

The 60's Student Movement & Saul Alinsky: An Alliance that Never Happened

By Mike Miller

Alinsky's response and the student movement's complaints were passing ships in the night. Indeed, poor and minority communities were demanding their place at the table...But they were not caught up in the endless status race and me-first rugged individualism that most offended student radicals.

By the mid-1960's, Saul 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 crystalized 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 radical and 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 America undermined the best of the nation's democratic

that in the communities where he worked it was "bourgeois decadent middle class values," held in contempt by the students, that motivated IAF organizations' members to action. In fact, Alinsky's response and the student movement's complaints 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 endless status race and me-first rugged individualism that most offended student radicals. This important distinction was lost as Alinsky and the student movement's leaders spoke at, not with, one another.

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Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee meeting, Alabama, 1962.

heritage and was inimical to any real democracy.

Regarding "new values," commonly called for during this period, Alinsky said

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

Photo courtesy Highlander School collection

meaningful change in the U.S. was to come about. 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

From 1968-71, I was lead organizer for San Francisco's Mission Coalition Organization (MCO), patterned on Alinsky's approach. MCO included neighborhood militants and moderates, radicals, liberals and conservatives. We used a formula of broad-based "lowest significant common denominator" organizing. Student militants 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, a campaign was mounted by militants to "free Los Siete." Support was again expected from MCO. It wasn't received in the form it was sought. Instead, MCO demanded that the University Administration negotiate in good faith with the student strike leaders, sought and won 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. One was churches, block clubs, tenant organizations, some youth groups, unions, seniors and parent organizations. The other was 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 annual conventions attended by about 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 the constituencies they claimed to represent. When organized, these constituencies spoke in another voice.

In 1968, 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 training 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 student movement militants 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 to build such power. Rhetorical excess and increasingly militant action became substitutes for organizing people. Alinsky had much to teach about such organizing...but he also had things to learn.

At their best, both SNCC and SDS presented a bold vision of 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 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 and won important victories and then disappeared into the administration of funded programs. Alinsky hoped 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) co-opted much of the energy released by SNCC's work in the state, so did Department of Labor, Housing and

Today the anti-poverty program is emerging as a huge political pork barrel, a wielding of anti-poverty funds as a form of political patronage. Its disguises as a war on poverty are thin and clumsy. The use of this kind of money for that purpose is particularly repulsive. The American people will accept to a certain degree the variance of programs from a professed purpose and a certain amount of wasteful administration. Even some plain graft is not shockingly unexpected; however, when this occurs in a program which bursts forth like a modern Sir Galahad then the American public will react in a rage. Americans, in common with most of mankind, have a contempt and revulsion for a phony, hypocritical piety. We don't particularly object to the sermon denouncing sexual promiscuity but we hold our noses when at the same time we know that the sermonizer is having an affair with the organizer.

From *The War on Poverty-Political Pornography*, Saul D. Alinsky; May 1965

Urban Development, Health & Education, Model Cities and War on Poverty programs coopt what Alinsky was building. The paths taken by the two organizing groups were different, but

In frustration at one point in the exchange, Alinsky said, "I hope, Ivanhoe, before the weekend's 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 verbatim transcript later published in the magazine, with quotations italicized.

Alinsky: All people (in America today) 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.

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 black community's 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 someplace. 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 situa-



Students are harassed at a lunch-counter sit-in in Jackson, MS, 1963.

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both vision without organization and organization without vision were defeated. The Movement declined and became isolated. Alinsky's work became co-opted.

Talking Past Each Other: Alinsky and Ivanhoe Donaldson

In late 1967, *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 but until the year before one of SNCC's most effective organizers and strategists. The subject was "conversations on revolution." Despite significant agreement in important areas, their comments illustrate how differently these two viewed the possibilities of the times.

tion. 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.

But efforts to link the 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.

The student movement increasingly spoke of the need for a revolution in values-discarding middle-class values. Alinsky disagreed:

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 reaction 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.

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 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 pos-

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“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.”

sibilities for creating new ones. He failed to anticipate that the new institutions, not just their “leaders,” would also become co-opted. The violence Donaldson 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 co-opting institutions including a new strata of public administrators who ran administratively decentralized public agencies and “community-based nonprofits” that were dependent for their funds on foundations and government, the growth of a black middle-class, and withdrawal from politics by the vast majority. Here are excerpts of what Donaldson said at the *National Catholic Reporter* 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. [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.

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...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.

Perhaps most illustrative of talking past each other was this exchange in which Alinsky addresses both "divide and conquer" and the possibility there might be times those in power wanted to negotiate with the black community.

