Rules for Radicals

Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals is the late work of community organizer Saul D. Alinsky, and his last book, published in 1971 shortly before his death. His goal for the Rules for Radicals was to create a guide for future community organizers to use in uniting low-income communities, or “Have-Nots”, in order to empower them to gain social, political, legal and economic equality by challenging the current agencies that promoted their inequality. Within it, Alinsky compiled the lessons he had learned throughout his personal experiences of community organizing spanning from 1939-1971 and targeted these lessons at the current, new generation of radicals.

Divided into ten chapters, each chapter of Rules for Radicals provides a lesson on how a community organizer can accomplish the goal of successfully uniting people into an active organization with the power to effect change on a variety of issues. Though targeted at community organization, these chapters also touch on a myriad of other issues that range from ethics, education, communication, and symbol construction to nonviolence and political philosophy.

Though published for the new generation of counterculture-era organizers in 1971, Alinsky’s principles have been successfully applied over the last four decades by numerous government, labor, community, and congregation-based organizations, and the main themes of his organizational methods that were elucidated upon in Rules for Radicals have been recurring elements in political campaigns in recent years.

1 Inspiration for Rules for Radicals

The inspiration for Rules for Radicals was drawn directly from Alinsky’s personal experiences over the course of his career as a community organizer. It was also taken from the lessons he learned from his University of Chicago professor, Robert Park, who taught him to see communities as “reflections of the larger processes of an urban society”. The methods he developed and practiced across the country were placed directly into the book as a guide on future community organizing for the new generation of radicals emerging from the 1960s.

Alinsky believed heavily in collective action as a result of the work he did with the C.I.O and the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago where he first began to develop his own, distinct method of community organizing. Additionally, his late work with the Citizens Action Program (CAP) provided some of his most whole and conclusive practices in organizing through the empowerment of the poor, though not well-known. Saul Alinsky understood community structure and the impoverished and the importance of their empowerment as a successful element of community activism and used both as tools to create powerful, active organizations. He also used shared social problems as external antagonists to “heighten local awareness of similarities among residents and their shared differences with outsiders”. Ironically, this was one of Alinsky’s most powerful tools in community organizing; to bring a collective together, he would bring to light an issue that would stir up conflict with some agency to unite the group. This provided an organization with a specific “villain” to confront and made direct action easier to implement. These tactics as a result of decades of organizing efforts, along with many other lessons, were poured into Rules for Radicals to create the guidebook for community organization.

2 Themes

In Rules for Radicals, several themes persist throughout Alinsky’s lessons to future community organizers. The most notable is his use of symbol construction to strengthen the unity within an organization. Often, he would draw on loyalty to a particular church or religious affiliation to create a firmly structured organization with which to operate. The reason being that symbols by which communities could identify themselves created strongly structured organizations that were easier to mobilize in implementing direct action. Once the community was united behind a common symbol, Alinsky would find a common enemy for the community to be united against.

The use of common enemy against a community was done to promote another theme of Rules for Radicals, nonviolent conflict as a unifying element in communities. Alinsky would find an external antagonist to turn into a common enemy for the community within which he was operating. Often, this enemy would be a local politician or agency that had some involvement with activity that was causing detriment to the community. His goal was to unite a group through conflict with an external antagonist. Once the enemy was established, the community would come together in opposition of it. This management of conflict heightened awareness within the community as to the similarities its members shared as well
as what differentiated them from those outside of their organization.[3] The use of conflict also allowed for the goal of the group to be clearly defined. With an established external antagonist, the community’s goal would be to defeat that enemy, whether it be a politician, policy, or opposing agency.[3]

Symbol construction helped to promote structured organization, this allowed for nonviolent conflict through another strong element in Alinsky’s teaching, direct action. Direct action created conflict situations that further established the unity of the community and promoted the accomplishment of achieving the community’s goal of defeating their common enemy.[2] It also brought issues the community was battling to the public eye. Alinsky encouraged over-the-top public demonstrations throughout Rules for Radicals that could not be ignored, and these tactics enabled his organization to progress their goals faster than through normal bureaucratic processes.[3]

Lastly, the main theme throughout Rules for Radicals and Alinsky’s work was empowerment of the poor.[5] Alinsky used symbol construction and nonviolent conflict to create a structured organization with a clearly defined goal that could take direct action against a common enemy. At this point, Alinsky would withdraw from the organization to allow their progress to be powered by the community itself, not by Alinsky.[1] This empowered the organizations he worked with to create change for whatever issue they were battling.[2] Symbol construction, nonviolent conflict, direct action, and empowerment of the poor were the main themes of Alinsky’s work in organizer, and whether reading Rules for Radicals, or examining his work directly, they can be distinctly observed within every community he organized.

Rules for Radicals is dedicated by Saul Alinsky to the original radical, Lucifer - also known as Satan, the Devil, The Old Serpent, and The Dragon (Rev. 12:2; 20:2). In this book is found the following:

“Lest we forget at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgment to the very first radical: from all our legends, mythology, and history (and who is to know where mythology leaves off and history begins — or which is which), the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom — Lucifer.”[7]

The rules[1]

1. “Power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have.” Power is derived from 2 main sources – money and people. “Have-Not’s” must build power from flesh and blood.

