welfare, the good of the nation, the democratic way of life—all these have become nebulous, meaningless, sterile phrases. This course of urban anonymity, of individual divorce from the general social life is one of eroded destruction to the foundation of democracy (Alinsky 1942).

He goes on to argue that people have a deep-seated sentiment that there is no place for them, that they do not count. He asserted that the voice of the people cannot be heard unless there is an organization to represent them. He identified the shortcomings of representative democracy and created the position of the community organizer to address the undemocratic conditions of 20th-century cities. When Tocqueville arrived in the U.S., associations were created in response to the need for people to help each other, since the power of the federal government was very limited. Tocqueville concluded that these egalitarian characteristics were safeguards against tyranny, which occurred when there was less civic engagement. Although Alinsky drew heavily from *Democracy in America*, he was not naïve enough to simply accept Tocqueville's optimistic views in the context of 20th-century big government. He proposed the role of the organizer as a specialist who promoted the participation of ordinary people by establishing a training system for other community organizers.

On the other hand, in the introduction to the 1969 edition of *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky

condemned Back of the Yards residents as “segregationists” (Alinsky 1989[1946]: xii). As he started to organize border areas between Black ghettos and white neighborhoods in the late 1950s, to the extent that IAF functioned as a training center for organizers, he was convinced that the rule by the people was being upheld. On the border between Black and white communities, Alinsky and trained organizers had to reconcile the tension between incoming Black families and existing white residents who tried to leave for the suburbs. At the same time, IAF did not position itself against racial discrimination because they judged that it might aggravate tensions among the constituents in Catholic communities where clergy members hesitated to accept Black families. Thus, Alinsky focused instead on the problem of “blockbusting”² by real estate agencies. Recentering the issue around the conflict between those who controlled people’s options and those who were deprived of the right to self-govern, Alinsky promoted the primacy of the sovereignty of the people over racial tensions (Fish, Nelson, Stuhr, and Witner 1966).

Here the community organizer was not just a catalyst, but redefined as an “abrasive” mobilizer of people against the existing power, creating new ways to canalize residents’ dissatisfaction (Alinsky 1957). While this attempt failed because almost all white residents left the community, Alinsky kept organizing. Alinsky, who continued to work closely with Black communities, was critical of the revolutionary fervor of New Left movements in the late 1960s, insisting that grassroots organizing had to be pragmatic and grounded in people’s interest. He believed that if people were not aware of power structures and of their own interests, participation became meaningless.

Alinsky and liberal members of the clergy justified organizing Black people from an ethical perspective. Alinsky’s lifelong ally Monsignor John Egan, asserted that community organizing should support opening up housing opportunities for Black families by referring to “responsibility,” not “right.”³ Several clergies and pastors supported Alinsky’s thought and practices from a moral perspective despite Alinsky himself being an atheist. Some members of the clergy practically doubled as organizers (many clergymen took IAF courses) – a practice that still remains. Alinsky did not believe in a rule of the people without trained and moral organizers. At the same time, he recognized the potential of *demos* as an agency of democracy with organizer intervention. In the case of IAF, the tradition of participation under the organizers continues today.

2. Theoretical Assessment: Feminist Critique and direct / representative democracy

Alinsky’s model of community organizing is premised on the view that it takes place in the public

2 Blockbusting is a business process in which U.S. real estate agents and building developers convince property owners to sell their houses at low prices, which they do by telling house owners that Black families will soon move into their neighborhoods in order to instill fear in them. The agents then sell those same houses to Black families, who are desperate to escape overcrowded ghettos, at much higher prices.

3 “Citizen Participation and Neighborhood Renewal,” folder 245, box36, Saul Alinsky Papers.

rather than private sphere. Alinsky claimed that women could not be organizers because they could not devote all their time to community organizing like himself. The distinction between public and private is contested by feminists who argue that it is entirely artificial. They claim that a range of practices rooted in the community are neither purely private nor public. Stall and Stoecker make a distinction between IAF practices—such as deploying technical jargon and rigid procedures—and what they call a “women-centered model” around settlement houses and welfare rights movements (Stall and Stoecker 1998). Women-centered organizing is more informal. Previously existing relationships between women, often begun around their coffee tables, are capable of sustaining an organizing effort over the long haul—unlike the artificially cultivated relationships of Alinsky-style organizing. Snarr writes that the lack of structural support—health care, child care, retirement—for these women means that they must “sacrifice themselves” in order to organize low-wage workers, which results in their often burning out at crucial times in their careers (Snarr 2011: 103).

