



The Right Wing Resurrects Saul Alinsky

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In the 1960s and '70s, Saul Alinsky, often considered the founder of community organizing, was a popular figure among liberal activists, based primarily on his how-to manuals, *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals*, and his reputation as a tough-talking, street-smart agitator who helped poor and working-class Americans gain a voice in battles with politicians and corporations. Now the Republican Party and its right-wing echo chamber are trying to make Alinsky, who died at 63 in 1972, famous all over again, by linking him to Barack Obama and demonizing the president as a dangerous radical.

During his primary campaign, Newt Gingrich constantly invoked Alinsky's ghost. "The centerpiece of this campaign, I believe, is American exceptionalism versus the radicalism of Saul Alinsky," he said in stump speeches and television appearances. Or variously: "If you believe as we do in the Declaration of Independence and you think that's a better source than Saul Alinsky, welcome to the team." "The president believes in a kind of Saul Alinsky radicalism which would lead to a secular European socialist model."

The right-wing blogosphere and punditocracy picked up on Gingrich's fixation. In the [last article](#) he wrote before dying of a heart attack in March, right-wing blogger Andrew Breitbart claimed that "the media does not want you to know that the president is a radical's radical whose presidency itself is a love song to a socialist 'community organizer.'" The organizer in question was Alinsky. In 1998, according to the Breitbart's website, Obama, then an Illinois state senator, agreed to participate in a panel discussion following a performance of a play called "The Love Song of Saul Alinsky." The other panelists, according to Breitbart, included someone who "worked with secret Communist and Soviet spy Lee Pressman to support strikers at Republic Steel in Chicago in 1937" and another who "worked closely with the Socialist Party in the 1950s, becoming president of the local chapter of the Negro American Labor Council, an organization founded by Socialist Party leader A. Phillip Randolph." Although this event occurred twenty years before Obama was elected president, Breitbart argued that it foreshadowed the covert socialist goals he is now advancing through his presidency.

Gingrich's rants and Breitbart's conspiracy theory went viral within the right-wing blogosphere and fed the belief that Obama is a socialist and radical whose administration is guided by Alinsky's ideas. Breitbart, wrote another conservative blogger, had caught "the president with his hand in the communist cookie jar." A columnist for the conservative *Washington Times* claimed that in Chicago, Obama was exposed to "the ruthless tactics and contempt for truth expounded by his guiding light, Saul Alinsky." The race-obsessed blog site [WorldNetDaily](#) (WND) claimed that Alinsky was Obama's "mentor" and that Obama was Alinsky's "star student" -- ignoring the fact that Obama was 11 years old when Alinsky died. In February, John Fund wrote in the conservative *National Review* that Obama's administration was following the ["Alinsky playbook."](#)

Even in 2008, invoking Alinsky had been part of the Republicans' strategy. In the late 1960s, while a student at Wellesley College, Hillary Clinton had interviewed Alinsky and written her senior thesis about him. During the presidential campaign four years ago, conservatives mined that thesis to tarnish Clinton as a radical. They took bigger swipes, however, at Obama, who had been a community organizer for three years in the 1980s in Chicago and had acknowledged being influenced by Alinsky's writings and ideas. In her September, 2008 speech at the Republican convention, Sarah Palin mockingly said, "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities." A few days later, Rudy Giuliani claimed on the television talk show *Meet the Press* that Obama had been recruited to Chicago by "a Saul Alinsky group" with "a very core Saul Alinsky kind of almost socialist notion that [government] should be used for redistribution of wealth."

After Obama entered the White House, Fox News' Glenn Beck constantly linked him to Alinsky, whom Beck viewed as a Marxist Machiavelli whose ideas for radical change had infiltrated the Democratic Party and mainstream liberalism. After Beck left Fox News last year, his former colleagues continued the campaign. Bill O'Reilly told his audience that Alinsky "is in the great tradition of Karl Marx [and] Lenin." Commentator Monica Crowley said, "This is the very essence of socialism... The tactics of Saul Alinsky and Barack Obama are geared toward wealth redistribution." Sean Hannity invited Andrew Breitbart's editor-in-chief Ben Shapiro for a [special FOX segment](#) about the Obama-Alinsky connection. During a press briefing in January, Ed Henry, the network's chief White House correspondent, said to White House press secretary Jay Carney: "Newt Gingrich keeps saying on the campaign trail that the president's vision comes from Saul Alinsky, the community organizer. I haven't heard you asked about that."

Ironically, Mitt Romney's father George, the one-time governor of Michigan, met with Alinsky in 1967 to ask his advice about addressing the racial turmoil following that summer's Detroit riots. "I think you ought to listen to Alinsky," the liberal Republican advised his political allies (see T. George Harris' *Romney's Way*, 1968). "It seems to me that we are always talking to the same people. Maybe the time has come to hear new voices." When this anecdote surfaced earlier this year on the right-wing blogosphere, conspiracy-minded extremists used it as evidence that Mitt Romney had also, like Obama, been infected by

Alinsky's influence.

