

## CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

**Saul Alinsky: Rules for Radicals**

Random House, New York 1971

Reviewed by *Simon Davies*

I was fourteen years of age when I first encountered Saul Alinsky's inspiring and timeless work "Rules for Radicals". All those decades ago - angry and confused - I was ploughing through a turbulent puberty, vowing to cause havoc to a school system that was harsh and prescriptive. Alinsky's book became my bedrock, and was the gateway to a subsequent life of activism.

The year was 1971. Nixon was in the White House and the Vietnam War careemed endlessly on. Nuclear holocaust was still a real prospect, the threat of a Big Brother computerised state was looming and the great rock legends of our era were dropping like flies. For any vaguely sentient young person, it was sometimes hard to imagine a better future to which we might contribute. Despite all the Flower Power songs and the hopeful early moments of student radicalism in the US, it seemed The System was impervious to change.

Still, a few of my more activist peers – even at such a young age - fought on through that despondent period, resisting the impositions of authority in whatever small way they could. Such effort was little more than symbolic. The problem was that none of us had any real insight into how to strategically engage truly entrenched power. We still believed that resistance was all about holding up a placard or huddling around a street corner chanting the lyrics from "Ohio" by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. I did attend a couple of radical meetings, but the talk of People's Revolution did not inspire me. I just wanted my school to stop strip searching us for drugs (Davies 2018 {2} pp 148-155).

Adamant that I would find an ingenious way to thwart my school's viciously intrusive plan to vanquish an imagined Marijuana plague, I immersed myself in the public library to find guidance. Predictably, the librarians routinely pointed me to the works of Gandhi, but his teachings

were a bridge too far for a silly adolescent like me. I just couldn't make the connection between his amazing actions and the tiny task that I faced. Then, one day, a particularly enthusiastic librarian handed me a copy of *Rules for Radicals*.

“You might find this useful”, she said, excitedly. “I just got this in for you”.

*Rules for Radicals* was the distillation of Alinsky's lifetime of work as a campaigner and community organiser. It sets out thirteen clear and succinct principles for action written in a way that even I could understand. Alinsky died before his time the following year at the age of 63.

The work inspired me because at that time there were few – if any – simple expressions of radical nonviolent campaigning principles outside the arenas of communist and socialist activity. I was just an ordinary teenager with poor scholastic achievement and like so many other people in my situation, I needed a text that spoke to me in terms that were not academic or protracted. Marx provided a political framework for resistance but – like Gandhi – it was difficult to discover a strategic platform for action from those sources. Sun Tzu and Machiavelli were powerful motivators, but they were a universe removed from my tiny world.

## **Profile**

Alinsky was a genius of community organising and had been an inspiration for grassroots activism in the US and elsewhere for more than thirty years. He demonstrated how creative ideas can undermine the authority of even the most powerful institutions.

It was as a Chicago criminologist, working in the 1930s in the then grey area of social work, that Alinsky took his first steps into the arena of radical activism. During the course of his studies into the demography of organised crime he arrived at the South steel mills of Chicago's west side. Here, Alinsky took the bland notion of community organisation and turned it into a rallying cry for social justice and equality.

Alinsky was a man of fierce imagination. He pioneered a generation of social and civil rights campaigning based on colourful tactics,

ingenious resourcefulness and a radical approach. These tactics rested on a broader foundation: the development of a “civil society” based on strong community partnerships.

There are many actions to recount, but one still stands as the most daring blackmail threat in Chicago’s history. At stake was the future of slum reform, the security of the world’s busiest airport – and the reputation of the entire Chicago administration.

The threat was uncompromising and simple: either City Hall met the demands of the blackmailers, or a small army of urban guerrillas would bring O’Hare airport to its knees.

These momentous affairs at the time were known to only a handful of people, and negotiations were confined to two parties. On the one side was Mayor Richard Daley, head of a vast and corrupt city administration. On the other, Saul Alinsky.

Daley faced a stark choice. Either he reformed the City’s perverted housing policy, or Alinsky would give the green light to a thousand waiting supporters to squat in every cubicle and urinal in the airport. With its facilities blocked for even an hour, the Great Hub of Chicago would be a zoo; within two hours it would become mayhem.

At the eleventh hour, the administration caved in. The mere threat of the “shit-in” was sufficient to guarantee meetings to discuss improvement of the slum areas of Chicago. Ed Chambers, then Alinsky’s right hand man, recalls: “We knew that power was not necessarily what you had or what you did, but what the enemy thought you had. If they think you are going to destroy the plumbing system or the Beethoven symphony, then they will have to act”. The O’Hare action galvanised Alinsky’s reputation as the most innovative community activist in recent American history. Principles such as the one articulated above by Ed Chambers were to become a founding principle of Rules for Radicals.

