**DRAFT: NOT FOR RELEASE**

**The Student Movement and Saul Alinsky:**

**An Alliance That Never Happened.**

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To understand Kent State, Orangeburg or Jackson State – the period 1968-1970—requires looking backward, first to 1964, then to 1960, then 1957, then 1948 and, finally, to the Great Depression of the 1930s. This is one man’s effort at that. My perspective is shaped by my experiences of all but the earliest of those periods; others looking with different experiences may come up with very different facts and conclusions.

Hindsight is a great teacher. Ignored, its errors are repeated; observed, they may be learned. For me, 1968-1970 was filled with hope and despair, joy in my work and pain at the loss of contact with many “Movement” sisters and brothers in the struggle. But let me begin at a beginning.

**The Great Depression: precedents for later organizing**

The Depression of the 1930s also gave birth to one of the great American social movements of the 20th century: the organization of industrial workers (auto, steel, rubber and more) in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO sought to organize all workers, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or type of work, in one industrial union (as distinct from “craft” unions which organized by narrow occupation).

Its organizing drives were mounted by young people similar to those who became the full time field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, or “Snick”)—the organization of young African-Americans that emerged from the sit-ins and freedom rides of 1960/1961.

It is hard to imagine the difficulties of the CIO organizing efforts. Against employer-hired private security forces, local and state governments that often provided police to support privately hired strike breakers, and against tremendous racial and ethnic antagonisms within the factories, fields and on the waterfronts, CIO organizers managed to build unity and power. “Black and white: unite and fight;” “an injury to one is an injury to all,” and similar slogans captured the spirit of the organizing.

Great strides forward were made. Millions of workers improved their working conditions and wages. More importantly, they created an instrument—the industry-wide union local and its “international”–in which they could directly and democratically express their hopes and dreams and through which they could struggle for them. This instrument also provided power in the community—in rent strikes and consumer boycotts, lobbying and electoral activity.

World War 2 ended most of the militant organizing of the ‘30s. CIO President John L. Lewis broke with liberals and the Communist-Left over the “no strike pledge”—entered into by most of the CIO as part of its commitment to the fight against the Axis powers (Japan, Germany and Italy), and the fight against fascism.

Lewis accurately warned that employers would use such a pledge to regain much of the power at the workplace they had lost in the ‘30s. While there were exceptions who didn’t follow the party line, Communist cadres, who were among the most talented and militant shop-floor leaders, typically (though not always) opposed stop-work action to defend worker’s rights.

It is during this period that union bureaucracy accelerated its growth, and union leaders extended their separation from the rank-and-file. Despite this, some CIO unions were in the forefront of the fight against racism and some union locals were centers of democratic discussion and debate.

**The Cold War, McCarthyism and “The Silent Generation”**

Soon after World War 2 ended, the Cold War began; indeed, it was underway before the end of the war. With it came the purge of left-wing unions in the CIO. The “McCarthy era,” named after the Senator whose search for Communists resembled the Puritan witch-hunts of Salem, marginalized dissent in the United States.

For the most part, Communists in the U.S. faithfully echoed whatever position was taken by the Soviet Union. This international loyalty led to support for the non-aggression pact that was signed between Hitler and Stalin; it continued in the no-strike pledge, support for Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe and installation of governments controlled by the Russians. But most liberals and radicals failed to realize that to marginalize and expel the Communists, rather than debate with them in labor and other forums, was to support the chilling effect of McCarthyism.

Dissent itself became suspect. By 1950, college campuses, once hotbeds of debate and radical ideas, were for the most part silent. We were called “The Silent Generation.” It was at the height of this period, in 1954, that I entered the University of California at Berkeley as a freshman student.

I experienced the chilling effect of the McCarthy era directly and saw what it did to others. A leftist elementary school teacher of mine wasn’t given permanent status. A barber in the neighborhood shop who read the then-daily West Coast Communist newspaper was let go: his presence had been a source of lively debate in 1945/46—I still remember it to this day. But lively debate gave way to acrimony and yelling and charges of disloyalty.

The FBI visited my family home in this period. My parents told me to go outside and play, and never did reveal to me the subject of the discussion. Only recently, making use of the Freedom of Information Act, was I able to get a copy of my father’s FBI file. He is quoted as telling the agents who visited, “If you ever come here again, you’ll face a $100,000 law suit.” (And, as an aside, I should note that even now over half of what the FBI and CIA sent me remains blacked out by felt tip pen. My father died in 1950! And the U.S. won the Cold War. Many years later, as a result of the release of documents in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I learned that my father sent coded documents to the Soviets during WW 2.)

In 1951, in my junior high civics class, I gave a report on the Milk Wagon Drivers strike going on in San Francisco. In the course of the discussion, I described strikebreakers as “scabs.” My teacher asked, “Michael, are you a Communist?” I was quick enough to say, “Yes, I’m the Denman (the name of our school) cell president and Mike (another one, who supported my point of view in the discussion on the strike) is vice-president.” The class laughed. I still remember the physical feeling of fear that immediately accompanied the teacher’s words.

At Berkeley, despite faculty loyalty oaths and the impact of McCarthyism, dissent was never fully snuffed out. The student residential co-ops, campus religious centers (particularly the University YMCA, known as Stiles Hall), the student government arm of the National Student Association (NSA), and other incubators for social movement and dissent created an atmosphere in which discussion of ideas different from those of the mainstream was encouraged.

Stiles Hall, in particular, fostered discussion of and action for civil liberties and civil rights. There was also a small but critical mass of radical students, particularly in graduate departments. Socialists and other radicals of various stripes, including supporters of the Communist Party, presented and debated their ideas in coffee houses and at street corner rallies adjacent to the campus.

Stiles Hall was my first place of involvement in student political activities. Our actions were mild indeed. In the most proper and orderly ways--typically small, non-publicized delegations and “off the record” conversations with “friendly” administrators--we appealed to the University to end racially discriminatory listing at its housing office, asked local barber shops to cut the hair of the handful of black (both “Negro” and African) students at Berkeley, and quietly ended some major restrictions on the appearance of radical speakers on the campus. Tame we were indeed: neither public rallies nor direct action characterized our activity. But through Stiles I also came in contact with the nonviolent peace and civil rights movements.

Quaker Cecil Thomas was a Stiles staff member. Through him, some of us were exposed to direct action protest against nuclear weapons. And through him we met Martin Luther King, Jr. and heard the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It is still hard for me to believe, and I was there, that in 1956 no more than 50 students showed up at Stiles Hall for a “coffee hour” with Dr. King. Yet that, in fact, is how little he was then known at Berkeley.

Cecil knew him because his wife and King’s wife Coretta had been college friends, both attending Spelman College—Fran being one of a handful of white students there. Networking was important then as it is now. The importance of relationships and movement centers in this period cannot be overemphasized. It was these that nourished the fragile bloom of support for civil liberties, civil rights and the peace movement.

# Breaking Out of the Silence: the University of California at Berkeley

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In 1957, Berkeley students decisively broke out of the mold of the Silent Generation. The year before, I had been elected to the student government as the lone undergraduate liberal voice there. (Graduate representatives had always been voices of liberal and radical ideas.) Allied with graduate reps Ralph Shaffer and Fritjof Thygeson, our small minority in the governing body of about twenty introduced resolutions against compulsory ROTC, fraternity/sorority housing discrimination and nuclear bomb testing. We also urged support of the South African struggle against apartheid, an increase in wages for student employees of the student association-owned bookstore, and similar causes. But our method of introducing these ideas remained traditional: we tried to influence votes as insiders. Sometimes a petition was used, but direct action was beyond our imagination at the time.

In this period, Thygeson introduced the idea of a campus political party. I later learned that at one time campus political parties of radical and liberal students were common at major universities in the country. The McCarthy era largely snuffed them out.

At Berkeley, we became persuaded of their merit. Thygeson and I resigned from our posts in the student government to protest “sand-box politics”. I organized a slate of candidates to run for student government office and we conducted a campaign unlike that in anyone’s memory: rallies and flyers grabbed student’s attention as they entered or exited the campus gates. It is hard to imagine now, but the very act of speaking at a campus entrance from the tailgate of a station wagon or of handing out flyers as students entered the campus was a radical act—because the only other students who did that kind of thing were the handful who were in one or another part of the campus socialist organizations.

While none of us won student government office, we doubled the electorate and our candidates got between 35% - 45% of the votes. With this impetus, later in the year our slate and its supporters formed SLATE, a campus political party that united liberal and radical students around a “lowest significant common denominator” platform on campus, national and international issues. I was elected its first Chairman.

The following semester, SLATE ran candidates again. The Administration reacted and we learned, as had the civil rights movement, that our adversary’s reaction was more important to our success than anything we initiated. SLATE was thrown off the campus, then reinstated because of the storm of protest that followed. Word about what we were doing spread to campuses across the country, particularly through NSA campus units which were centers for liberalism. Only later did we learn that the CIA had infiltrated the NSA, both its national leadership and on most major campuses.

“Lowest significant common denominator” made it possible for newly politicized moderate and liberal students to work together with veteran radicals because the latter were persuaded that the most important thing about SLATE was that it was bringing people into politics whom the radicals had been unable to reach.

SLATE’s “issue orientation” avoided “ideological” formulations, leaving those to members who wanted to promote them, but making it possible for those who didn’t to become politically active. Liberal students supported free speech on campus because they believed that it was an important American right guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

A radical may have believed in the First Amendment as well, but also had an interest in bringing his particular leftist comrade on the campus to speak to students. A liberal could support civil rights from a human rights and Constitutional perspective, while a Marxist might have understood racism as a function of American capitalism. How the two arrived at their conclusion to support civil rights was not part of the “lowest significant denominator” formulation of the issue.

