

Alinsky in the Age of Neocolonialism

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For Saul Alinsky, widely considered the father of community organizing, the city was reducible to two basic units: the neighborhood and the enemy outside the neighborhood. Poor and working class neighborhoods continually suffered because external decision makers controlled the internal distribution of resources. Building off of the CIO structure, Alinsky developed an organizational model for building power that has proven foundational to successive generations of organizers. Much of his model, however, is worthy of critique, and taking into account new directions in social movements and changing conditions in oppressed communities, this paper will explore how the Alinskyist model is being revised today.

Power is central to all community organizing work. In the United States, the major manifestations of power, political and economic, have largely remained concentrated in the hands of white male businessmen. In 2005, the decision making power and influence of the largest transnational corporations have by far surpassed that of countries struggling in the Global South. Estimations suggest that the richest one percent of the US population hold more wealth combined than the poorest ninety-five percent. Further, the average ratio of CEO-to-worker salary stands at 431-to-1 this year. Statistics on the growing disparity between the rich and the poor in this country are plentiful and, by now, hardly surprising. With the Bush regime and the rise of the conservative Right have come an intense new level of cronyism and corporate influence on government policy. In a climate of increased police brutality and prison

recidivism, soaring unemployment and an inhumane minimum wage, youth of color are being criminalized at an alarming rate. Both the industry of warmongering and that of imprisonment have shown record profits this year with operations in Iraq and the insatiable appetite of the prison-industrial complex. This would suggest that in the eyes of white corporate America, the working class and people of color are fit only to populate the military and the jails. The consolidation of wealth in the fewest hands possible and the disenfranchisement (or elimination) of everyone else appear to be the clearest agendas.

Herein lies our first major need to critique Alinsky's model: conditions facing communities of color have significantly changed. Alinsky proposes the "organization of organizations," a coalition of faith-based groups, labor unions, ethnic groups and political organizations. Today, however, participation in most of the above have largely declined. The experience of political inefficacy was cemented by Bush's stolen election and party membership in communities of color has dropped. Labor has lost much of its influence due to bureaucratization, shrinkage, and as we saw this year with the split of the AFL and the CIO, massive in-fighting. The strongest organizations in communities of color appear to be religious ones. Also on the rise is job and residency turnover, caused by the growing marginalization of the secondary labor market, toward which the US economy is largely turning.

As communities have changed, so too have the targets of community organizing. Alinsky defines a target as visible, local and capable. Today's targets, including industry and banks, have largely left communities of color (*divestment*) and what economic institutions remain are local expressions of larger corporations—and hence

removed from decision-making. Institutions that have remained visible and local, such as schools or police, are essentially incapable of creating the desired changes regardless of how much pressure a community organization can mount.

In Rules for Radicals, Alinsky outlined his model for pragmatic radicalism, which called for a professional organizer to act as an outside agitator to unite existing local groups and build a membership base around issues the community felt were important. He emphasized militant confrontation against the power structure, but advocated flexibility in tactics and ideological relativism. "The question is not, 'Does the end justify the means?' The question is, 'Does this particular end justify this particular means?'" (Alinsky, p 47) To stay pragmatic, he argues, the organization should be nonideological. Because people and institutions operate on the basis of self-interest, issues should be immediate, specific, winnable, and uncontroversial. These basic tenets will serve as the major points of antiracist and feminist critique of Alinsky's model.

Unfortunately, community organizations often mirror the oppressive social relationships found in larger society. Though more people of color are found in the staffs of community organizations since the 90s (Sen, p L) the tendency of activists and NGOs to come from outside of communities with alien solutions—*the Peace Corps mentality*—has become increasingly problematic. Alinsky describes the organizer's job "to inseminate an invitation for himself" and "that inner doubt, shared by many, whether the masses of people are competent to make decisions for a democratic society" (Alinsky, pp 103-4). Further, Alinsky's model seems to imply the necessity of the white male organizer for community progress. In the same breath as coming to

people “where they're at” he describes a process of first “disorganizing” a community which has been organized for apathy (116). The demanding lifestyle of Alinsky's organizer is incompatible with the majority of residents of the communities in question, especially workers and parents. It is evident that Alinsky was skeptical of women doing his type of organizing work.