Sometimes, Alinsky said, 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...He

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 back track, you know, which really doesn't speak to the core:...the society has to end racism.

Rage in the Streets

What accounts for these differences?

With Donaldson and the student movement, Alinsky shared a radical analysis of what was wrong in American society. But Alinsky 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 (or 'broad-based') organization," as he called it, was how the poor, have-a-little-want-more and middle class could gain power to bring the country back to its best promis-

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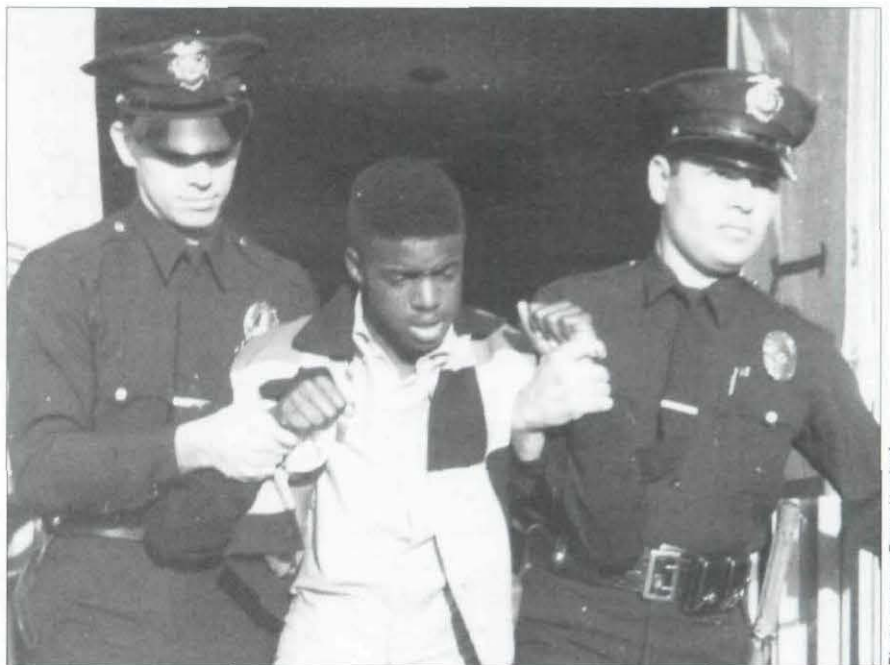


Photo courtesy Bruce Hartford

es of democracy, liberty, equality and justice for all.

With Alinsky, the student movement believed that you couldn't rely on the normal channels of change; you had to

A student is arrested at a sit-in at Van de Kamps in Los Angeles, 1964.

Labor's post-WW2 southern organizing drive was a failure; expulsion of "Communist-led" unions, the Cold War and McCarthyism conservativized the labor movement; unions made few serious efforts to organize the lowest paid workers...hope had been lifted and dashed.

organize outside regular two-party electoral politics, insider lobbying and polite petitioning, but its loss of faith in the system's capacity for change and its inability to organize moved it increasingly toward despair.

Alinsky's realistic idealism was shaped by the experience of the 30's. In the South, black experience was far different. The New Deal compromise, which excluded southern blacks (and poor whites as well) in exchange for Southern (racist) Democrat politician's 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 1930's. Labor's post-WW2 southern organizing drive was a failure; expulsion of "Communist-led" unions, the Cold War and McCarthyism conservativized the labor movement; unions made few serious efforts to organize the lowest paid workers. Honoring "states rights" meant that legally sanctioned racism would continue to permeate the south. Painful experiences and memories persisted of lynchings, poll tax, stolen land, black sambo and Reconstruction-betrayed: hope had been lifted and dashed.

SNCC workers believed they could combine organizing with moral pressure and bring about change. The systematic refusal by the Federal Government to protect them in their voting rights work, combined with the failure of the 1964 Atlantic City Democratic Party challenge to seating the racist Mississippi delegation, shattered whatever faith they had in the system. Together, these were expressed in angrier and angrier rhetoric and greater and greater withdrawal into separatist nationalism. SNCC defined a far broader context. 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 America'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 helped bring about. As the decade drew to a close, SNCC turned inward in factionalism and bitterness and its outward action was increasingly isolated from its constituency of poor blacks. Factionalism and isolation occurred in the northern movement as well. The hope that the student movement would provide a new generation of effective organizers, equivalents of the young radicals of the 1930's who went to work in factories across the country to become "internal organizers" and the smaller number who became full time professionals, was not to be realized. A very small portion of the student movement moved on into Marxist-Leninist "pre-party formations." Some of them tried to emulate their 30's predecessors. Their sectarian politics and often-brittle style precluded that possibility. †

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