Soon we were receiving letters and phone calls from campuses across the country inquiring about our activities. We told our story at a National Student Association (NSA) Congress, as well as on speaking tours to campuses—particularly throughout the state college and university systems in California. No longer frightened by the possibility of appearing “too radical,” a student movement began to grow on northern campuses across the country. Its expression was local campus political parties—for us the equivalent (without its risks) of CIO union locals of the 1930s.

It is important to note, and it is a point to which I shall return, that we turned to radical and liberal graduate students at UC for guidance in what we did. Continuity between political generations aided us a great deal. We were all part of an on-going and deep community, one in which we saw and talked with each other daily—as students and as activists.

Non-Marxist socialists of various stripes, anarchists, democratic socialists, Trotskyists, Spartacists and Communists, and their supporters, were represented in political organizations that had an on-campus presence, as were more mainstream liberals. Graduate students and others from all these political tendencies were among our important mentors. In addition to teaching us skills, we learned from them that we were part of a tradition, and that struggle did not necessarily bear immediate fruits. In a phrase, we learned the somewhat schizophrenic concept of “radical patience”— schizophrenic because it posed two seemingly contradictory ideas.

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On the one hand, to solve the problems of war and peace, civil liberties, civil rights and economic justice that concerned us, radical (in its original meaning of “going to the root”) solutions were needed. We were reading C. Wright Mills, and the idea of a dominant power elite made sense to a lot of us. And quoting Karl Marx no longer was taboo. Whatever most persuaded us, we began to understand that more than a simple debate was going on.

We saw that students alone would be insufficient to bring about the changes we sought. We had to help bring into being, strengthen, or become an ally of community forces—including whatever was left of a militant labor movement (still significant in the Bay Area). We sought out Mexican-American, African-American and other minority community organizations, civil liberties groups and, in California, a relatively influential Democratic Party reform “club” movement—called the California Democratic Council (CDC). There was a struggle for power, and we were taking on some very powerful interests.

If radical ideas, values, program and analysis often prompted our action, we were also aware that patience was required; working with liberals who were more centrist in their critique of American society was important.

We sought to persuade majorities. We were tolerant and respectful of those who disagreed with us, and our idea of civil liberties applied to both ends of the political spectrum—right and left. Though few of us were full pacifists, we were conscious of means. Gandhi’s idea that means are the ends in process had appeal.

Each year SLATE grew in influence, first electing a couple of its candidates to student government, then electing its candidate for student body president, and finally taking a majority of the student government. So frightened was the University administration that it unilaterally expelled graduate students from the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC), the body which formed the electorate for student government. As they had in the past, so the Administration continued to be a great, if unintentional, ally of campus organizing: its reactions angered students and moved them to action.

**1960: The Sit-ins and What Followed**

The black student-led sit-ins, the first of them February 1, 1960, soon gained national media attention. Followed the next year by the Freedom Rides, their impact throughout the country cannot be overstated.

For those of us already in the nascent northern student movement, connection with this movement was of central importance. The first relationships developed through the NSA; it sponsored northern student support for the sit-ins and freedom rides. CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) organized UC students to join a Freedom Ride to Mississippi—and a number of them ended up in Parchman Penitentiary. Through her NSA connections, Betty Garman, later a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) full-time staff member, brought SNCC’s message to Berkeley. As they did on campuses across the country, “Friends of SNCC” at Berkeley raised funds, engaged in educational activities, and mounted political support for the Southern student movement.

Soon after SNCC was formed, SLATE invited its Chairman, Chuck McDew, to participate in the SLATE Summer Conference, “The Negro in America.” (This was before the introduction of “Black,” “Afro-American” and “African-American”.) McDew stayed at a house I shared with one of the Berkeley movement’s important mentors, Herb Mills, and keynoted our conference. Before returning to the South, he asked me to be SNCC’s representative (a volunteer position) in the Bay Area.

This began a formal relationship with SNCC that lasted to the end of 1966 and the famous “Peg Leg Bates” staff meeting that voted the handful of whites remaining in the organization out. (Jim Forman, SNCC’s then-Executive Secretary, points out—and others dispute—that the motion was later reconsidered and tabled. But the spirit to exclude was there whatever the formalities.)

The sit-ins ended whatever hesitation student activists in the North had about nonviolent direct action. Inspired by SNCC’s courage and tactics, shop-ins, sit-ins and other direct action protests in behalf of civil rights came in force to the Bay Area. As they were in the South, Bay Area students were arrested in large numbers at hotel and restaurant sit-ins, as well as during the NAACP-led auto row demonstrations to get Blacks hired as car dealers. Leaving stuffed shopping carts at cash register lines was the CORE-initiated “shop-in” to obtain jobs for minorities at supermarkets. Peace movement-sponsored nonviolent direct action increased as the United States government’s commitment to the war in Southeast Asia grew.

**My 1960**

The year 1960 was very important for me. I had been fired from a job organizing public housing tenants in a large project on New York City’s Lower Eastside. I had grown up in “the projects,” and the painful stigma of poverty and class associated with them was an important source of my beliefs and commitments. In this job, I thought I could bring together what I’d learned in the student movement at Berkeley and in reading about CIO and other organizers who came before me.

For a while, that was true. But before my temporary job became permanent, I was fired for being too militant. (I walked with tenants on a picket line that blocked a dangerous street that went through the project.) New York City turned out to be a very small place for me. Efforts to find a similar kind of job led nowhere, and I discovered that the word was out in settlement house circles that I was “a little Alinsky.”

For the same reason, I was unable to get a job at Mobilization for Youth (MFY). As its theoretician and initial organizer sociologist Richard Cloward told me after a very friendly conversation in which he identified positively with what I had been doing, “If I hire you now, it will tip my hand to the Henry Street Settlement, and they could become a major obstacle to what I hope Mobilization will do.” It was early in MFY’s development; I thought he was right, so he got no argument from me.

By early 1960, I was headed back to Berkeley—this time to serve as coordinator of a statewide campaign against capital punishment, another of the key issues for the student movement of that period.

In the Summer of 1960, at the SLATE Summer Conference that preceded “The Negro in America,” there was a session on farm worker organizing led by Hank Anderson, then Research Director for the AFL-CIO’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), which was seeking to organize the mostly Mexican-American, Mexican and Filipino workforce. The discussion that followed could have continued late into the afternoon, but Anderson told us he had to leave.

“Where are you going,” I asked.

“I have an appointment with this guy Saul Alinsky who lives down in Carmel; he knows a lot about the Mexican-Americans in California,” he replied.

“Mind if I tag along,” I asked. That’s how I met Saul Alinsky.

We drove down to Carmel where Alinsky had what had been a summer home, but was now the permanent residence for his wife Jean who had multiple sclerosis. Alinsky answered Hank’s knock on the door. After Hank introduced himself, Alinsky pointed at me and asked, in what I was to discover was an often-used gruff manner, “Who’s he?

Anderson was taken aback. I filled the silence by saying, “I was fired from a job in New York City for being a ‘little Alinsky,’ and I wanted to meet the big one.”

That tickled his ego, and for the next couple of hours, with Alinsky steadily telling Hank “don’t worry, we’ll talk about the Mexicans,” he asked me what I’d been doing in New York, and regaled us in some detail with the story of his battle with the social work establishment there.

**Saul Alinsky’s Rise As The Professional Radical**

In the mid- to late- ‘50s Alinsky had been a consultant to an organizing effort on Manhattan’s westside in the Chelsea neighborhood—and he’d been fired as well. Chelsea had been an Irish neighborhood, but was increasingly Puerto Rican. Like many poorer working class neighborhoods across the country, particularly those in minority communities, Chelsea was faced with an urban renewal program that would have eliminated thousands of units of what had become housing for low-income Puerto Ricans.

Dan Carpenter and the Hudson Guild Settlement House (of which he was Executive Director), along with Catholic parishes and other groups in the neighborhood, sponsored an organizing effort there. They brought Alinsky in, but rather than to direct “an Alinsky project,” the more common way in which he worked at the time, here his role was limited to “consultant”. A conflict emerged between Carpenter, Hudson Guild and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), on the one hand, and the Catholic parishes and Puerto Rican clubs on the other. As I found with the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower Eastside, New York’s Settlement Houses weren’t quite like Jane Adams Hull House in Chicago. Rather, they were part of a liberal social work and social welfare industry establishment. It was for reform but not at the price of too much rocking the boat.

“Saul Alinsky,” Heather Booth once accurately noted, “is to community organizing as Freud is to psychotherapy.” Alinsky began his work in Chicago’s infamous “Back of the Yards” neighborhood—the setting for Upton Sinclair’s famous novel *The Jungle*. There, in the 1930s, the CIO was also organizing through its Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC). Herb March, an open member of the Communist Party, was the principal organizer.

In conditions that stagger today’s imagination, packinghouse workers spent long hours earning a wage insufficient for the basics of life in conditions that were both dangerous and unhealthy. Supervisors treated workers like slaves—and in their powerless condition they were indeed “wage slaves.”

At about the same time March was doing his workplace organizing, Alinsky and Joe Meegan, a highly respected Catholic recreation department worker in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, began to develop a community organization whose building blocks were the already-existing churches, nationality, athletic, women’s and other existing associations that dotted the largely Eastern European neighborhood, as well as new groups they would form. (There was a small Mexican-American group as well).

