**ORGANIZING AND EDUCATION: Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire & Myles Horton.**

*by Mike Miller*

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The pot continues to boil: organizers, activists and citizenship educators arguing about their respective roles and contributions in the struggle for social justice. There is an ongoing critique of organizing that comes from people like Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander Center (the internationally known citizenship education organization located in Tennessee) and Paulo Freire, the Brazilian whose similar work with illiterate peasants and rural workers became internationally known through his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For Horton, the dialog about organizing and education took place with his a long-time associate and friend Saul Alinsky, the best-known community organizer in America, who died in 1972. The discussion revolved around, from Horton's point of view, a debate that went on between them. In *We Make The Road by Walking*, Horton puts it this way: "Saul Alinsky and I went on a circuit...At that time Saul was a staunch supporter of Highlander, and I was a staunch supporter of him, but we differed and we recognized the difference...Saul says that organizing educates. I said that education makes organization possible, but there's a different interest, different emphasis. That's still unclarified."

The point is made in Horton's autobiography, *The Long Haul*, as well. After imagining an urban area with run-down buildings, he says the organizer's goal would be to get the building torn down or fixed up. So the organizer would use whatever means accomplished that goal, even if it meant people would learn nothing about "using people power." But that's not the educator's goal. "If I had to make a choice, I'd let the building go and develop the people." Later, "...you may have to make a decision as to whether you want to achieve an organizational goal or develop people's thinking." What Horton misses here is the real lesson when you “let the building go”. Defeat confirms the notion marginal people have of their powerlessness. That is not a lesson organizers want to teach.

There is a sub-theme as well. Horton and Freire worry a great deal about cooptation--the absorption of social justice movements into the status quo against which they once struggled. The issue deserves the attention it receives from radicals.

Horton isn't entirely consistent regarding Alinsky, though he is in the more general critique of organizing. Horton versus Horton appeared when Alinsky was discussed at the "Alinsky in Retrospect" seminar at Chicago's Columbia College in 1978: "(Saul) believed that people in struggling expanded their perception of self-interest to encompass self-respect, dignity and solidarity with their neighbors. He thought of this as self-education. He thought this was a high quality of education...He did more than talk about education. He consciously (emphasis added) used organizational activities for educational purposes....Alinsky was aware that the experiential learning of the people, particularly the professional organizers, was important...He was very proud of the fact that...people learned." Horton thought most organizers didn't share Alinsky's concern.

Horton's version of the difference between education and organizing is a straw man because of his limited definition of "organizing." "Organizing implies that there's a specific, limited goal that needs to be achieved, and the purpose is to achieve that goal. But if education is to be part of the process, then you may not actually get that problem solved, but you've educated a lot of people." And, "Organizers are committed to achieving a limited, specific goal whether or not it leads to structural change, or reinforces the system, or plays in the hands of capitalists."

Undoubtedly there are organizers who view their role in this way, but not Alinsky or, for that matter, many of the organizers against whom these criticisms are often directed. Alinsky and his tradition no more resemble this definition of organizing than do Horton, Freire and Highlander resemble what goes on in a sterile classroom where a bored teacher tries to pour ideas into the heads of uninterested students.

In the living experience of people in slums, ghettos, barrios or "hollers" the lessons of democratic power, of people power, cannot be taught without an organization in which they exercise such power. Both the uses and abuses of power are learned by experience. To be able to condemn injustice, talk about structural change, define values, name the power structure and spin out visions of what a new society would look like are all admirable and, indeed, necessary. But neither alone nor in combination will any of them begin to shift great numbers of people from silent resentment of, or acquiescence in, their oppression to the struggle for liberation.

The organizer's side of the story is told in a classic essay, "Making An Offer We Can't Refuse," written by Richard Harmon, who directed Alinsky's organizing project in Buffalo, NY in the mid-1960s, and now works for the Industrial Areas Foundation in Portland, OR.

