**BOOK REVIEW. Marnie Brady; *International Journal of Urban and Regional***

***Research.* Online: August 23, 2016. DOI: 10.1111/1468-2427.12355.**

**Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller (eds.) 2015: People Power: The Community**

**Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press**

What makes People Power an insightful read for community organizers and

urban scholars alike is its composite portrait of organizer Saul Alinsky’s legacy through

the voices of those who enacted his postulates on tactics, strategy and power. Editors

Schutz and Miller (the former an education scholar, the latter a longstanding organizer

and Alinsky disciple) present this particular lineage of place-based organizing in the

US as a reflection of urban democratic practice and a call for more effective organizing.

After Miller first distills Alinsky’s influential core concepts, Schutz and Miller introduce

readers to more than 20 key organizers who were positioned in the orbit of

Alinsky himself or his teaching. By the editors’ own admission, this is not a book for the

unfamiliar reader.

The editors go beyond the well-worn historical map of early Alinsky-led neighborhood

groups such as Chicago’s Back of the Yards Council and The Woodlawn

Organization to present US regional and national networks manifesting varying

degrees of Alinsky association. The best known among these include the Community

Service Organization––precursor to the United Farm Workers (UFW), Industrial Areas

Foundation (IAF), National People’s Action (NPA), PICO Network, Citizens’ Action and

ACORN. The volume weaves together editorial commentary, brief biographical profiles,

interviews and primary texts from the formative years of Alinskyist institution-building

(1955–80). Several cases pay tribute to key wins alongside detailed explanations of ever

relevant issues, such as NPA’s early organizing against redlining.

Primary texts largely written by and for organizers set this book apart. The editors

culled from audiotapes and mimeographs to include original works in the volume

ranging from Nicholas von Hoffman’s (1963) paper on leader identification, Stan Holt’s

(1975) cautions on the co-optation perils of community development, Heather Booth’s

(1974) influential work on women in direct action and Wade Rathke’s (1973) initial outline

of the ACORN organizing model. Of central concern to these and numerous other

featured organizers is how to activate people around issues directly affecting their lives

and made winnable through the demands, tactics and strategies available to a power

building base.

The editors make explicit internal debates over how to achieve this or similar

goals. Differences in approaches follow the contours of ‘organization of organizations’

versus individual membership; organization size and scale; demands on the state and

corporations versus mutual aid; relational versus issue-based motivation; mobilizing

versus organizing; pragmatic self-interest versus ideology; and the distinction between

outside organizers and indigenous leaders. The organizing playbooks in this compilation

treat many of these areas of debate largely as procedural directives. Fortunately, Schutz

and Miller add critical commentary and interviews with key organizers to consider

these distinctions further as questions of strategy, if not false choices.

A current of internal critique, the evaluation of one model’s success over

another’s, is a pervasive feature of Alinskyist organizing. Notwithstanding ego-driven

splits and territorial fights, Miller’s critique speaks to the external consequences of

certain approaches; he laments the ‘staff-driven approach’ that in effect diminished

leaders to ‘troops’ or instruments for turnout, which he observes emerged later as the

modus operandi among unionists influenced by the training of UFW organizer Fred

Ross (pp. 98–9). As in other passages, the editors clarify crosscutting themes (in this

case the relationship between organizational form and democratic practice).

The volume also lays bare critique of the pragmatic and status quo demands

of congregational-based organizing in the 1980s. In the wake of massive federal

disinvestment from cities, churches often mobilized large numbers around small issues.

John Gaudette, son of former Alinsky associate Tom Gaudette, recalls internal tensions

in PICO around the character of their demands. He remembers saying: ‘We’ve reached

the level of power and we can’t keep fighting for stop signs. We can’t keep fighting for

a cop on the corner. We have to go bigger’ (p. 137). The older Tom Gaudette, in an

interview that the editors recovered from previously un-transcribed audiotapes, rebukes

PICO’s move away from the block-club model to focus on one-to-one interviews

with church congregants: ‘Relationships and power and yackety yack. Hell, okay. But the

point is at the end of the year what did you do?’ (p. 139). A reasonable question from this

chapter’s description is whether the congregational approach at that time led to greater

opening of democratic space, or the controlling and narrowing of critical dissent.

Schutz and Miller also recognize the critique of the dominant white and male

organizing culture of the Alinskyist outfits during this period, identifying a few important

exceptions that prove the rule. Ultimately, the editors write off this facet of Alinsky’s

legacy as a ‘fact of history’ (p. 14). The editors also footnote an incisive discussion on

the segregationist direction of the Back of the Yards Council (p. 41). At issue here is

the possibility of the reproduction of privilege and the protection of power structures

within social justice organizing. By extension, the editors do little to situate organizing

examples in the broader context of racial capitalism, international movements and

state-sanctioned repression.

In some regards, the compilation reads as a foil to the long-developing and complex

narrative of movement-aligned local organizing observed in some of today’s US

cities and suburbs. Indeed, not all anger is created equal. Contemporary US formations

such as Black Lives Matter, Right to the City Alliance and National Domestic Workers

Alliance contrast with the Alinskyist tradition in theories of change and community

care practice. On the other hand, organizers within these formations often deploy power

analysis adapted from the Alinskyist tradition. More recently, several non-Alinsky formations

developed strategic alignments with Alinskyist institutions NPA and PICO.

The pragmatic choice for the astute organizer and student of urban democracy

is to read *People Power* for its examples and its silences. Schutz and Miller contribute an

invaluable account of the pitfalls and advantages of tried Alinskyist approaches. When

considered in the more expansive context of transgressive struggle, the lessons drawn

from these approaches remain apt for winning ‘non-reformist reforms’ of urgent and

strategic need.

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