In addition to what was happening “on the ground” in the neighborhood, Alinsky and Meegan were able to bring Chicago’s powerful Catholic Church in alliance with the Packinghouse Workers Union. Auxiliary Bishop Bernard Sheil joined CIO President John L. Lewis at a rally supporting the packinghouse organizing. Soon thereafter one of the employers capitulated; the rest followed, though not without bitter struggle in some cases.

Out of this yeasty brew of action came the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), an alliance that brought community and workplace together in a powerful organization of a type never seen before in U.S. slums. Alinsky was propelled into prominence.

Catholic dioceses in Omaha, Kansas City, St. Paul and other cities where there were packinghouse workers or other poor, in combination with bishops who followed Catholic social and economic justice teachings, wanted Alinsky to organize in their areas.

Packinghouse Union leadership, including union President Ralph Helstein, supported the organizing as well, hoping it would parallel union drives in those areas. The union’s aggressive commitment to racial equality added yet another dimension to the organizing work. Only World War II cut off what was then emerging as a national movement.

After World War II, Alinsky returned to community organizing. (He once noted that he used “community organization” because it sounded harmless, thus not alerting opposition to his real intentions, which are better summarized with his phrase, “mass organization.”) His 1946 book, *Reveille for Radicals,* describing his work and defining its underlying democratic principles, became a hit. But with the purge from the CIO of the left unions and the CIO’s retreat from social movement to interest group unionism, labor was a diminishing ally.

Alinsky urged the CIO unions not to accept pay increases if they were passed on as price increases to consumers; for a brief period, the United Autoworkers followed this approach. But they, as did other CIO unions, finally agreed to get what they could for their members whatever that meant for working people and the poor in general, and the commitment to no price increase was abandoned.

In place of unions, Catholic churches increasingly became the base for Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) work, later to be joined by major mainstream Protestant denominations. As Martin Luther King and the Montgomery bus boycott emerged during the McCarthy era, so did Alinsky’s work persist in that period. Both were exceptions to the rule of silence that dominated the times.

Returning to my own connection with Alinsky, our 1960 meeting led to a relationship that continued through the decade. In 1961, as part of the effort by Bay Area student movement activists to connect with the community, I became involved in an anti-urban renewal fight in Hunter’s Point—one of San Francisco’s major African-American neighborhoods. Alinsky became a mentor, as did Fred Ross, his west coast organizer who was IAF’s real connection with Mexican-Americans in California.

From Ross and Alinsky, I learned about an urban renewal fight in the Los Angeles barrio, and other urban renewal fights in other Mexican-American communities in the state. What came to be called “Negro removal” wasn’t only having its negative impact on African-Americans. Working class and poor whites, Latinos and African-Americans were all pushed out by the Federal bulldozer—all in the name of “progress.” This history became part of my life as I got deeper into local anti-freeway and anti-urban renewal fights in San Francisco.

**Going Full-Time With SNCC**

By late 1962, SNCC’s appeal got me to leave a job at a delinquency prevention agency and become a full-time SNCC “field secretary,” with responsibility to provide staff support for existing San Francisco Bay Area “Friends of SNCC” groups and to organize new ones. While most Friends of SNCC offices were not to participate in local activities in their northern communities, I asked SNCC’s national office to let me wear my SNCC mantle in local organizing work. (Our support work for the South was very strong, so my request was granted.) The caution was that if the Southern support work suffered, I would have to stop.

By late 1961, SNCC workers in the South realized that nonviolent direct action for de-segregation was insufficient to break the back of state-sanctioned racism or to involve the black adult poor of the south—who couldn’t drop everything to participate in a sit-in and go to jail, and for whom desegregation of lunch counters wasn’t a central issue.

In Black Belt Counties from Georgia to Arkansas, SNCC began using voter registration as a tool to organize low-income black communities. What SNCC was doing paralleled lessons I was learning from Ross and Alinsky. The arrows of action all pointed in the same direction.

A few people in SNCC knew of Alinsky’s work in Chicago’s Woodlawn area, and thought it was a sell-out. (The roots of their discontent went back to the 1930s, and Alinsky’s disputes with the Communist Party; they’re tangential to the points I want to make here.) I felt both Alinsky and SNCC represented promise in the country. My hope was to wed deep commitment to small “d” democracy and the nuts-and-bolts professionalism of IAF with the vision, courage and moral depth of the Deep South civil rights movement. Within SNCC, I promoted Alinsky, and with Alinsky, I promoted SNCC.

Alinsky saw a need for Black organizers and recognized that a real social movement was emerging within the African-American community. That recognition came when an overflow audience turned up at a Black church in Chicago’s Woodlawn neighborhood for a talk by a couple of Freedom Riders. Alinsky was interested. He invited Rev. Ralph Abernathy, King’s closest associate and friend, to be on the Board of Directors of the IAF. He sought meetings with the major civil rights organizations and tried to get them to hire IAF to provide training for their full-time staffs.

In the North, in African-American communities in Buffalo, Rochester, Chicago and Kansas City, IAF organizing projects developed. In Dayton, Detroit, Oakland and elsewhere, Alinsky was invited by local Black and other clergy to address them, lead intensive workshops on organizing, and provide consulting assistance. Charles Silberman’s widely-read *Crisis in Black and White* featured Alinsky’s work in Woodlawn, on Chicago southside.

# Organizing and Mobilizing

By 1963, SNCC was sinking roots in local Black Belt communities. Its emerging constituency included day laborers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, domestics and the unemployed. A handful of independent black business people, farmers and artisans were often key initial leaders. Only a small number of African American clergy were among its supporters. Often invited to be present by respected local leaders, at their best SNCC’s field secretaries were in for the long haul. Door-knocking (or “canvassing”), meetings with local leaders, and efforts to convince local blacks they should try to register to vote were increasingly the center of SNCC work.

With promises from the Kennedy Administration’s Justice Department, headed by the President’s brother Robert, SNCC hoped for Federal support when voting rights were denied. Such was not to be, with an important exception: the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division intervened when people were jailed because they were seeking the right to vote. SNCC’s Bob Moses called this a “crawl space’ for The Movement. But despite ever-larger numbers of blacks seeking to vote, and a growing base of support for its work in the South, SNCC could neither break southern racism by its own organizing nor mount sufficient pressure to get the “Feds” to support such efforts.

Killings, beatings, bombings, burnings and other forms of harassment and intimidation were not enough to get the national Democratic Party to jeopardize its alliance with the “Dixiecrats”—who supported segregation and denial of voting rights, and were in a Congressional alliance with the Republicans.

SNCC’s work became differentiated from King’s. Strategically, King sought to win the moral conscience of the nation and, with its support, bring pressure to bear on the Federal Government to enact and enforce anti-segregation measures. While voting rights increasingly became a focus of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), not until much later did SCLC actually make long-term commitments to local communities.

Where King went, the media followed. Direct action would typically create a reaction: jailings, fire-hosings, police dogs, electric cattle prods and other brutality. The local power structure’s reactions were perfect feeds for the evening TV news. King’s strategy appeared to have impact.

King, it was increasingly thought by SNCC, “mobilized.” That is, SCLC made plans and moved local people into action in support of those plans. In SNCC’s view local people were props for a scenario that was determined at Atlanta SCLC headquarters. If SCLC decided to abandon them, there was little they could do. When King left, the media departed and nothing remained to protect local blacks against firings, evictions and violence, or to enforce whatever might have been won.

While exaggerated, this analysis bore an important truth: local people weren’t centrally involved in conceiving what was to be done. For that to happen there would have to be permanent local structures built that local people led, and this was not SCLC’s practice.

King did work through local people, but they were different people— the clergy—and most black clergy weren’t invested in building organizations that would be run by lay people. SNCC was opposed to this kind of “hierarchical leadership,” but that was a different point from the one that King “didn’t leave anything behind.” African-American clergy had long been the spokespersons for their communities, and they weren’t about to change that. Further, the black church was, as one clergyman accurately put it, “the only institution that we own lock, stock and barrel.” Even in the poorest of communities, local people contributed, often tithing and more, to sustain their most important communal institution. This was a truth that SNCC often ignored.

SNCC, on the other hand, sought to build new small “d” democratic organizations at the county and town level. Its mentor was the legendary, and still largely unknown, Ella Baker who, in the 1940s had been director of branches for the NAACP, and had extensive relationships with civil rights activists in the south. In 1957, she became SCLC’s interim Executive Director. While Martin Luther King wanted the emerging sit-in movement to become SCLC’s youth wing, Baker encouraged the students to form their own independent organization, which they did as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, or “Snick.” Baker had strong views about local grassroots organizing, and she imparted them to SNCC.

SNCC tried to strengthen struggling civic associations and voter leagues that were the creation of courageous local people who were, unfortunately, a relatively small minority within their own communities. In either case—new organization or strengthening an old one—the work required extraordinary patience. SNCC field secretaries often went months with only a handful of people going to the county courthouse to try to register to vote. But the steady work did affirm and build strong local people.

Fannie Lou Hamer exemplified them. A sharecropper fired for her attempt to register to vote, she became a SNCC field secretary. She was subsequently badly beaten in an encounter with police in Winona, MS. Her strength of character was inspirational. If she was unique in her charisma, she wasn’t unique in what she represented. Though SNCC did build some strong local organizations, it was more likely to develop strong people—people courageous enough to risk everything to exercise the right to vote.

From Albany, Georgia to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, with varying degrees of effectiveness, SNCC field secretaries did build something that was local, that had a more-or-less permanent presence, and that developed the capacities for self-government of local people. The best known of these efforts were The Albany Movement (Albany, Georgia), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and, a little later, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), the first “Black Panther Party.”