Underlying Alinsky's approach is an understanding of power which has been highly contested by feminists. Rather than a zero-sum situation of haves and have-nots where power is not given but taken, feminist organizers have a collective concept of power that stresses the development of the community through collaboration. A more women-centered model would focus on individual empowerment. His tendency to divorce the ideological from community work has origins in a pluralist mentality: because organizing is bringing people together to practice democracy, fundamental social change is not a concern. This betrays a certain faith in the system that communities of color may not share. Central to feminist thought is the idea that the *personal is political*, whereas Alinskyist organizations work exclusively in the public sphere, “direct[ing] their energy toward reforming public institutions while ignoring the potential of using the private sphere—home and family” (Sen, p LIV). Woman-oriented organizing tends to focus on a matrix of oppression, considering gender, ethnicity and class as central and intertwined issues. For Alinsky, these are not “winnable” issues and working in this framework is more or less fruitless, hence bad for base-building and retention. Gary Delgado, student of Alinsky and founder of the Center for Third World Organizing, argues that community organizing must abandon short-term winnable issues in favor of the complicated and controversial issues rooted in identity (Delgado, *Beyond the Politics of Place*).

Alinsky's choice of diction—*inseminate, penetrate, battle, whipped up, war they'll get*—betrays him as a patriarchal military strategist. The emphasis on conflict-based tactics is not only counterintuitive to feminist organizing, but actually dangerous for many marginalized communities, often resulting in increased police repression or deportation of non-citizens. For women-centered organizing, the maintenance and development of social cohesion through personal connection and networking—creating a safe space for growth—is more important fundamentally than struggle for institutional power. As Rinku Sen points out in Stir It Up, “many of the rules of community organizing run counter to the political traditions, cultures and realities of communities of color” (Sen, p LI).

In the kinds of neighborhoods we are concerned about, it becomes less and less likely that strategies stressing either the consolidation of existing associations or the confronting of an outside enemy make much sense. Socially atomized and increasingly cut off from centralized, unresponsive mainstream economic institutions, these neighborhoods and their residents present a new challenge to organizers. Based on critique from feminists and antiracists, new strategies must stress an organizing process that enhances and builds community, and that focuses on developing a neighborhood's own capacities to do for itself what outsiders will or can no longer do. Taking neighborhoods seriously in their current condition means building social, political, and economic structures at the local level that re-create a space for these people to act and decide, challenging the internalized oppression that the system depends upon.

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Clemency For Stan “Tookie” Williams: Political Education at Malcolm X Grassroots Movement

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Though I have been extremely unsuccessful in maneuvering into MXGM this semester, I am finally making some headway. In my first interview with a member, Kamau Karl Franklin, we spoke at length about the difference between their model and the traditional Alinskyist approach. Kamau stressed the use of culture as a tactic, so the first work I did was promoting an event organized by an informal coalition of which MXGM is a part. While I played a minimal role in preparing for the event, I want to focus here on the event itself. Stanley “Tookie” Williams, the founder of the now international gang, the Crips, author of 9 children's books on staying out of gangs, creator of an innovative gang truce process, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, will be executed on December 13th, 2005, after twenty-five years on death row in the state of California. One of the six Principles of Unity at MXGM is to work in support of political prisoners. This work is seen as a duty to the legacy of activism in this country, and takes on many forms including letter writing, legal assistance, and raising public awareness about political prisoners. While perhaps not falling under the traditional rubric of CO, this event offered elements of political education, base-building and direct action.

As Kamau pointed out in our interview, MXGM's membership comes largely from people in their 20s in communities of color. The use of public venues to promote awareness and activism through hip hop culture has been essential to their success. For Alinsky, leadership development and political education are reserved for those indigenous leaders deemed ready, while rank-and-file are expected to develop by following leaders. Alinsky defends this saying, “I suggest that before critics look upon this as 'trickery,' they reflect on the discussion of means and ends” (Rules for Radicals, p 115). Okay, Saul. On the other hand, Rinku Sen offers that for communities of color, more democratic popular education has proven both relevant and effective. Kamau describes this combination of music and politics as “edu-tainment” but I see these gatherings as a significant locus of the development of collective power.