“Organizing is teaching,” writes Harmon. “Obviously, not academic-type teaching, which is confined for the most part to stuffing data into people's ears. Organizing is teaching which rests on people's life experiences, drawing them out, developing trust, going into action, disrupting old perceptions of reality, developing group solidarity, watching the growth of confidence to continue to act, then sharing in the emotional foundation for continual questioning of the then current status quo...This means that education is primarily in the action, but becomes really liberating education only if the person develops the discipline to rigorously reflect on that action...We have to own the questions in this educational process. It must be our curiosity that is the engine...pulling us into action, then reflection, then more action, more reflection.”

Organizers should take note of Harmon's emphasis on teaching. Many organizers, in fact, don't do much meaningful teaching--which is why we need insistent reminders from people like Horton and Freire. But good organizers do teach. Harmon, working in an organization that is in action, has an advantage. The action creates the teachable moments when people find that the world is not the way it is taught in the civics textbooks. In these situations of cognitive dissonance there are real opportunities for education.

God (or the Devil) is in the details: we see the differences between the educator and organizer if we carefully compare Harmon's series of questions with those asked by educator Nina Wallerstein in her essay "Problem-Posing Education: Freire's Method for Transformation" in Ira Shor's *Freire for the Classroom*. Wallerstein's questions have students describe or name a problem, define it along with associated feelings, relate the problem to their own experience, generalize to develop an understanding of why the problem exists--asking who benefits and who loses from the existence of this problem and, last, discuss strategies for solutions and what can be done to implement them. Good questions. But not enough for people to gain the experience of building and using democratic power.

Harmon's questions are different: "What is the problem?" "How many other people feel the same way?" "What precisely do we want?" "Who do we see to get things changed?" "How many of us should go to see him?" "Who will be the spokespersons?" "Are we willing to caucus?" "What is the timetable for the response?" "Where and when is the evaluation session?" It should be right after the meeting--never let people go home alone after an action! Clearly these questions can be posed most meaningfully in the course of developing an actual campaign--something that is done within an organization. Organizing has often been criticized for focusing on winning rather than on educating. But the dichotomy is a false one. When large numbers of people win it is educating if they evaluate the experience. To teach an ever-widening number of people who are oppressed or discriminated against that they can, by democratically developed collective action, fight and win is the central liberating lesson--and it comes through organizing. Lost struggles, especially when experienced by people who have just been persuaded to leave the TV and join with their neighbors, fellow church members or co-workers to do something, only reinforce the pervasive belief that "you can't fight the powers that be." Wallerstein's questions alone don't get at this.

Two dangers exist. The first lies in the fact that the lessons of organizing, central as they may be, don't inherently lead to an understanding of the larger social structure or the necessity to fundamentally change it. Such an understanding necessarily emerges out of more reflection, analysis and discussion. It is extraordinarily important that this kind of education go on--precisely that advocated by Horton and Freire--if organizing is to do more than give one more group a slightly larger piece of a shrinking economic or public services pie, or substitute one set of oppressors for another. To avoid these pitfalls, people need to be challenged to:

-- Discuss values--those of our adversaries and ours. They are often fundamentally different: "me-first," I want to be on top, the status race versus sharing, caring, love, justice, equality and freedom.

-- Examine alternative visions of how cities, regions, countries and economies could be organized.

-- Learn the workings of the political, economic and social power structure within which we live and how it came to be that way.

-- Study those who sought to bring the country closer to its democratic promise in social movements of the past.

-- Build the new society within the old--that is, structure their own organizations to embody democratic principles. The organizing tendency is to avoid these larger discussions. That's why it needs Freire and Horton around.