This tension in the South between SCLC and SNCC was replicated in the North. Alinsky was increasingly criticized by Northern “movement” blacks and their white allies for being too parochial and not militant enough; too interested in permanent organization and not enough in radical critique of American society; too limited in what he hoped could be accomplished.

From Alinsky’s point of view, the critics weren’t building anything that had staying power. And to deal with a mayor like Richard Daley of Chicago you had to have staying power. Alinsky noted that when King came to Chicago to march for desegregation of housing, Daley conveniently left town. An agreement that was finally signed with King had no teeth to enforce it, nor was any real power base built in Chicago’s ghettoes to press for its enforcement. Alinsky, master at teaching aphorisms, noted that “an agreement is only as good as your power to enforce it.”

When a council of civil rights organizations organized a school boycott to protest the atrocious condition of Chicago’s ghetto schools, the Alinsky-organized and still-influenced Woodlawn Organization reluctantly joined. When it was successful, Alinsky claimed that—except in Woodlawn—it was the headlines in the Chicago papers that informed the larger black community of the boycott, not local organizations.

This local debate was reflected in national church bodies, particularly mainline Protestant, that supported civil rights and community organizing work in the North. Emblematic of it was the United Church of Christ (UCC), one of whose divisions, chaired by Dr. Charles Cobb (whose son Charlie was a SNCC field secretary) supported King’s approach, while another, the Board for Homeland Ministries, supported Alinsky’s.

The debate grew acrimonious as black militancy rose and concessions from white power structures remained relatively small. (Charlie Cobb, in a conversation we had on this subject, wryly noted that the fight was really about how money was allocated within the UCC.)

The distinction between mobilizing and organizing was replicated in the northern, largely white, student movement. While SLATE remained a local campus political party, informally aligned with similar formations throughout the country, the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) emerged with more of a mobilizing strategy. Its national office had its own full time staff, including traveling organizers who visited campuses to build and strengthen chapters that would participate in national campaigns. The result was a growing national presence for the white student movement in the north and some highly effective protests, particularly against the war in Vietnam, but not the kind of local multi-issue strength that the campus political parties represented.

**1964: Alienation and the Beginnings of Isolation**

Despite the failings of the Federal government to enforce voting rights, and even though SNCC was increasingly disenchanted with both Democrats and Republicans, 1964 was still a year of hope. Almost one thousand northern students and a scattering of lawyers, health professionals, teachers and other non-students, most of them white, came South for the Mississippi Summer Project. Even when it was clear that three civil rights workers, including one of the volunteers, had been murdered, the students came anyway.

While many in SNCC resented the white presence because of legitimate fears it would overwhelm SNCC and local Black leadership, it was significant that so many people with no direct stake in the outcome put their bodies on the line for the movement in the deep south.

During the Summer Project, final work was completed for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to the Democratic Party Convention. “Seat us instead of the all-white racist Democratic Party of Mississippi,” they said.

Within SNCC, as August drew near, we believed we had the votes in the Convention’s Credentials Committee to get a minority report to the Convention floor. The minority report’s effect would be to unseat the Mississippi “regulars” and recognize in their place the MFDP. In front of national TV, we did not think the Convention could ignore this report.

At least, some thought, there would be a compromise offering each of the parties one-half of the delegates. The regulars would walk out on that compromise, leaving the MFDP as the only Democratic Party left in Mississippi with which the national party could work. We did not fully appreciate President Lyndon Johnson’s antagonism to MFDP, nor his skill as a politician, including his ability to leverage what we thought were solid votes away from their commitment to the MFDP. Nor did we anticipate how the rest of the civil rights movement (except Dr. King), the labor movement (especially Walter Reuther of the Auto Workers), and liberals such as Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale would submit to Johnson’s wishes. Johnson was afraid of the Barry Goldwater Republican challenge to his Presidency, and thought seating of the MFDP would drive substantial numbers of white voters into the Republican Party.

When the MFDP lost the challenge, the last ray of hope in our government was extinguished in most of the SNCC staff and many of the local leaders in Mississippi. The failure of MFDP’s Atlantic City challenge confirmed, both in the northern student movement and in SNCC, the most pessimistic view of American politics. (So did the continuing war in Vietnam.)

SNCC could not withstand the defeat. An internal debate that had been simmering within the organization now took center stage. Black power, an idea implicit in everything SNCC had been doing since its voter registration and community organizing work began in 1962, became a slogan, but one without an effective program or strategy.

Increasingly, SNCC became isolated from the very communities in which it had patiently worked for as long as three years. Paralleling this experience in the South was the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the inability of the northern student movement to stop it.

At Berkeley, 1964 was the year of the Free Speech Movement (FSM)--prompted by University Administration efforts to stop student groups, including UC Friends of SNCC and CORE, from collecting money on campus for the southern civil rights movement. Another of the Administration’s follies, this one shut the campus down.

Mario Savio, a graduate of the Mississippi Summer Project, was FSM’s principal spokesperson. In mood and tone, FSM represented in the North what SNCC and MFDP expressed in the South: a last chance for the system to act morally, to defend civil liberties and civil rights. When students climbed to the top of a police car to speak to the assembled thousands in front of the University’s Administration Building, they actually took their shoes off so they wouldn’t damage the car. By 1968, students were trashing police cars and shouting, “Off the pig.”

**Alinsky, Black Power and SNCC**

By mid-1966, I was persuaded that SNCC could not recover from a tailspin that began in 1964. On a personal level, it was a deeply painful period. I thought my friends were losing touch with the reality of the United States. I couldn’t share their increasingly militant rhetoric; it was isolating them from the very people with whom they wanted to talk.

While I supported the concept of black power—and wrote an article on it that was introduced by Stokely Carmichael—it was clear to me that SNCC wasn’t building it. The louder the slogan was proclaimed the weaker its reality became. In October of that year, Alinsky asked me to go to work for him in Kansas City, MO. In December, I bid official farewell to my SNCC comrades at the Peg Leg Bates staff meeting, though I remained in touch with a number of them.

Meanwhile, in Woodlawn, Rochester and Buffalo, Alinsky seemed to be building something that looked like real black power. FIGHT, the IAF’s Rochester organization, was led by Minister Franklin Florence, an associate of Malcolm X. When Florence asked Malcolm about whether he should become involved with a white man to organize a black community, Malcolm told him Alinsky was the best organizer in the country.

Satisfied by the response, Florence went on to become the forceful leader of a powerful black community organization—one strong enough to take on KODAK and win a partial victory for inner-city jobs. FIGHT’s sister organization in Chicago’s slogan, “self-determination through community power,” was a clear expression of the concept of black power, and there was a reality of power accompanying the slogan. As Florence once put it, “When you say ‘black power’ in Rochester, it’s spelled F-I-G-H-T.”

**Close But Not Quite**

On January 18, 1967, Stokely Carmichael shared a Detroit Central United Methodist Church platform with Alinsky in what was billed by its church sponsors as a “debate” on black power. Alinsky’s opening remarks put a damper on that idea: “If you came here thinking you’re going to find much disagreement between us, you’re in the wrong place,” he said. He added, “Do you think we go into a black community and come out with pastel power?”

“The audience,” I was told, “was weighed with clergy who were supposed to be involved in improving racial relations in their communities. The conference was designed to give them a better understanding of the issues. But it soon became clear not all had any deep sensitivity or knowledge as a foundation.”

Later in the talk, after Carmichael had been characterized by an audience member as “hateful,” Alinsky said something like this: “You are not in the presence of a man motivated by hate. Stokely is motivated by love of his fellow man.” According to Carol Schmidt, then a reporter with *The Michigan Chronicle*, an influential African-American newspaper in Detroit, “Alinsky’s words took Carmichael by surprise. His eyes widened. He stopped fidgeting. He looked shocked and taken off guard. And then his eyes were full of tears that he blinked away rather than rubbing. The auditorium was silent. Alinsky gave the moment its due before going on with his talk.”

Soon after the Detroit meeting, Carmichael went to Rochester to support FIGHT. It was the last chance for a relationship between SNCC and Alinsky. By that time, Stokely Carmichael had been elected SNCC’s Chair. Invited by Florence to address an anti-KODAK rally in Rochester, to a cheering crowd Carmichael said, “When Minister Florence asks KODAK to jump, they’ll ask, ‘How high’?” A national boycott of KODAK was promised, but SNCC couldn’t deliver. Alinsky’s disenchantment with SNCC grew. Around this time, Carmichael also said, “If you want an example of black power, look at FIGHT.”

At a January 20, 1967 SNCC Central Committee meeting, Alinsky was on the agenda. The item read, “Organizing Institute in relation with Sol (sic) Alinsky.” More generally, the discussion reflects where SNCC was at the time in its thinking about/understanding of “organizing.” Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox and Jim Forman opposed a relationship with Alinsky; Cleve Sellers was interested; Stokely Carmichael said that Alinsky was the only one in the country actually doing organizing on the ground—even though SNCC may disagree with him politically. The conversation meandered and, at least according to these minutes, remained unresolved. But the conclusion was really clear: SNCC and Alinsky were on different paths.

**Alinsky, and the Northern (mostly white) Student Movement**

By the mid-1960s, Alinsky was increasingly sought as a speaker on college campuses. He drew crowds and lots of support wherever he went. But the northern student movement, increasingly crystallized around SDS, was now dividing in two directions. One was swept up by the call for ideology and increasing rejection of “Amerika”; the other was headed toward electoral politics, generally within the Democratic Party.

Asked what his ideology was, Alinsky would say no more than that he was a small “d” democrat, that democracy could not function if some citizens were denied their rights, and that the growing concentration of power and wealth in the U.S. was undermining the best of the nation’s democratic heritage and inimical to any real democracy.