Speakers at this event included members of Pastors for Peace and End The Death Penalty, Rosa Clemente (MXGM member), Panama Alba (Vieques Brigade), Ras Baraka (Newark City Councilman) and Stanley Williams, who telephoned from Death Row. Because of the diversity of organizing work represented, I saw the event as an incredible learning opportunity. While focusing on the struggle to get Gov. Schwarzenegger to grant clemency for Williams and how to participate, issues ranging from Puerto Rican liberation and the death of Filiberto Ojeda Rios to repressive anti-gang legislation being proposed were also addressed. Rosa Clemente rightly critiqued that she had been the only woman speaking that night. Ras Baraka, who probably considered himself the most important person there, was somewhat angered by the lateness of the event and his speaking last well after crowd participation had dwindled.

The town hall also served as a venue for base-building. Obviously, the event was focused on mobilizing opposition to Stanley Williams' execution, but at the same time a very important function of CO was fulfilled. Alinsky argues for speaking to a community "where they're at," or within their experience, so I found the mix of hip hop, church-style call and response, and charismatic speakers to be well within this idea, even if outside the traditional manifestations. The presence of organizers of color and white organizers representing different groups allowed for further coalition building, as well as guiding audience members toward potentially interesting activist work. There were frequent pauses in the line up and sporadic conversation broke out frequently. This interesting arrangement—a speaker, time to converse on what had been said, followed by music, then another speaker and so on—was, though time-consuming, incredibly effective at accomplishing the various goals of the evening. Information about Malcolm X Grassroots and the coalition were provided as secondary to information about the death penalty issue, but it was nonetheless present. The paid staff of MXGM, Djibril Toure, while not speaking, played bass in one of the bands, the Welfare Poets, and Rosa was there with her baby daughter. This opportunity to see organizers as real people facing the same issues you might be helps combat the idea that one is too busy or incapable of organizing.

Finally, the time between speakers was used for direct action to get Stanley Williams off Death Row. While I have often contested the somewhat liberalized definition of direct action found in the Midwest Academy guide, this event helped me

see the impact of such seemingly basic work as phonebanking and letter writing. Petitions were circulated, phone numbers and email addresses direct to the Terminator were provided, and computers were available to write letters. Stressed in every speech was our ability to stop this execution. Panama Alba pointed out that “You never know which phone call, which letter it will be that breaks the camel's back.” People were encouraged to call, write, and most importantly, tell everyone they knew about what was happening. I will characterize this as “ripple” organizing, focusing on the ability of those present to bring many more people into the struggle.

I have to critique MXGM for not being more creative about finding a space. While Harlem was an ideal place for this venue, allowing me to speak with many Harlem residents (particularly gang-affiliated youth) about the death penalty while advertising, the Black Theater was a bad choice. The room used, though nice looking and accommodating the large audience, cost one thousand dollars to rent for the night. Apparently, a single-mother emptied her bank account to rent the room, so the donation jar went around many times and the night ended several hundred dollars short of the overhead cost.

That small critique aside, I think this event was very successful, not just at providing a Death Row inmate much needed support, but at building the strength of all the organizations present individually and the coalition they represent. Another insight Kamau offered in his interview was that support for political prisoner work in communities of color had declined due to a lack of success in previous cases such as Amadou Diallo's. Nonetheless, this event represented a positive step in building organizational support and directly attacking the death penalty.

Leadership Development in Community Organizations:

Case Studies on Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and Make the Road By Walking

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Final Paper Outline:

1. Introduction

- Defining "leadership"
- Toward being better listeners, not better dictators.
- Traditional roles of leaders in communities of color
- Role of LD in strategies for social change

2. Leadership Development in Alinsky

- Professional organizers and indigenous leaders
- Qualities of a leader
- Process of identifying leaders
- Learn by example (leader-follower model?)
- Critique of strict line between organizers and leaders

3. Leadership Development in Sen

- Leadership identification vs deeper development
- Formalized programs, popular education
- Embedded race, gender, class issues
- Renewal and regeneration of leadership

4. Leadership Development in Midwest Academy

- Balanced ticket (and antiracist "tokenism" critique)
- Task leadership vs Maintenance leadership
- Development process (self-interest, positions for growth)
- Alternate distinction between organizer and leader

5. Case Studies

- MXGM history: period of stagnation, formalized program
- MXGM prongs: challenging internalized oppression, political education, skills transmission
- MXGM program content
- Kamau Franklin: qualities of a leader
- Make the Road: Freire techniques (further research in progress)

Appendix: Power Analysis & Action Planning- A three hour popular education, compiled by Rahula J McGaffey