The second danger is that people learn too well the nature of power in America today and either withdraw in the face of what appear to be such insurmountable obstacles or become part of politically correct groups--right on this or that question--and powerless to do anything about any of the questions. The educator’s tendency is to view the facts of power-building as cooptation. Horton succumbs. "We concluded," he says, "that reform within the (schooling) system *reinforced* the system, or was coopted by the system. Reformers didn't change the system, they made it more palatable and justified it..." Freire, however, modifies and amends. "We have more space outside the system, but we also can create the space *inside* of the subsystem...Trying to coopt is a kind of struggle on behalf of those who have power to do so. It's a tactic; it's a moment of the struggle...(I)n order for you not to be co-opted, at least for you to be out of the possibility of some power wanting to co-opt you, it's necessary that you do nothing." Purity is for the yogi or monk--and the adult educator, a step removed from the action, needs to be careful of it as well.

All significant organizing efforts and social movements face the problem of how to win immediate victories while at the same time expanding their power so they can address more recalcitrant problems in society. The reform versus revolution distinction doesn't provide guidance in formally democratic societies where the rights of free speech, assembly and petition to the government exist along with competitive elections. Another category is needed--perhaps re**for**lution (or re**v**o**form**), concepts that imply both fundamental change and something other than the immediate violent overthrow of a government. The strategy for achieving fundamental change in the United States is to build autonomous, deeply rooted, broadly based, people power organizations that can act locally and work together in larger political and economic arenas. Alinsky's early work, the Southern civil rights movement and the labor movement, all in the last 70 years, are examples. At their best, each included efforts to change major institutions, mutual aid and self-help, creating and enhancing autonomous culture, and education and training as dimensions of their organizational life. All these movements have lessons to offer us today.

In the best organizer's work, people act and talk. They talk about what they are doing, and that is one of the best ways to learn. In the best work of religious or labor education, at a slightly more leisurely pace, a time-out for more reflective education takes place. The various organizing networks now have anywhere from three to ten day "training sessions" which are mostly focused on how people think about values, democracy and power, though they include skills training as well. But these sessions are very different in form from the open-ended circle that characterizes the Highlander method. Would the organizers open their work to critical discussion led by a Myles Horton? It is not clear whether they would. Would the educators ground their teaching in the concrete difficulties faced by any organization dealing with the staggering problems of poor and working people in the United States today, as well as the strength of the entrenched power they must confront? It is not clear that the educators do. If the two do no more than polemicize against each other, it is not likely that either will make the contribution that is needed. But the work needed to go beyond polemics isn't easy. In the old labor movement, there was a healthy tension between the labor educators and the organization's top leaders and best organizers. As far as I know, no one in current organizing practice has tried to institutionalize two sets of people performing the two roles. There is a certain luxury the educator has that is not available to the organizer since the latter's emphasis is building democratic power and the former's is to understand what it means.

Democratic organizers and educators are both central to building the kinds of people power organizations we need to move our nation toward a truly democratic society. We can measure the success of their efforts in two ways.

First, the leaders of powerful organizations can obtain meetings with the leaders of powerful social institutions--like government and corporations. We measure the power of "our side" by the kind of recognition given us by the decision makers with whom we can obtain meetings. There is, indeed, a predictable pattern of development. New movements are initially ignored. If that doesn't work, there may be efforts, on the one hand, to placate or appease them and, on the other, to infiltrate and destroy them. We have seen each of these in the evolution of the major American social movements since the 1930s. The president of a Chicago community organization in the 1960s was an undercover "red squad" cop! Only when none of these work do those in power decide to recognize their adversaries. The fact of recognition acknowledges a change in the relations of power. Only when those who hold institutional power think they cannot eliminate a strong opposition, are they forced to recognize and deal with it. Negotiations then take place. Are the negotiated agreements cooptation? Since such agreements are, by definition, "collaboration" (one makes agreements with those who already have institutional power) one could argue that they are inherently coopting. An easy answer but a wrong-headed one. The question is whether or not the agreements are used to enhance people power so that the next time around democratic prerogatives challenge the status quo even further.

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On the other side of the negotiating table, the holders of institutional power will try a new approach--to absorb the opposition into the status quo. Not many movements or organizations ever reach this point. The American political landscape is littered with "radical" organizations which can't obtain a meeting with the local dog-catcher--which means they aren't worth the effort of cooptation. Their rhetoric is inversely related to their effectiveness.