Regarding “new values,” Alinsky said that in the communities in which he worked it was bourgeois, “decadent,” middle class values, held in contempt by the students, that motivated IAF organizations’ members to action. To Alinsky, the poor were fighting for their piece of the pie. He often added that after they got it, there would be the possibility for broader discussions on the meaning of democracy. This second thought got lost in his exchanges with the student left.

In fact, the student movement’s complaints about him, and Alinsky’s responses to them, were passing ships in the night. Indeed, poor and minority communities were demanding their place at the table, their slice of the pie, their piece of the action. But they were not caught up in the me-first rugged individualism that most offended student radicals. This important distinction was lost in a conversation that never was. Alinsky and the student movement’s leaders were both speaking at each other, not with one another.

While SNCC increasingly came to define black power as black nationalism of one kind or another, Alinsky increasingly argued that the white middle class and the “have a little, want more” working class had to be brought into the action if meaningful change was to come about in the country. He publicly worried about the white working class’ drift to the right.

While the Northern white student movement was disintegrating into numerous factions of Marxist “pre-party formations” or seduced by electoral politics, Alinsky was playing his same old tune: organize powerful “people’s organizations.” Without them, little can be changed. If the goal is justice, organize!

**1968-1970: Alinsky and the Student Movement Part Ways**

In 1968, I returned to my home in San Francisco and became lead organizer for the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO), a largely Latino community organization in San Francisco’s Mission District. MCO was very broad-based, including Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal churches, a few unions, youth and senior groups, and tenant, homeowner, small merchant, nationality, and other interest group organizations. MCO and its predecessor Mission Council on Redevelopment (MCOR) defeated urban renewal, won rent strikes, stopped condominium conversions, won jobs for racial and ethnic minorities, stopped bank red-lining, prevented high-rise construction in a residential neighborhood, and changed practices and policies of the public schools. The organization’s membership included militant high school and college groups, as well as nationalist Latino organizations. An uneasy alliance kept them all together. Nothing is as persuasive as success, and MCO was succeeding in winning things that people in the District thought couldn’t be won.

Despite the successes of the MCO’s formula of broad-based “lowest significant common denominator” organizing, the militants within it were not satisfied. When third world student strikers at San Francisco State University and students at the neighborhood’s Mission High School issued “non-negotiable demands,” they expected MCO to support them.

When seven young Latinos were charged with murdering a San Francisco policeman, militants demanded “free Los Siete,” and support was again expected from MCO. It wasn’t received in the form it was asked for.

Instead, MCO:

\*Called upon the University to negotiate in good faith with the student strike leaders;

\*Sought and won the transfer from Mission High School of the top administrative staff, and; \*Called for a fair trial and funding for an adequate legal defense team for Los Siete.

MCO increasingly divided into two camps. On the one hand were churches, block clubs, tenant organizations, some youth groups, unions, seniors and parent organizations. On the other were high school and college militants and nationalists, non-profit “community-based” government- and foundation-funded agencies and, ironically, some of the more middle-class Latino organizations. At each of the organization’s annual conventions, attended by as many as 1,200 delegates, the former bloc won.

The division reflected what was happening in the country. Militants and nationalists were vocal but didn’t speak for a majority of the constituencies they claimed to represent. When these constituencies were organized, they spoke in another voice—that voice was represented by what was increasingly called “the Alinsky model.”

In 1969, Alinsky opened his school for organizers and made a last effort to connect with the student movement. He hired Staughton Lynd, an important participant in the Mississippi Summer Project’s “freedom schools,” to be one of the organizing institute’s three principal staff members. But the attempt to connect failed. Lynd was soon gone and the connection, slim though it had become, between Alinsky and most of the militants of the student movement ended.

The student movement was unable to build the power necessary to accomplish its goals, and it became increasingly unwilling to learn the lessons required if such power was to be built. Rhetorical excess and increasingly militant action became substitutes for organizing real power. Alinsky had much to teach about such organizing…but he also had things to learn.

At their best, both SNCC and SDS presented a vision of a bold and active democracy. It was an appealing vision as well, one that, if accompanied by serious organizing, could have engaged large numbers of the American people. Alinsky didn’t sufficiently appreciate that.

IAF organizations reached a certain level of power, gained a seat at decision-making tables, stopped some of the worst things from happening to their people, won important victories, and then disappeared into the administration of funded programs. Alinsky’s hope was that these organizations would remain blocs of power effectively representing their constituencies. Instead, they became administrators of Federally (and otherwise) funded programs.

As the Child Development Group of Mississippi (Headstart) coopted much of the energy released by SNCC’s work in the State, so did Department of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Health & Education, Model Cities and War on Poverty programs coopt what Alinsky was building. But the paths taken by the two organizing groups were different.

On the one hand, vision with weak organization was defeated; on the other, organization with weakly-stated vision was defeated. In the longer term, both were defeats. The Movement declined, became isolated and largely disappeared. Alinsky’s work became coopted.

A more recent observation should be made: The cooptation problem persists in contemporary community organizing. Throughout the country, there are “Alinsky-tradition” community organizations—some of them representing large numbers of people. They are at decision-making tables. But the proposals they make there are relatively timid.

It has taken the Occupy movement to place the fundamental questions of vast economic and social inequality, concentration of power in the hands of the wealthy, and the erosion of any serious notion of democracy on the national agenda. But the same tension that existed between Alinsky and SNCC now is replicated. One the one hand is organization with insufficient vision and program to address the central issues of the day. On the other hand is vision without power to meaningfully struggle for its realization. Will some synthesis take place? That remains to be seen.

**Talking Past Each Other: Alinsky and Donaldson**

What has preceded sets the stage to examine a conversation. *The National Catholic Reporter (NCR*), sort of a *Nation* *Magazine* within U.S. Catholicism, convened a two day discussion among intellectuals and activists of the period, including Alinsky and Ivanhoe Donaldson, a Fellow at the liberal-left Institute for Policy Studies. Until the year before, Donaldson had been one of SNCC’s most effective organizers and strategists. The subject was “revolution.”

Despite significant agreement in important areas, their comments illustrate how differently these two viewed the times and the possibilities within them. In what follows, I make summary statements of the subject at hand and then let the two of them do most of the talking. In frustration, at one point in the exchange, Alinsky said, “I hope, Ivanhoe, before the weekend is out, you and I will be able to communicate. The fact is that what you are saying ties in with what I was trying to say before.” But it really didn’t.

To the student movement, Alinsky was merely a reformist. In the *NCR* discussion, he supports both “reform” and “revolution.” Here are excerpts from the transcript (circa 1967), with quotations italicized.

*All people (*in the United States today*)*, Alinsky says, *are alienated out of decision-making. The middle class has almost gone into a state of what I’d call mass schizophrenia …because they feel there’s no way you can get a handle on anything in this vast amorphous anonymity of corporate structure—you can’t see who’s at fault or how you can move.*

Surely this is not a statement for tinkering at the edges of a system with minor reforms. Alinsky thought there were things profoundly wrong with the state of the nation.

A common label attached to Alinsky was that he was only “local,” failing to understand that major decisions were made at a national level. On national vs. local organizing in relation to the FIGHT organization in Rochester, NY and its battle with KODAK, he said:

*FIGHT couldn’t deal with this corporate structure. KODAK dominated Rochester, but Rochester was not KODAK’s world. KODAK’s world was THE WORLD…So we’re faced with a whole new deal… We couldn’t just say the corporation is evil, and expect anything to happen…(W)hat you begin to wonder as you start moving into trying to change this corporate economic structure we’re faced with is simply, how do you do it?….*

*I recognize full well the limits of local organizations. But you’ve got to start from some place. You don’t start in a seminar room if you’re going to work with people. You’re going to work with them where they live, in their local situation. You get enough of them and you can then tie it up into a national movement. But when you don’t have that, you have nothing.*

(Here’s what Alinsky wrote on this argument in the 1969 “Afterward to the Vintage Edition” of his 1946 classic, Reveille for Radicals.

(*In the world as it is, one must begin from where one is. A political idiot knows that most major issues are national, and in some cases international, in scope. They cannot be coped with on the local community level. The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council at the zenith of its power could not deal with the most pressing problem of its time, the issue of widespread unemployment, until our whole economy boomed as a result of world developments. Until the people of the East and West and other parts of the country had the money to buy meat there would be unemployment in the Back of the Yards regardless of anything the Back of the Yards Council could do. This is obvious. However, it is just as clear that in order to create a national movement one must first build the parts to put together. The building of the parts is a tough, tedious, time-consuming, often monotonous and frequently frustrating job. There is no detour to avoid this means to the end of building a national movement. To organize the automobile industry each part of General Motors [Chevrolet, Cadillac, suppliers, etc]…had to be organized and then put together, and then General Motors was organized. The same process had to be followed with Chrysler…and then Ford…and now the bigger parts were ready to be put together and there was a nation-wide automobile workers union*…*The fundamental issue is how we go about building a national movement…* )

Efforts to link Alinsky’s local efforts failed: in Chicago, Alinsky-related organizations couldn’t get together to have a city-wide presence. And FIGHT’s battle with KODAK got a “ho-hum” from sister black organizations. His formulation ignored the fact that there were, from the outset, national organizing committees with which the union locals affiliated and to which they paid dues. He didn’t organize a counterpart structure.