Given this tenuous connection to Alinsky, it is unlikely that Mitt Romney will utter the organizer's name during his campaign to evict Obama from the White House. But Republican conservatives, through Super PAC-sponsored ads and other media conduits and spokespeople, will make sure that voters regularly hear Alinsky's name tied to Obama, and that Alinsky's name plays into all the subliminal messages and code words that the GOP will use against the president.

The conservative pundits and Republican strategists count on the fact that most Americans have never heard of Alinsky. He's a mysterious figure, with a vaguely foreign- (and Jewish-) sounding name, whom they can describe as a radical and a socialist. Yet Alinsky's story is hardly a mystery. He's been the subject of one major biography (Sanford Horwitt's *Let Them Call Me Rebel*) and one full-length documentary film (*The Democratic Promise*, narrated by Alec Baldwin).

Born in 1909 to Orthodox Jewish parents who divorced when he was 13, Alinsky grew up in a Chicago slum. At the University of Chicago, he took courses in the school's famed sociology department and then attended graduate courses in criminology and law. Leaving graduate school without a degree, he joined Chicago's Institute for Juvenile Research (IJR), which was developing community projects based on the then-novel theory that crime was the result of poverty and social turmoil in neighborhoods. Alinsky developed a talent for building trusting relationships with community residents, criminals, and prisoners.

In 1938, IJR assigned Alinsky to study Chicago's Back of the Yards area, the immigrant neighborhood of about ninety thousand made famous in Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*. Alinsky spent most of his time with leaders of the Packinghouse Workers union, who were trying to organize employees of the major meat-packing firms that dominated the area. The union understood that it would be difficult to win a victory in the workplaces without community support, so they embraced Alinsky's efforts to build a neighborhood organization.

Alinsky reshaped activism in America by transferring some grassroots organizing tactics from shop floors and factories to urban neighborhoods and religious congregations. In Back of the Yards, he sought out local leaders involved in churches, sports leagues, neighborhood businesses, and other networks. One was Joseph Meegan, a supervisor of recreation at Davis Park. He and Alinsky gained the confidence of Chicago's auxiliary Catholic Bishop Bernard Sheil, who founded the Catholic Youth Organization. Sheil helped them recruit young priests and parish leaders, and to overcome the tensions between Catholics from different ethnic backgrounds. They persuaded Sheil to speak at the 1939 founding meeting of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), comprising about 75 organizations, including unions, neighborhood groups, churches, sports clubs, small businesses, and others. The next day, Sheil shared the stage with Congress of Industrial Organizations president John L. Lewis at a rally of 10,000.

The alliance between the church and the union guaranteed that the BYNC would be taken seriously by the city's political and corporate power brokers. BYNC pressured city officials to provide the neighborhood with school lunch and milk programs, fluoridated drinking water, an infant-health clinic, and a baseball field with floodlights. BYNC got the city to clean up vacant lots, and it sold garbage cans to the community at a fraction of the market cost. BYNC started a credit union to provide local residents and businesses with low-interest loans, and pressured the federal Works Progress Administration and the National Youth Administration programs to provide jobs for neighborhood residents. These successes marked the beginning of modern community organizing.

BYNC also caught the attention of important patrons. Bishop Sheil and Marshall Field III (a newspaper publisher and heir to the Marshall Field family fortune) helped fund Alinsky's new organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), designed to train community organizers and build community organizations in other cities. In 1946, Alinsky published *Reveille for Radicals*, a bestseller that described the nuts and bolts of effective organizing. The book became the Bible of community organizing until he wrote his next book, *Rules for Radicals*, in 1971.

Alinsky's books not only provided organizers with a tool-kit of principles and tactics, but also offered a vision for a renewed democracy. Alinsky was scornful of social workers, whom he thought viewed poor people as "clients" to be served by beneficent experts. He felt similarly about government anti-poverty programs, which he called "political pornography" because he believed they distributed crumbs that kept people pacified. In his view, an empowered citizen actively questions the decisions made by those in power. The organizer's job, he said, is to agitate people to recognize their own self-interest and then help them mobilize to challenge the bastions of power and privilege. Organizers have to show people that many problems they view as personal troubles can only be solved through collective action.

Alinsky taught that confrontation and conflict were often necessary to change power relations. One way to achieve that, he believed, was to "personalize" an issue -- to identify the person who has the power and authority to make a decision that will change institutional practices. Alinsky believed it was necessary to "rub raw the resentments of the people in the community." That meant getting people involved in small-scale battles (against unscrupulous merchants or realtors, for example) so they could experience winning, gain self-confidence, and then tackle larger targets and issues. Community organizing, he believed, taught people how to win concrete victories through creative tactics that were fun and morale-building.

Yet he realized that compromise was the heart of democracy. "To the organizer," he wrote in *Rules for Radicals*, "compromise is a key and beautiful word. It is always present in the pragmatics of operation... If you start with nothing, demand 100 percent, then compromise for 30 percent, you're 30 percent ahead."