Second, we measure successful institutional change by the nature of the proposals presented to, and the results obtained from, those in power. This is only possible when you are at the negotiating table. Two kinds of proposals are typically made. "More" is one of them--more money, housing, jobs, vacation time, schools, hospitals, etc. These are essential, but they don't get at the more fundamental structural changes that need to be made. What does? We do well to look at the history of the labor movement to find examples of these.

The second kind of proposal challenges existing decision-making structures and prerogatives. The hiring hall, with rotational dispatch of workers based on how long they had been out of work, took control of employment away from owners and managers and put it in the hands of democratic unions. Collective bargaining forced employers to negotiate with unions over matters they once had decided unilaterally. The contractually negotiated right of workers to stop work when they considered a situation to be unsafe gave new authority to those on the shop floor. Worker ownership and control extends democratic prerogatives even further.

Parallel changes in decision-making prerogatives take place when community organizations win the right to veto plans for their communities, become partners in the decision-making processes or gain full authority over making certain kinds of decisions. For example, when a community organization wins the right to define an urban renewal program (or any other program aimed at its constituency), it has changed the relations of power.

Another involves the extension of democratic rights--as, for example, when the franchise was extended to white property-less males, freed slaves, women and eighteen year olds. It was no accident that voting rights were so difficult to win in the 1960s.

Understanding the difference between democratically constituted organizations and movements which come "from below," on the one hand, and government designed mechanisms for "citizen participation," on the other, is central to an understanding of co-optation. In this regard, great confusion exists both in action and in theoretical discussion and debate. Two communities might have what appears to be a strong, participatory, face-to-face, neighborhood organization for citizen involvement. But there may be a major difference between them. In one, the form for "strong democracy" is government sponsored and paid for neighborhood structures. In the other, the form for democratic participation is independent of government, raising its core budget from member dues and grassroots fund-raising activities. Both organizations might be vigorous in their defense of neighborhood interests and, in both, participants might learn the skills of civic participation, gain self-confidence, have greater access to decision-making and have an impact on the decisions made. But that's not enough.

The former kind of organization is typically limited in the scope of its activities to what has been defined for it by its funding agencies. If it goes outside the scope, either in program or tactics, it is likely to lose its funding and staff and, as experience with the poverty program and similar government sponsored citizen participation efforts shows, go out of business. In the latter, leaders and organizers want to aggregate political resources because they understand that the solutions to the problems of the neighborhoods don't principally lie in City Hall--they lie in the private corporate sector and with state, regional and national levels of government. They develop relationships of mutual interest and confidence with people in other community organizations in other places. Thus they go beyond the parochialism of local neighborhoods--and they meet people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well, breaking down stereotypes and "isms" that have historically divided the country. They also work on whatever are the issues affecting the quality of life of their members. Thus, for example, they enter workplace arenas and may cooperate with unions. They challenge corporations on the issue of health care.

This contrasts dramatically with the acceptance by the government sponsored neighborhood associations of the pie as it is. They fight over how it is divided--not how big it is, what its ingredients are, or who shapes it. One writer gave unintended witness to this dramatic difference: "One of the ironies of well-functioning citizen participation structures," he wrote, "is that they give legitimacy to decisions that go against a neighborhood." In this case, "participation" is about administration and “empowerment”, not about policy, structures or people power. Independent organizations may reach agreements that aren't what they want, but they do so with the idea that they will come back with greater strength on a later day and get what they believe they deserve.

Formally democratic, autonomous and independent organizations are a necessary though not sufficient condition for the democratization of our society. Too often these organizations come to replicate the values and leadership forms and structures of the dominant culture and institutions. To build an alternative vision, one more true to democratic faith, requires that we begin at the base of society--in the neighborhoods, associations, congregations and workplaces where most people live their lives.

