

The Civic Legacy of Saul Alinsky

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In 1946, Saul Alinsky published “Reveille for Radicals.” It described the methods he used to create a neighborhood organization that gave a powerful new public voice to the exploited residents in a Chicago neighborhood.

His methods quickly spread to many working-class and low-income neighborhoods across the United States. Today, his approach is still the most common methodology used by urban neighborhood organizations.

“Alinsky style” organizations have been most widely known for their activist methods of institutional confrontation. A classic example is neighborhood groups invading the offices of a Mayor and releasing rats that they caught in their alleys. The rats were there because the city had failed to consistently pick up the garbage. The local media loved these kinds of “actions” and so they became the public hallmark of Alinsky organizations.

While this public confrontation has been most visible, much less noticed have been the unique methods used to create the neighborhood organizations. These methods involved new forms of civic organization and action.

There are at least two elements of the Alinsky method that are important civic inventions. They manifest the processes that enhance and enlarge the authority of local citizens.

The first of these elements recognizes local voluntary associations as vital sources of collective citizen action. Before Alinsky’s methods became popular, if there was a local neighborhood organization it was usually a small group of residents who purported to speak for the neighborhood.

Instead of organizing individuals, Alinsky focused on coalescing the local clubs, groups, organizations and churches – the voluntary associations. The resulting new neighborhood organization was basically an association of associations. This form of organization greatly increased the number of residents involved in the group, ensuring that it was much more representative than an organization of a few self-selective individuals. The association of associations also led to defining mutual concerns for the common good of the associated

residents. Also, because the association defined the concerns of a large number of associated residents, it was a powerful public voice for those who often had been voiceless and unheard.

The second civic contribution of the Alinsky method was a simple practice called a “one-on-one.” This activity involved neighbors in visiting other residents on their block and engaging in a discussion regarding deeply felt concerns or issues. This information provided useful guidance for setting the agenda of the neighborhood organization. The discussion also created a relationship of trust between the neighbors. Trust is the bedrock necessity for effective associational life. This trust manifested itself in the willingness of neighbors to join collective neighborhood actions focused on the collective personal concerns of the residents.

The Alinsky focus on associations and resident concerns recognized the vital civic function of the world of the personal and its collective manifestation in associations. This world contrasts with the institutional world. To “institutionalize” something is to depersonalize it. Institutionalization ensures that the system will function regardless of which *person* is involved.

It is also true that institutional participation depends upon money – a paycheck. In the associational world of civic engagement, participation depends upon personal trust.

Tip O’Neill famously said, “All politics is local.” Alinsky added that politics’ local manifestation depends upon the personal trust that “glues” residents together in civic associations that magnify their power to create, produce, advocate and vote.