From another perspective, Ann Phillips indicates that the more utopian the version of democracy, the more potentially authoritarian the outcome (Phillips 1991:135). She warns that a decision-making process based on direct democracy is accompanied by “paradoxes of participation.” If a social movement applies egalitarianism among its members, there is no official “leader.” As Freeman demonstrates, social movements, especially since the 1970s, tend to prioritize egalitarian structures, which leads to a “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman 1972). Both emphasize the lack of transparency in the tacit assumption of “equal right to speak,” which masks power imbalances among members. Phillips and Freeman’s logic may unintentionally undermine the legitimacy of women-centered organizing.

Indeed, direct democracy is not a panacea; its consequences are double-edged. However, those enticed by the ideal of direct democracy continue to pursue consensus building at the cost of hidden inequality. Polletta addresses this problem using the words “preoccupied with process” to describe activists who choose tactics of direct democracy not necessarily because they are effective, but in order to express their opposition to representative democracy and bureaucracy (Polletta 2004).

Regarding these issues highlighted by Polletta, IAF is no exception. The “house meetings” adopted by IAF, for example, are also prone to exclusion and internal conflict (Polletta 2004: 223). After the death of Alinsky in 1972, Edward Chambers took over as IAF’s director and began to rebuild the foundation as an institution for training community organizers and leaders, including a significant number of women. At the same time, a young organizer, Ernesto Cortes Jr., began to explore the benefits of engaging with the faith of the organizers themselves. He began recruiting community leaders by reaching out to existing lay leadership, mostly women from Hispanic Catholic parishes in his hometown of San Antonio. He is now approaching retirement, but COPS (Community Organized for Public Service)—an affiliate of Southwest IAF—continues with his practices and has become the leading organization of community activism in the U.S. (Warren 2001; Rogers 1990). However, much research is still needed to determine whether IAF structural support for female organizers has improved or not.

Bowlin uncovered IAF's structural weaknesses by interviewing IAF members. The interviewee, Katie Horvath, a former organizer at Gamaliel (one of IAF related networks) in Detroit said: "The problem on the left is that we confuse the beneficial aspects of structure with the detrimental aspects of hierarchy"—citing Freeman's "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (Bowlin 2018). Bowlin notes that organizers are aware of the problems. IAF teaches to "dis-organize" institutions that are no longer functional, to reset and restart the hard work of building up a network. He found a problem peculiar to IAF; group leaders are often church pastors and, in many Christian denominations, women remain underrepresented in the pulpit—or are barred entirely from leadership roles (Ibid). Horvath recalled a Gamaliel meeting where leaders discussed the manifestation of "God's commonwealth" without a single mention of gender. Another organizer, who described the group as dominated by a male-centric, aggressive approach with an emphasis on agitation rather than trust-building, set out to create a separate consensus-based organization (Ibid). This shows that religion may at times exacerbate gender issues. Snarr writes that only 8% of Christian congregations in the U.S. have a female clergy leader, while women make up about 30% of all students in Christian theological higher education overall (Snarr 2011: 109).

However, Bowlin is optimistic about IAF and its branches since lead organizers meet people where they are, addressing their immediate concerns, instead of imposing a cause or ideology. To be sure, Alinsky's focus on "the world as it is"—reflective of his pragmatism—has been criticized by Black organizers. They argue that such pragmatism is devoid of any analysis of how the world became the way it is, i.e., dominated by global capitalism that causes severe economic inequality, as well as systemic racism and white supremacy. Yet one could argue that IAF's issue-based action could counter manifestations of systemic racism in the forms of violence and low wages.