In the best examples of contemporary faith-based organizing, such alternative visions are being built at the base of society. Participating congregations are dynamic, living things. People sing, pray, laugh, struggle, plan, act, reflect and learn together. They both support and challenge each other to act on their deepest concerns and values. A community is built that seeks to embody in its internal life the values it struggles to achieve in the wider world. It is out of deep, trusting, relationships, built by organizers with the leaders with whom they directly work, that the opportunities to build this kind of community arise. But generating alternative visions sufficiently believable for people to devote the time necessary to struggle for them is a very, very difficult task.

To grasp the kind of structural change needed, we need to be open to big picture thinking. Our reluctance to get into the discussion of economic alternatives is in part a function of the discredited socialist vision. Capitalism is triumphant. Command socialism of the Communist variety is deservedly dead in Europe and corruptly hanging on in China. Social Democracy of the Western European variety seems mired in stifling bureaucracy and, when push comes to shove, won't challenge basic corporate capital's power. Neither seems very related to the kind of participatory democracy that is at the core of community organizing. Because of the democratic suspicion of concentrated power, socialism doesn't seem to have much to offer today. A minor, though at times vocal and influential, voice of socialism is also democratic but its influence is no greater than a similar democratic voice in capitalism. Debs classic democratic statement was, "Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing you cannot do for yourselves."

Reconnecting active, participatory, democracy to socialism makes it possible to look at what role a genuinely democratic government might play in relation to our principal economic institutions. From a democratic perspective, it seems to me we have to look at capitalist, cooperative and socialist ideas about how to bring the economy under the democratic control of society. Markets are good mechanisms for the allocation of resources and the setting of prices. But they are not the only mechanism. Consumer sovereignty is necessary but not sufficient. Apart from the issue of public ownership (after all, 20% of our utilities are municipally or otherwise publicly owned and operated--and they are often as lacking in accountability as any private corporate bureaucracy can be), the question remains, "Who owns what is put on the market--an oligarchy of wealth or a system of widespread worker, small and mid-size entrepreneur and community and/or consumer ownership?" Further, how are economic institutions made subordinate to the society of which they are a part--as opposed to being treated as "The Economy"--something which hovers autonomously above our political and social institutions. Are the people competent to run the economy? How do we respond to the argument of colonialists and other elitists about the "incompetence" of the people?

Paraphrasing the democratic socialist Hal Draper, we must turn the question around: “How does a people become fit to rule in their own name? *Only by fighting to do so.* Only by waging their struggle against oppression--oppression by those who tell them they are unfit to govern. Only by fighting for democratic power do they educate themselves and raise themselves up to the level of being able to wield that power. Nowhere in history do we know of a dictatorship which trained the people to become 'mature' democrats--*except insofar as it 'trained' them to fight against it.*..There seems to be a contradiction: if there is no way for people to become 'ready' for democracy except by fighting for democracy, then it follows they must begin fighting for it *before* they are certified to be 'ready.' And, in historical fact, this is the only way in which democracy has advanced in the world.”

The broader vision we need is one that combines democratic control of the economy with a pluralist society--one in which power is held by independent associations and not concentrated in the government. Organizers need to begin concretely to think about how to make corporate power directly accountable to people in local communities, to break up its great concentrations of wealth and power, and to develop a decentralized, sustainable and renewable way of economic life. In this enterprise, we will need the contribution of people like Myles Horton and Paulo Freire who are not preoccupied by the daily pressures of organization building, but who can challenge the organizers to fully reach the democratic potential that is in their work.

It is difficult for community (and labor) organizers to generate the proposals for structural change that we need today. The organizers' and community organizations' job, it seems to me, is to create the public space where ideas can seriously be discussed and where, when new directions are agreed upon, they can be powerfully acted upon. The educators will contribute to creating alternative programs and structures; the organizers will strategize with the people how to build the power to meaningfully struggle for these alternatives. Contemporary organizing, in particular faith-based organizing that is rooted in a biblical vision of the *shalom*, will make a major contribution to our getting where we want to go. But it alone is not sufficient. A revitalized labor movement is necessary as well. So are the various other forms that community organizing takes.

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