Such actions brought Alinsky a degree of fame, with an essay in Time Magazine declaring: “It is not too much to argue that American democracy is being shaped by Alinsky’s ideas” while the New York Times observed he “is hated and feared in high places from coast to coast”.

Indeed Alinsky’s networks and campaigns had become so infamous that in March 1972, shortly before his death, Playboy devoted twenty full

pages to a verbatim interview with the man (Playboy, 1972 pp 59-79).

Despite having such an undeniable influence, Alinsky was not given adequate recognition by analysts and commentators in the broader field of nonviolent action. Gene Sharp, for example, in his epic 1973 three-volume work on the subject provides only a single passing reference to the man (Sharp 1973, p.139). While it is certainly true that Sharpe's work is far broader than the scope encompassed by Alinsky, it remains something of a mystery why there is such a gulf in the literature.

This having been said, there is certainly a substantial body of criticism of Alinsky's techniques. Concern has been expressed about his military approach and his organisational philosophy. Stall & Stoecker (1997) have been particularly pointed in such criticism, claiming that Alinsky fetishises war and excludes feminist perspectives. Moreover, his approach, they conclude, creates conflict for communities that simply cannot afford to sustain conflict. Nonetheless, his work – and *Rules for Radicals* – have inspired a wide spectrum of influential people from Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson through to Ralph Nader.

## **The book**

*Rules for Radicals* is a short tome. At 196 pages it is brief enough to complete on a medium-haul airline flight; a brevity that perhaps helped maintain its popularity through the years.

The book is set out in ten chapters that provide briefings on how to accomplish the goal of successfully uniting people into an active grassroots organisation with the capacity to bring change to a variety of issues. Though targeted at community and neighbourhood organization, these chapters also touch on other issues that range from ethics, education, communication and symbol construction through to political philosophy (Reitzes, Donald C. 1987 pp 265–83).

It is perhaps natural for commentators and even historians to focus on the rules laid out in the book, but there is so much more that deserves scrutiny. Alinsky discusses a great many strategies and tactics behind those rules. He is passionate about language, and the importance of taking back words that have been either appropriated or changed by the opponent (Alinsky pp 49-62). He talks of the ethical and practical

aspects of that eternal question “do the ends justify the means?”, which he summarily dismisses as a pointless question outside a highly specific context (Alinsky pp. 24-47). And as for a narrative about tactics, I remain certain that the chapter on that subject should be required reading for anyone seeking to create an influence (Alinsky, pp 127-164).

Recognising this broader context, it may be instructive at this point to glance at the rules themselves:

1. Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
2. Never go outside the expertise of your people.
3. Whenever possible go outside the expertise of the enemy.
4. Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules.
5. Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon.
6. A good tactic is one your people enjoy.
7. A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.
8. Keep the pressure on.
9. The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.
10. The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.
11. If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counterside.
12. The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.
13. Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

In 2012 - on the fortieth anniversary of Alinsky’s death – I started writing a work that sought to update and expand those rules for the modern era. Although Alinsky’s work sets out the basis of grassroots community activism, some of those concepts have become less relevant to present day campaigning. A couple have even become risky and counterproductive for some forms of activism. The first rule, for example (power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have), has become almost redundant. An era of analytics and social media will soon reveal with precision the scale of your operation. And in the modern

context it is often more effective to admit that you are small and poorly resourced than to pretend otherwise. Media love the lone maverick!

Alinsky's imagery and language is at times also archaic, polemic and even in some respects, elitist. It is also frequently cast in the masculine gender. Expressions such as "your people" and "the enemy" appear time and time again, and do not resonate with a broader audience. The book is steeped in the language of war: battle, conflict and attack. Indeed, the first chapter of *Rules for Radicals* begins with a quote from the book of Job in the Old Testament: "The life of man upon earth is a warfare" (Job 7:1) (Alinsky, S (1973) p.3). True, the militaristic theme will be inspiring to some, but it does not always sit comfortably with the cold and almost mathematical strategic analysis that is so often needed. Still, in an era of pragmatism and compromise, Alinsky reminds us that there are moments when we must metaphorically take up arms.

However, when – five years later – my project was complete, almost all of Alinsky's rules were included. We had conducted workshops and public consultations across Europe, and it was clear that his work had formed a bedrock for further development. We ended up with a hundred principles, a wide spectrum which reflected the reality that Alinsky was a campaigner who focused on a narrower "on the street" approach to actions

I have no doubt that *Rules for Radicals* will endure, despite condemnation for a militaristic and masculine approach to activism. The text itself is inspiring and informative. And importantly, it provides – even 47 years on – a modern context to ancient strategic thinking.

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