The student movement increasingly spoke of the need for a revolution in values—discarding middle-class values. On where the American people were in relation to this question, Alinsky noted:

*In large masses of people—the middle class and large masses of the low-income class—there’s unrest, frustration, hate, but I haven’t seen any real fascination with revolution. I’ve had kids from SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) say, “Alinsky, you know what you’re doing? You’re organizing the poor for decadent, degenerate, bourgeois, bankrupt, materialistic values.” And I find myself responding, “You know what the poor in this country want? They want a bigger piece of those decadent, degenerate, bourgeois, bankrupt values.” This is not a revolutionary reaction.*

Alinsky was deeply apprehensive about the power structure’s repressive response to militant action if it wasn’t disciplined, nonviolent action.

*As far as American whites are concerned, using repressive tactics on physical violence is very simple: they will condone a high degree of physical repression without any question. They will talk about law and order and property and they’ll say this is just out of control and the government will be able to be repressive.*

Despite his concerns, Alinsky saw the period as offering promise for basic change.

*I’m in complete agreement with our whole drift here—we are living in revolutionary times, or pre-revolutionary…The rationale for living today is cracking up. That’s why, when somebody says we have to get rid of our corporations, I ask, “What are you going to put in their place?” You* [Ivanhoe] *say it isn’t a legitimate question. You can’t move unless you have some idea of where you’re going. Now this is our problem, this is a major reason why these are revolutionary times—because our rationale is collapsing all around. We feel we don’t have any power left, we don’t know where the hell to go, we don’t know what handle to pull on. We’re opposed to war in Vietnam but what do we do about it?…*

*The fact is we have a revolutionary matrix. Unless we start coming up with certain answers, unless we start accepting that “what is your alternative?” is a legitimate question, we may very well get that revolution…but it’s going to come from the right. So let’s not just look for the revolution on the left, which is what we’ve been doing…*

*We get statements for example that we’re going to have radicalization of institutions. Let’s start being specific. What institutions? What do you mean ‘radicalize?’ If we’re talking about political organization, then what kind, where, how, who, what are the resources, what are the potentials, what are all the negatives operating against it. And above all, what do we mean by a so-called revolutionary change.*

*When you start telling me you can’t have any revolutionary changes by working within our structured institutions, that you’ve got to get rid of the whole society, tear it down, burn it down or something—then from where I sit this is just political LSD. You’re not going to do it, that’s all. You’re not going to tear this thing down.*

In part, Donaldson reflected a different mood—the mood of SNCC in light of what happened in 1964 at the Democratic Party Convention, and everything that led up to it and that followed. But his ideas have important differences as well.

Donaldson was pessimistic about the possibilities for change within existing institutions, and optimistic about the possibilities for creating new ones. He failed to anticipate that the new institutions, not just their “leaders,” would also become coopted. In the language of the time, administrative decentralization—bringing blacks and other minorities into the system by delegating limited authority over public institutions to them—became “community control” and was juxtaposed to “institutional change” as a strategy. The violence he saw as politicizing led to repression.

But instead of leading to an increasingly radical mass base, it led in multiple directions: a radically alienated sector of the black community expressed in such organizations as the Black Panther Party, absorption of another sector of the black community in various coopting institutions, the growth of a black middle-class, and withdrawal from politics by the vast majority. Here are excerpts of what Donaldson said at the NCR gathering:

*Young people are disinterested in what goes on in the electoral game. They begin to look for other methods to develop what their interests are, and development of these other methods begins to challenge the society because people build their own institutions outside of the society’s established institutions and therefore they appear to be radical. The question of change and revolution begins to grow inside of that…(Y)ou begin to develop something of your own which you can put your energies into…It’s like developing nations inside nations.*

*When one builds an organization that deals with the establishment on behalf of the black community you get frustration, and that frustration leads to violence. You see, two things happen when that kind of an organization takes place. It will initially lead to rejection or it will initially lead to containment…absorbing of these new institutions—or at least the leaders—into the on-going political rhetoric, with no results…*

*From this frustration you get the explosive violence within the black ghettos. There’s a politicizing of the community that’s phenomenal…it becomes irrelevant what national black leaders have to say because the psychology all of a sudden exists on the streets which can’t be beaten. You know, ‘Baby, these cities will burn.’*

*Now the society’s method of dealing with this will be repressive, and I maintain that as the society moves toward repression, then in fact it creates the ferment of revolution…The young respond to repression by beginning to figure ways of beating repression…They will learn how to move, adapt and become true guerrillas and their activity will begin to polarize the people within the community and once again heighten the politicalization process.*

*More and more black people are nationalists and that’s what the white community doesn’t understand. The same with violence today; they’re not going to accept the potential of violence…There’s another question here about repression, about whether this country can in fact put black people in the prison camps. I’m not so sure that’s so easily done. To say it would be easy is to say there’s no segment of society which would reject that outside of the black people, and I think that there is a strong enough young group in this country, among white students, who gather energy and momentum and begin to develop their own forms of hostility. That momentum is there and there’s no point in denying its existence…*

Donaldson saw in the black community more than a movement to participate in the system as it is. (In fact, Alinsky-organizing was unable to reach the most disaffected constituencies of the black community.)

*[T]here’s a difference between just being an ethnic group seeking power to participate as normal individuals in an ongoing society, and it’s another thing when an ethnic group is also radical in its politics and begins to have revolutionary overtones. It means it doesn’t want just to participate in that society; it’s looking for radical change in that society…*

He challenged Alinsky’s view with a sweeping critique and simple demand—but no strategy on how to get from here to there.

Donaldson: *I think that what society has to do is end racism. You know it’s not going to do it by this summer and I’m not sure it’s ever going to do it, given its present institutionalized style. I think what is needed is a style of doing that is one that says this is really a national crisis and we have to act on it as such.*

*I don’t think you can call something a national crisis and have business as usual…It’s a real question of how we can turn this whole society’s energies into gearing to understand itself and the differences that exist within itself.*

Alinsky spoke and acted within a moral framework, but he was a pragmatist in action. Sometimes, he observed, there’s a real desire in the power structure

*to do something…in terms of jobs or anything else—but who do they talk to, who represents the black communities?…And this becomes a real fundamental issue because unless the community is…organized…you don’t have the prime essential for the democratic mix, to wit: meeting of representatives, pushing and hauling, giving and taking, the compromising, et cetera. And there is this vacuum across the country. Already the establishment knows that it can no longer deal with the Uncle Toms…*

Donaldson’s response, itself a misreading of Alinsky’s point, is emblematic of the talking past each other that went on between Alinsky and the student movement.

*[I]t’s a myth to say the black community doesn’t have leadership, it’s an excuse, it really is…Black leadership has dealt with (the) leadership of this country throughout the history of this country…*

Donaldson observed that the black community’s problems have long “been on the books,” and continued,

*So to say that one needs to have a particular leader in this day and age in this society is really kind of a backtrack you know, which really doesn’t speak to the core:…the society has to end racism.*

**Rage in the Streets**

What accounts for the differences?

With Donaldson and the student movement, Alinsky shared a radical analysis of what was wrong in American society. But he never gave up on the possibility of changing it by making full and imaginative use of the Bill of Rights’ guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly and petition. “Mass organization,” as he called it, was the vehicle for the poor, have-a-little-want-more, and the middle class to gain power to bring the country back to its best promises of democracy, liberty and justice for all.

With Alinsky, the student movement believed that you couldn’t rely on the normal channels of change; you had to organize outside regular two-party electoral politics, insider lobbying and polite petitioning. But the student movement’s loss of faith in the system’s capacity for change, and its inability to organize, moved it increasingly toward despair.

Alinsky’s pragmatic idealism was shaped by the experience of the ‘30s. Industrial unions did win things for their members and made a larger contribution to the society as a whole. Italian, Irish, Jewish, eastern European and other immigrants flocked to the CIO. They hoped to be part of the American Dream. They took citizenship classes, became naturalized and voted. On the issue of racial equality, the best CIO unions practiced what they preached. A full-employment economy, brought about by WW II, made it possible for everyone to work. And, except in the worst of circumstances, systematic violence and intimidation was not the norm.

In the South, black experience was far different. The New Deal compromise, which excluded southern blacks (and poor whites as well) in exchange for Dixiecrat votes, meant that Southern racism was not challenged within the Democratic Party. It also meant that farm workers, domestics, tenant farmers and others in occupations common to southern blacks were excluded from the protective labor legislation passed in the 1930s. Labor made few serious efforts to organize there. Honoring “states rights” meant that legally sanctioned racism would continue to permeate the south. Painful memories persisted of lynchings, poll tax, stolen land, black sambo, and Reconstruction betrayed: hope had been lifted and dashed.

When workers were organized in the north, they knew they were in a fight with bosses for a bigger piece of the pie and a democratic voice in their workplace and communities. But there never was a question of whether they should have the elementary rights of citizenship. In the south, blacks were legally excluded from voting and discriminated against in everything. Violence could be visited upon them with impunity, and was often sanctioned or perpetrated by the police themselves.

SNCC workers believed that they would combine organizing with moral pressure and bring about change. The systematic refusal by the Federal Government to protect them in their voting rights work when combined with the failure of the Atlantic City challenge shattered whatever faith they had in the system. Together, these were expressed in angrier and angrier rhetoric and greater and greater withdrawal into dead-end nationalism (which nationalism did not have to be).

SNCC defined most of the student movement. The courage and brilliance of its major leaders prompted emulation by the rest of the student movement. When the war in southeast Asia proved every bit as recalcitrant to change as U.S. racism, the mood of rage was easily assimilated by SNCC’s northern, mostly white, student movement counterparts who, often coming from relatively privileged families, were also unprepared for such resistance.

By 1968, the space had opened in the South for legal black power organizing. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, organized in 1966, demonstrated that. But SNCC couldn’t capitalize on what its earlier action had accomplished. As the decade drew to a close, SNCC turned inward in factionalism and bitterness; its outward action was increasingly isolated from its poor black constituency. Factionalism and isolation occurred in the northern movement as well.