2. “Never go outside the expertise of your people.” It results in confusion, fear and retreat. Feeling secure adds to the backbone of anyone.

3. “Whenever possible, go outside the expertise of the enemy.” Look for ways to increase insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty.

4. “Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules.” If the rule is that every letter gets a reply, send 30,000 letters. You can kill them with this because no one can possibly obey all of their own rules.

5. “Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon.” There is no defense. It’s irrational. It’s infuriating. It also works as a key pressure point to force the enemy into concessions.

6. “A good tactic is one your people enjoy.” They’ll keep doing it without urging and come back to do more. They’re doing their thing, and will even suggest better ones.

7. “A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.” Don’t become old news.

8. “Keep the pressure on. Never let up.” Keep trying new things to keep the opposition off balance. As the opposition masters one approach, hit them from the flank with something new.

9. “The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.” Imagination and ego can dream up many more consequences than any activist.

10. “The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.” It is this unceasing pressure that results in the reactions from the opposition that are essential for the success of the campaign.

11. “If you push a negative hard enough, it will push through and become a positive.” Violence from the other side can win the public to your side because the public sympathizes with the underdog.

12. “The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.” Never let the enemy score points because you’re caught without a solution to the problem.

13. “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.” Cut off the support network and isolate the target from sympathy. Go after people and not institutions; people hurt faster than institutions.

3 Criticisms

Despite the effective nature of the lessons passed down in Rules for Radicals, Saul Alinsky has received some criticism for the methods and ideas he presented within his primer. First, it has been noted that much of his instruction has only been effective in urban, low-income areas.[6] This has led some social scientists, such as Robert Pruger and Harry Specht, to criticize his broad statement that Rules for Radicals is a tool for organizing all low-income people. Further, his use of artificially stimulated
conflict has been criticized for its ineffectiveness in areas that thrive on unity.[8] In fact, in several Chicago areas in which he worked, his use of conflict backfired, and the community was unable to achieve the policy adjustments they were seeking.[2]

Much of the philosophy of community organization found in Rules for Radicals has also come under question as being overly ideological. Alinsky believed in allowing the community to determine its exact goal. He would produce an enemy for them to conflict with, but the purpose of the conflict was ultimately left up to the community. This idea has been criticized due to the conflicting opinions that can often be present within a group.[8] Alinsky’s belief that an organization can create a goal to accomplish is viewed as highly optimistic and contradictory to his creation of an external antagonist. By producing a common enemy, Alinsky is creating a goal for the community, the defeat of that enemy. To say that the community will create their own goal seems backwards considering Alinsky creates the goal of defeating the enemy. Thus, his belief can be seen as too ideological and contradictory because the organization may turn the goal of defeating the common enemy he produced into their main purpose.[8]

4 Legacy

The scope of influence for Rules for Radicals is a far-reaching one as it is a compilation of the tactics of Saul Alinsky. It has been many direct influences in policymaking and organization for various communities and agency groups, as well as indirect influences found in politicians, activists educated by Alinsky and the IAF, and other grassroots movements.

4.1 Direct impact

Despite his death in 1972, Alinsky’s influence has carried through time to help spawn the creation of numerous other organizations and policy changes since his death. Rules for Radicals was a direct influence that helped to form the United Neighborhood Organization which came to prominence in the early 1980s.[3] Its founders Greg Galluzzo, Mary Gonzales, and Pater Martinez were all students of Alinsky’s who carried the tactics he left in his primer forward in organizing Chicago neighborhoods.[3]

The work of UNO helped to vastly improve the hygiene and sanitation situations for southeastern Chicago as well as to improve education standards there as well.[3] Additionally, the founders of Organization of the North East in Chicago during the 1970s also applied Alinsky’s principles to organize multiethnic neighborhoods in order to give the area greater political representation.[3]

The teachings found in Rules for Radicals have also been dispersed by many of Alinsky’s students who not only undertook their own community organizing endeavors, but also taught numerous other grassroots movements the tactics they had been taught. Direct students of Alinsky’s such as Edward T. Chambers took the lessons of Rules for Radicals to help form the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Queens Citizens Organization, and the Communities Organized for Public Service. The most notable of these is the IAF which served as a teaching ground for many community organizers based on Alinsky’s tactics. Another student of Alinsky’s, Ernest Cortez, rose to prominence in the late 1970s in San Antonio while organizing Hispanic neighborhoods. His use of congregation-based organizing received much acclaim as a popular method of Alinsky’s by utilizing “preexisting solidary neighborhood elements, especially church groups, so that the constituent units are organizations, not individuals.”[5] This congregation-based organizing and symbol construction was taught to him by Edward Chambers and the IAF during his time studying under both.

The methods and teachings of Rules for Radicals have also been linked to the Mid America Institute, the National People’s Action, the National Training and Information Center, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations, and the Community Service Organization.[5]

4.2 Later influence

Additionally, the methods taken from Rules for Radicals have also been prevalent in modern American politics. Barack Obama’s most recent primary campaign was noted for featuring strong elements of Alinsky’s organizing techniques.[5] The use of congregation-based organizing has been linked to Jesse Jackson when he was organizing his own political campaign.[9]

5 Publication data


6 References

[1] Rules for Radicals, by Saul Alinsky


7 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

7.1 Text


7.2 Images

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