Again, what matters is whether IAF recognizes these problems. A Seattle organizer notes that he is particularly mindful to prevent privileged white organizers from dominating relational meetings (Bowlin 2018). This is an example of self-correcting measures within IAF, in which organizers monitor their own actions and flexibly respond to problems. In other words, IAF's top-down structure enhances accountability to ensure that such issues are addressed. Likewise, IAF's distinction between public and private is used to support self-care among leaders and help them establish boundaries between family, work, and political involvements (Bretherton 2015: 145). In keeping with Alinsky's methods, IAF training sessions instruct leaders to only use official titles or formal names with politicians in negotiations so as not to introduce collusion. Alinsky would say that the "organizer's job is to insemminate an invitation for himself, to agitate, introduce ideas, get people pregnant with hope and desire for change" (Alinsky 1971[1989]: 103).

As Dreier points out, where people live makes a big difference in the quality of their individual lives (Dreier et al. 2004:3). Over time, the poor have become concentrated in central cities and distressed inner suburbs, while the rich mostly live in exclusive downtown neighborhoods and affluent outer suburbs. Most importantly, the lack of improvement in wage levels since the mid-1990s has widened the gap between rich and poor, leading to the rise of urban poverty in particular. The infrastructure of the places

where people live also has a big impact on the quality of society. Poor and working class families are less likely to own computers or have internet access. If they do not own a car, they cannot send their children to private schools, and must rely on local public schools.

Considering these conditions, IAF and other branches have taken up the challenge of bringing people together from diverse poor and working class backgrounds by training skillful organizers. The established system of accountability and educational courses, and built-in self-correcting systems partly compensate for IAF's structural problems. Theoretically, radical democracy strives to reconsider hegemony, promoting a vibrant "agonistic public sphere" (Mouffe 2005). Mouffe contends that the belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track. Alinsky, under the constraints of the golden age of American liberalism, was also critical of the agreement of the liberal rational and moral consensus, which led him to create the strong role of the community organizer. The organizer acts with the purpose of triggering civic engagement, avoiding compromises, and creating political confrontation between adversaries. IAF empowered vulnerable populations, shifting material resources. It helped increase living wages and promote affordable housing. As Waltzer writes, the recognition of stigmatized groups is no doubt a good thing, but people do not win respect by insisting that they are not respected enough. What he calls "meat and potatoes multiculturalism," (Walzer 2004) where the material strength of groups compels their mutual respect is an appropriate evaluation of IAF.

On the other hand, over the past few years, several studies have focused on nationwide cultural and economic divides. Some social scientists have argued that the increasing support for the radical right is attributable to a profound sense of deprivation by white working-class voters, with deep-red and deep-blue Americans inhabiting different cultures and having little common ground (e.g., Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Williams 2017). As indicated in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2014), the income gap between rural and urban sectors could lead to an "autocracy" due to less federal spending on public education and aging infrastructure (Temin 2017). There are now few IAF affiliates working in the Rust Belt, where white working-class communities who voted for Trump in 2020 are located. Although these affiliates are aware of the need to organize (Gecan 2020), the larger the gap between IAF and these communities, the harder it is to overcome it. While IAF is actively attempting to address feminist critiques about its structural issues, an even more challenging problem is that American society has become increasingly divided geographically, which undermines community organizing efforts as a whole.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of IAF community organizing is not merely to empower the *people*, but also to mobilize and transform them into citizens. There are a number of issues concerning IAF that revolve around the nature of collective action, such as gender, white supremacy, and religious hierarchy. Although community organizing has structural flaws that lead to exclusion and silencing of minorities, the more

organizations pursue egalitarian structures, the less conflict is needed for self-correcting towards a healthier democracy. Following Alinsky's model, IAF established a hierarchy among organizers and between organizers and the people. While this is sometimes criticized as authoritarian, it nonetheless highlights the realistic and pragmatic approach championed by organizers. In the absence of a binding ideology that encourages people's spontaneous participation in the political sphere, the quality of their participation can be enhanced by organizers. This approach raises the question of whether the people have perfect agency; we must be aware that participatory democracy could potentially exclude others in the name of the people.

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