A downward spin led to crash and burn. The hope of a few years earlier died.

**Was Anything Possible? The Farm Workers Exception**

The student movement analysis that accompanied its alienation from American politics said, in part, that it was hopeless to do anything in this country. We were in the “belly of the beast” and change would have to come from external sources—the revolutions of the third world countries being the principal source. Increasingly the movement’s heroes were third world revolutionaries like Che Guevera and Ho Chi Minh.

There was an exception to the general trends of the period: the United Farm Workers (UFW). I had written a working paper for a 1964 national SNCC staff meeting comparing the California Central Valley with the Black Belt Counties of the South.

There were, to be sure, huge differences. Regular lynchings weren’t present in California (though there was a history of violence, including killings, against Depression-era farm worker strikes). Perhaps more importantly, grapes required skilled farm workers. Cotton didn’t: chemical sprays and the machine picker eliminated huge numbers of jobs without diminishing productivity. When the SNCC-supported Mississippi Farm Labor Union (MFLU) organized in cotton it lacked the leverage available to the UFW in grapes.

Within California, there were important allies who could be mobilized to serve as a counterweight to the power of agri-business in the legislature and governor’s office. For the most part, agribusiness supported Republicans, though there were “Valley Democrats” (California’s equivalent to “Dixiecrats”) who were as anti-farm worker organizing as the most conservative Republicans.

At the same time, farm workers in California were in some important ways similar to day laborers, tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. And agribusiness in California was a powerful octopus with tentacles reaching into the University of California’s Agriculture Departments, interlocking directorships with major California banks and railroads, and a great deal of power in California politics.

I proposed an exchange between SNCC and the union’s predecessor organization -- the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). In 1965, several national SNCC leaders went with Terry Cannon and me to Delano and met with NFWA leaders there.

Terry Cannon was editor of a San Francisco-based SNCC newspaper called *The Movement*. Dickie Flowers, a SNCC staffer, went to Delano, headquarters of the NFWA, and Marshall Ganz, after a lengthy stint in Mississippi’s Amite County, returned to his hometown of Bakersfield (in the Central Valley) and then, keeping his SNCC staff identity, joined the NFWA staff. Over the next ten years he became one of the union’s most talented organizers and a member of its top leadership body.

My relationship with Fred Ross and Saul Alinsky helped make this exchange happen because of Cesar Chavez’ history. Soon to become a national figure as the strikes in grapes and lettuce and the subsequent boycotts hit the country, Chavez had been identified as a leader in an early 1950s California organizing drive among urban Mexican-Americans. The organizing was initiated by Fred Ross under the auspices of Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation. Chavez later called Ross “my secret weapon.”

The full farm worker story is another important chapter of this period, one too complex for this paper. But several points about it should be noted here. First, the relationship of trust between Chavez, the emerging leader and organizer, and Fred Ross, the veteran organizer, was of critical importance. Its roots went back to Ross’ first encounter with Chavez in the early 1950s. Chavez became a key leader of the Community Service Organization (CSO), and later its principal full-time organizer—a result of Ross’ organizing work. When Chavez decided to leave CSO to organize farm workers, he asked Ross to be part of the effort.

In SNCC, development of grassroots organizations flowed from a commitment to the most disenfranchised of southern blacks. But within SNCC there was no one with Ross’ talent as an organizer who could serve as a mentor for the rest of us. Ella Baker was closest, but didn’t have the extensive hands-on contact that Ross had with Chavez and the union. Organizing as science, craft and art were highly developed in Chavez, Gil Padilla, Dolores Huerta and several others who had been part of the CSO and who joined Chavez to organize farm workers.

Second, allies within California emerged fairly quickly. Indeed there was a history of support for farm workers from liberals, more progressive labor unions, and important Protestant and Catholic religious people. This was generally absent in the Deep South states where evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist, mainline Protestant and fundamentalist whites were apologists for the system of segregation and where, except in Louisiana, there were few Catholics. (In the late 1950s, New Orleans’ Bishop integrated the diocesan parochial schools and excommunicated racist Leander Peres from the church, but Louisiana’s French/Spanish legacy was far different from the Protestantism of the rest of the South.)

As soon as organizing work manifested itself in California’s Central Valley, these groupings rallied to support it. The California Migrant Ministry, a mainline Protestant organization, became an informal arm of the farm workers union organizing effort. Priests and nuns joined in as well. Unions in the automobile, packinghouse, garment, printing, longshore and other jurisdictions soon responded to the farm workers’ organizing effort. The reform “club” movement within the California Democratic Party also was supportive.

Third, and I think most important for the discussion here, was that Ross, Chavez and the others at the core of the union organizing effort were sophisticated enough in their understanding of power to neither be totally disillusioned with its abuses nor to give up on their ability to use it in rural California for positive ends.

Chavez and his co-workers made alliances with the Walter Reuther-wing of the AFL-CIO, important Catholic Bishops and their Protestant counterparts, major segments of the Democratic Party and the student movement. Most important, when leaders from these groups, especially the Reuther wing of labor and segments of Democratic Party leadership, sought to moderate the direct action of the farm workers union, Chavez was able to stand his ground without fearing isolation. He knew the religious community, the student movement and the grassroots liberal Democrats would remain supporters. He also knew that Reuther and others closer to the center of the Democratic Party would pay a very high price with their liberal and religious allies if they broke with the union.

Put another way, there was enough depth of support from key constituencies to prevent more conservatizing forces from doing to the Farm Workers Union what they successfully did in the Democratic Party to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and its challenge at the 1964 Convention.

1968-1970 were years of growing isolation for most of the movement, and no major victories. With the farm workers, the opposite was the case. From the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, the union effort enjoyed unparalleled growth. By 1975, as many as 100,000 workers were members of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and beneficiaries of contracts negotiated between the union and growers. (What became of the farmworkers’ union is another story—a sad one, but one beyond the scope of this article.)

**Lessons: What Might We Have Done Differently/What Were Our Mistakes?**

What can be learned? As a movement, we didn't know how to handle defeat.

Instead of careful calculation that would have used defeats as opportunities to better understand our adversaries and modify policy, strategy and tactics, our rhetoric grew more shrill and our tactics more militant Reversing Teddy Roosevelt's advice, we talked loudly and carried a little stick. The art of politics was lost.

It became heresy to ask the question, "What will be the reaction to our action?" As a corollary, "compromise" became a dirty word rather than a way of understanding that we were on a long march through the institutions and that we had to build for the long road to get there. Contradictorily, many fell victim to the paralysis of analysis--engaging in conversations so esoteric and theoretical as to guarantee leaving most people out of them.

Commenting to me on what was going on at the time, International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) Secretary-Treasurer Lou Goldblatt made two observations that stuck with me ever since I heard them in 1968. Regarding the various "non-negotiable demands" of the period, he said, "The only thing in our experience that is non-negotiable is recognition." And about how change would come, he said, "We are in a continuous struggle over prerogatives."

The Free Speech Movement was our last experience at Berkeley with recognition -- where institutional power had to negotiate with us. Thereafter, we were unable to generate negotiable proposals that changed the relations of power. A few urban community organizations both won the right to "represent" their neighborhoods and generated proposals that institutionalized and expanded their right to an on-going voice in decision-making processes that affected their communities. But they were soon coopted by Federal dollars.

Instead of seeking a way to neutralize the Wallace-Nixon-Reagan appeal to white working class and lower middle-class discontent, and to win over this constituency, the Northern student movement took the turn to the political right as a confirmation of its arrogance toward white working class people.

Students who would have been thrown out of the room for uttering “nigger,” "spik," "chink," "bitch," or "broad," got a chuckle of approval when they said "redneck" or "Honkie." Indeed, there even emerged in some places “Honkies for Black Power.”

Where white working class and low-income neighborhoods organized against freeways and urban renewal, it was generally white exclusionary populists who spoke for them. Where small and medium size farmers, merchants and businessmen battled against corporate domination, they waged their struggles in a framework of early 19th century understandings of capitalism, competition and the free market.

Instead of seeking ways to win Vietnam draftees, volunteers and vets, they were often characterized as the enemy. (A notable exception was the GI coffee house group within the anti-war movement.)

There is no democracy as long as there are excluded groups who are afraid or powerless to speak in their own behalf and for their own unique interests and identities. The problem in the late 1960s was the inability to fashion vehicles in which there could be unity in diversity. Instead of trying to figure out what "lowest significant common denominator" meant in the context of growing awareness of sins of omission and commission toward women, people of color, and other excluded and marginalized groups, particular identities and their distinguishing issues became the central themes of organizing.

Paralleling this weakness was the rise of various forms of separatism in these groups. In an earlier period, the student movement, both northern and southern, stood for the whole--whether because of our idea of democratic citizenship, or democratic socialism, or because we thought we were part of a vanguard that would liberate all humanity, or because we were all God's children. We grew increasingly unable to communicate with, involve in our activities, and speak for the majority of the American people--including women and people of color.

Instead of looking at initial defeats and figuring out how to convince majorities of our views, courts were increasingly relied upon to impose solutions to what were problems of both individual Constitutional rights and politics. However "right" the Constitutional arguments might have been, victories solely based on this approach confirmed what the political right found to be an increasingly potent picture of us--we were the "elitists."

Instead of building a politics around the ideals of democracy, equality and community, emerging “identity movements,” particularly elements of the women’s movement, alienated vast number of Americans by a radical individualism that implicitly denied mutual obligation and ignored our common humanity.