Alinsky viewed his success in Chicago as a first step in building a network of "people's organizations" around the country. He envisioned these groups, along with unions, forming the basis of a progressive movement for social justice. In 1947, Alinsky hired Fred Ross, an experienced organizer among California's migrant farmworkers. Ross built the Community Service Organization (CSO) in several cities, mostly among Latinos, recruiting new members and identifying potential leaders through house meetings and one-on-one conversations. In San Jose, California, one of the people Ross recruited was César Chávez, whom Ross hired and trained as an organizer. Chávez would later adopt these organizing ideas in starting the United Farm Workers union.

In the mid-1960s, Alinsky began training organizers and overseeing campaigns in Buffalo, Rochester, New York City, St. Paul,

Kansas City, and Chicago. He worked closely with African-American groups in major cities, hoping to build stable organizations that could battle segregation and wield influence on a variety of issues.

After riots erupted in the Black ghetto in Rochester in the summer of 1964, an interracial group of clergy approached Alinsky to help them build a power base among low-income African Americans and challenge the influence of the city's dominant employer, Eastman Kodak, which employed only seven hundred and fifty Blacks out of forty thousand employees. (Alinsky quipped that "the only thing Kodak has done on the race issue in America is to introduce color film.") After several months of meetings, local residents founded Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today (FIGHT), a community organizing group, to take on Kodak. When the company refused to create a training and hiring program for Black residents, FIGHT upped the ante. A number of FIGHT members and their churches purchased Kodak stock and pledged to attend the company's annual shareholder meeting. Kodak tried to keep protesters at a distance by holding the meeting in Flemington, New Jersey, but FIGHT brought a thousand people more than three hundred miles to the meeting. Their action gained national media attention.

Following this, Alinsky threatened to bring a hundred Black people to a Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra concert after treating them to a banquet of nothing but huge portions of baked beans. The idea was to conduct the nation's first "fart-in" to embarrass Kodak, a major Philharmonic sponsor. Fortunately for the Philharmonic, FIGHT did not have to resort to that tactic, because Kodak agreed to implement the jobs program.

The battle in Rochester was typical of Alinsky's approach, which was to employ any tactic that would work to bring powerful politicians and corporations to the negotiating table with ordinary people. As he wrote in *Rules for Radicals*, "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."

During the 1960s, Alinsky was particularly scornful of the student New Left and the campus anti-war movement. He believed that they relied too much on protests, demonstrations, and media celebrities and did not understand the importance of building organizations. He also considered their sometimes-revolutionary rhetoric silly, utopian, dogmatic, and alienating to their potential working-class base.

Alinsky's ideas took hold and influenced organizers and activists around the country. His books and colorful campaigns brought him a great deal of attention (including a glowing profile in Time magazine in 1970), and he became an iconic figure among organizers. Beginning in the 1970s, America experienced an upsurge of community organizing, what writer Harry Boyte called a "backyard revolution." Many community groups emerged and adopted Alinsky's ideas. They organized with some success around slum housing and tenants' rights, public safety, and racial discrimination by banks (red-lining). Environmental organizations drew on Alinsky's ideas, too, especially groups opposed to the construction of nuclear power plants and fighting the industrial poisoning of their neighborhoods, as in the battle in the polluted Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York.

Alinsky was hardly the subversive, however, that Gingrich and other conservatives have portrayed. During the Depression, some of the key leaders of the industrial labor movement were members of or close to the Communist Party, and Alinsky worked alongside them in building an alliance between the neighborhood, the church, and the unions --- but he was neither a Communist nor a socialist himself. He was fond of quoting Madison, Jefferson, and Tom Paine. He considered himself a patriotic American. He eschewed ideology. His closest political ties were with the Catholic Church. He frequently spoke at seminaries advising future priests to express their faith by putting Catholic social teachings into practice by helping to organize their parishioners rather than doling out charity. In 1969, a coalition of Catholic groups in Iowa gave Alinsky its Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award, named after Pope John XXIII's encyclical on war, peace, and social justice. Today, many of the community organizing groups that follow Alinsky's ideas are rooted in religious congregations that constitute a progressive counterpart to the upsurge of rightwing activism among evangelicals.

Tens of thousands of organizers and activists have been directly or indirectly influenced by Alinsky's ideas about organizing. Most of them -- like the young Barack Obama, who did not work for Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation but for another church-based community organizing group in Chicago's poor neighborhoods from 1985 to 1988 -- have been progressives, following Alinsky's instincts to challenge the rich and powerful.

The left, however, has no monopoly on using Alinsky's techniques. After Obama took office in 2009, even as the Tea Party and conservatives like Beck attacked Obama for being an Alinsky-ite and a "socialist," they began recommending Alinsky's books as training tools for building a rightwing movement. Freedom Works, a corporate-funded conservative group started by former Republican congressman Dick Armey, has used *Rules for Radicals* as a primer for its training of Tea Party activists. One Tea Party leader explained, "Alinsky's book is important because there really is no equivalent book for conservatives. There's no 'Rules for Counter-Radicals.'"

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