Instead of struggling to claim the best of the American democratic tradition as ours, and becoming fish in the sea of the people with whom students sought to work, our defeats were used to confirm the in-part-accurate theory about how manipulated and media-brainwashed people were, about hegemonic capitalism, and about money-corrupted politics. And the student movement’s isolation grew.

I think the core of the student movement weakness was that it didn't know how to deal with cooptation. Foundation and government funding undermined the independence of organizations it was involved in creating and sustaining. The Peace Corps and VISTA coopted youthful idealism. The George McGovern 1972 presidential campaign involved significant numbers of idealistic young people. Community-based nonprofits substituted for independent community organizing.

Describing this process, Harry DeRienzo said of his experience in the once-powerful New York tenant organizing movement, "The leaders became members of boards of directors; the organizers became executive directors and program staff; and the members became clients." That is, they went from co-creators of their own programs to consumers of someone else’s.

The same process took place throughout the country. Cooptation can mean recognition; that’s not what it meant in this period. Cooptation was not concession to demands. Cooptation undermined and destroyed the ability of people’s independent organizations to enforce what had been won, and to continue struggling for justice yet to be achieved. The power structure successfully coopted us.

Strong people were not sufficient to the task of dealing with cooptation. When Mississippi was targeted by Federal funding, the struggle was over who would administer the funds. Radicals and militants called their goal “community control,” but the administration of someone else’s money without the political power to define its uses is inevitably a route to disaster.

Alinsky understood this, but couldn’t prevent it. In Rochester, FIGHT’s Minister Florence lost the organization’s presidency to a rival who supported “community economic development” as an alternative to confronting systemic evil. Ed Chambers, IAF’s organizer there, had warned Florence that this might happen. It did.

By 1968, the back of legally sanctioned segregation and discrimination had been broken. As a result of the breakthrough in voting rights, several thousand black officials were soon elected in the Deep South. Black cops, mechanics, desk clerks, waiters and waitresses and others integrated previously all-white workforces.

Without SNCC, it is not clear when, or even that, this would have happened—it certainly would have been much later. But the racist and class system that SNCC wanted to change showed its ability to adapt and absorb. SNCC’s broader goals—the beloved community, black cooperatives, black (and white) labor unions, reversal of the legal and sometimes illegal expropriation of black-owned land, participatory democracy, ending poverty and more—remained unrealized.

The radical’s dilemma of social change in the United States was SNCC’s and Alinsky’s dilemma: both did for liberalism what liberalism claimed for itself but refused to accomplish. Neither was able to realize its more radical aspirations.

The student movement couldn't deal with cooptation of its message. Militants in the civil rights movement, myself included, were universally outraged when Lyndon Johnson concluded an address to Congress with our phrase--"We Shall Overcome." The possibility of this as a victory escaped our thinking. The Federal War on Poverty coopted our language of participation by the people. Administrative decentralization coopted our concept of community control. Alinsky called these mechanisms of cooptation “political pornography.” Here’s how Mississippi movement veteran Mrs. Leola Blackmon described what happened:

[W]hen Head Start got into the county, that split up everything. When they got the pre-schools…our leaders all jumped out of our organizations, our Freedom Democratic Party, and went for those jobs. That left the peoples that were following. Y’know how that is when something happen to a leader and nobody else can really just go on. They had peoples to take over, but didn’t have nobody strong enough to know the issues and follow them up…Then those poor peoples who had all interest in these leaders, they started saying, “They using us to get everything for themselves!” Which it was true. It was sure enough true.

There were, of course, exceptions to these trends. Student movement veterans went to work in places where they became union organizers and leaders; others became community organizers. GI coffee houses developed relationships of trust and confidence with Appalachians, Latinos, Blacks and others from lower income backgrounds who were the bulk of the Army.

Many graduates of the student movement entered professions and participated in associations with their colleagues seeking to align their work with broader social purposes. In both alternative and mainstream media, effective voice was given to dissent and alternatives to conventional wisdom. Some entered electoral politics and kept their principles intact. Many became academics who wrote and taught in ways consistent with the movement in which they had earlier participated. A few community organizing efforts successfully bridged divisions among the people and saved affordable housing, local jobs and businesses, and neighborhood institutions.

#### Local Versus Global

Critics of “local organizing” often say that you can’t solve the problems people experience locally without dealing nationally (and, increasingly in the era of globalization, internationally). But Alinsky never disputed that. Indeed, in the *National Catholic Reporter* discussion he is explicit; his point bears repetition because it is largely ignored by his critics:

“*I recognize full well the limits of local organizations. But you’ve got to start from some place. You don’t start in a seminar room if you’re going to work with people. You’re going to work with them where they live* (or work or pray or otherwise gather)*, in their local situation. You get enough of them and you can then tie it up into a national movement. But when you don’t have that, you have nothing.”*

Alinsky’s weakness was different: it lay in his reluctance to articulate a vision of how things could be different. His 1946 book, *Reveille for Radicals*, had some of this, but by the time I met him he mostly spoke of the realities of power, not a vision that would animate a sustained attack on how power was misused and what an alternative might look like.

At most, he spoke of a “blurred vision” of what might be. Or, he observed that the people in the communities where he worked wanted the same “corrupt, decadent, bourgeois, values” that the student movement was railing against.

Yes and no. That Americans were increasingly being turned into consumers and believers in “rugged individualism” was certainly true. But solidarity and community still motivated large numbers of them, and sharing and caring were more manifest in lower and working-class communities than elsewhere.

Today, the dominant metaphor is of human beings as consumers in a marketplace— “economic man”. (When he campaigned, Bill Clinton spoke of voters “hiring” a president; President George Bush equated democracy with free markets.) The fact that American marketing has penetrated the world is used as evidence of virtue, rather than of either the power of the empire’s god to overwhelm local gods or the fact that, in the face of powerlessness and roles in which they are co-creators, people may turn to consumption as the best means available for self-realization. We become what we buy when there are no other roles available.

But no vision will ever be turned into political victory and public policy without strong, local, building blocs of power. On this point, Alinsky is as valid today as he was then. (An effort to recognize this is the saying, “Think globally, act locally.” While the slogan misses the point of how to build locally, it captures an important truth.)

**What's Relevant for Today?**

Many of the things the early student movement did—SLATE and SNCC being the examples I’ve chosen because I know them best—are as up-to-date as this evening's news. “Lowest significant common denominator” and multi-issue organizing still make sense. Diverse constituencies are needed to create meaningful majorities. Getting leaders who authentically speak for particular groups in the room before a lowest significant common denominator is defined is central.

Tactics that contribute to winning strategies and to widening the base of support rather than those simply aimed at obtaining media coverage are as relevant today as they were then--something I hope the protesters against the IMF, WTO, World Bank, NIKE, Wall Street and other corporate exploitation quickly learn. Otherwise, they risk turning popular issues into those whose tactics are debated more than their merits (and I know our adversaries will always pick on our tactics no matter what they are).

There is a deep yearning among Americans to be members of something meaningful, to act on the best of our values, to be co-creators of their destinies rather than consumers of the offerings of distant and unaccountable others. So, too, there is a deep sense of fairness among a majority of the American people. In the early- to mid-1960s, we learned something about how to tap these sources of energy for a politics that put people first. Contextualized and properly applied to current circumstances, principles that were valid then are valid now. We can and should mourn the losses of the ‘60s and ‘70s. We should celebrate what we accomplished. We should learn and remember the lessons of those days in what we do now.

**An Afterward**

I wrote the first draft of this paper almost 20 years ago. Susan Erenrich is tenacious when she gets her teeth into a project, so when she told me that this book was going to happen I was confident it would, and waited rather than turning what is now a chapter into an article. Having tinkered a little with it, but not much, I do want to add this afterward that sums up the Alinsky-SNCC differences.

Anyone who is serious about organizing should read Nicholas von Hoffman’s Radical, his appreciation of his friend and mentor Saul Alinsky. Von Hoffman describes how, before trying to organize in Chicago’s Black Southside, he scraped his pennies together to buy the best-looking clothes he could afford. He reasoned that to be taken seriously in his assignment by Alinsky to organize the largely Black Woodlawn neighborhood, he would have to look like a man of substance.

His attitude embodied Alinsky’s response to radical critics who charged he was just organizing people to enter the decadent middle class. “You know what the people in the ghettoes where we organize want?” he responded, “to be part of the decadent middle class.”

SNCC field secretaries working in the poorest Black Belt counties of the Deep South took a different approach. It could be said that they “dressed down,” though they and I wouldn’t look at it that way. They wore the bib overalls of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and day laborers they hoped would be the base of, active participants in, and leaders of a movement to build black power in the south. And they contributed significantly to doing just that.

The communities in which they worked were bound together by deeply held religious beliefs that included the idea that we are all God’s children, which translated into a firm commitment to equality. Caring and sharing were more than hollow words of a Sunday sermon.

In what I have written here I try to capture the important, and difficult-but-not-impossible to reconcile, differences expressed in these two approaches. I think there are central truths for radicals in each of them. One has to begin where people are, clear sighted about the realities of their lives, cognizant of the jealousies, status rivalries, and imitations of the dominant system in which they participate. At the same time, it is a mistake to ignore and fail to build upon values and actions that are prefigurative of a world that is guided by more than “watch out for number one.”

Synthesizing these apparently contradictory truths is part of what Alinsky meant when he said you have to be an integrated schizophrenic to be a successful organizer of people power. Achieving that synthesis is a task still before those who want transformational change in this country, and who believe—as did Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis—“We can have a democratic society or we can have the concentration of great wealth in the hands of the few. We cannot have both.”

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