

# The Poor Man's Machiavelli: Saul Alinsky and the Morality of Power

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**T**his article presents Saul Alinsky's theory of community organizing as a democratic alternative to political realism's fixation on the coercive authority of the state and the ethical problems of statesmanship. Alinsky shows how the organizer can be used as a paradigmatic political actor in developing an approach to political ethics that treats power and self-interest as ethical concepts on which to construct a radical vision of democratic politics. His "morality of power" consists of learning how to use relational power and thick self-interest to develop democratic forms of deliberation and action. In contrast to the aim of the statesman, the organizer's goal is not simply to acquire power and learn how to wield it: An organizer helps the powerless learn how to use and think about power for themselves. Organizing is realist, pedagogical, and democratic, and Alinsky's ability to hold these ideas together makes him an important theorist of democratic agency in undemocratic times.

"To understand the behavior of people as they are in the real world precludes either disillusionment or cynicism. You learn to be realistic in your expectations. You go on using the probables in the eternal struggle to achieve the improbable."

(Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* ([1946] 1989, xii)

**B**y the time of his death in 1972, Saul Alinsky was the most celebrated and the most reviled community organizer in the United States. He was also a famous raconteur, giving speeches and telling stories about his work to audiences across the country. One of his stories concerned a group of young seminarians who visited him for advice. "We're going to be ordained," the students told him, "and then we'll be assigned to different parishes, as assistants to—frankly—stuffy, reactionary old pastors. They will disapprove of a lot of what you and we believe in, and we will be put into a killing routine." Hence their question, "How do we keep our faith in true Christian values, everything we hope to do to change the system?" Alinsky responded that they had a choice between being priests or bishops. A bishop "bootlicks and politics his way up justifying it with the rationale, 'After I get to be a bishop I'll use my office for Christian reformation.'" He continued, "Unfortunately, one changes in many ways on the road to a bishopric, and then one says, 'I'll wait until I am a cardinal and then I can be more effective.'" The choice they faced was simple: "When you go out that door, just make your own personal decision about whether you want to be a bishop or a priest, and everything else will follow from there" (*Rules*, 13).

Alinsky's story presents us with two distinct paradigms of political agency. A bishop is a leader who seeks to acquire power by rising through an existing institution into an official position that carries the authority to command others. The students who visited

Alinsky might well have thought that the best way to change the system was through acquiring a position of power and influence, but his story was designed to make them suspicious of the idea that change comes from above. Instead, by asking them to imagine what they could accomplish by remaining priests, he introduced his visitors to a different kind of agent, one who creates power from the bottom, rather than trying to capture it at the top.

The contrast between the bishop and the priest finds its political analog in the difference between the statesmen, who has long been of interest to political theorists, and the organizer, who has received far less attention. For instance, the figure of the organizer has been conspicuously absent in the recent turn toward political realism inaugurated by Bernard Williams and championed by Raymond Geuss, which remains bewitched by the figure of the Weberian statesman (Geuss 2008; Williams 2005). The irony here is that Alinsky, unlike most of realism's self-proclaimed ancestors, actually identified himself as a realist (McQueen n.d.). Uncovering why Alinsky thought the organizer was the quintessential realist political actor can help contemporary realists move beyond their fixation on statesmanship toward a broader understanding of the range of political purposes that invocations of realism have served in the past. Alinsky's realism, in particular, is worth exploring for the wide influence he had on politics in the United States and in fields such as civic studies, contentious politics, social movements, democratic theory, and, of course, community organizing (e.g., Bretherton 2014; Boyte et al. 2014; Coles 2006; Polletta 2002; Stout 2010; Tarrow 1998).<sup>1</sup> His work can help us understand how realism might relate to these other fields, a question that is increasingly important as realism moves beyond its origins as a meta-theoretical critique of normative theory to embrace a wider range of first-order political and theoretical concerns.

Alinsky's guiding question—how power can be acquired and exercised by as many people as possible,

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton wrote her senior thesis about Alinsky, who supposedly liked her enough to offer her a spot in his first training institute (she declined in order to attend Yale Law School). President Obama never knew Alinsky, but he was trained as a community organizer in the Alinsky tradition and wrote about his experience in his autobiography (Obama [1995] 2004).

starting from conditions of widespread inequality and popular disempowerment—concerns the possibility of affirming both a realist approach to political theory and a radical commitment to democratic politics (see Finlayson 2015 on conservative and radical strands in realist thinking). Like many realists, he sought to answer this question by depicting the dynamics of political action as a continuous back-and-forth between the necessary creation of conflict and the eventuality of compromise. However, Alinsky went beyond most of today's realists by embedding this process in the larger process of democratic empowerment through organizing. He saw organizing as a form of political education that involves learning to use both conflict and compromise to build power and advance the people's goals. An organizer is an agent of the democratization of power who engages in "strategically hopeful action" to bring out the "potentially positive sum" nature of political power (Read and Shapiro 2014, 40–41). But Alinsky's most important contribution, from a realist point of view, is his articulation of a distinctive approach to political ethics—an ethical orientation called "the morality of power"—that holds these processes together in a way that is both recognizably realist and radically democratic.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I develop Alinsky's morality of power as a more democratic alternative to realism's traditional fixation on the ethics of statesmanship. Alinsky used classic realist concepts such as power and self-interest as the foundations of political ethics. He believed everyone should have the power to pursue her self-interest through politics, and this belief served as the foundation of his commitment to democratic empowerment. But whereas contemporary realists follow Weber in understanding power as the ability to command violence, Alinsky was primarily interested in the ways relational power could serve as an alternative to violence. The morality of power consists of learning how to use relational power and thick self-interest to advance democratic forms of deliberation and action. Unlike the statesman of ordinary realism, the organizer's goal is not just acquiring power and learning to use it ethically and effectively. An organizer's job is to help the powerless learn how to use and think about power for themselves. Organizing is realist, pedagogical, and democratic, and Alinsky's willingness to face up to the difficulty of holding these ideas together makes him an important theorist of democratic agency in undemocratic times.

## REALISM AND THE STATESMAN

Before turning to Alinsky's democratic brand of realism, it is worth looking at why the figure of the

statesman has come to play such an important role in realist theory. William Galston identifies the hallmarks of realism as

a moral psychology that includes the passions and emotions; a robust conception of political possibility and rejection of utopian thinking; the belief that political conflict—of values as well as interests—is both fundamental and ineradicable; a focus on institutions as the arenas within which conflict is mediated and contained; and a conception of politics as a sphere of activity that is distinct, autonomous, and subject to norms that cannot be derived from individual morality. (2010, 385)

As Jason Frank notes, realists believe political theory "should begin with the conflicts, constraints, and possibilities faced by historical actors and develop its theoretical reflections from this primary agent-situated orientation" (Frank, n.d.). Realists hope to use this agent-situated approach to develop an analysis of political conflicts and institutions that can provide guidance on how political actors should think about their actions in ways that ideal theories operating under highly idealized circumstances cannot. Thus, realists attempt to derive an ethics of political conduct from an analysis of existing political institutions and the moral psychology of the actors involved in them.

The close connection between moral psychology and political ethics illustrates realism's debt to Bernard Williams. In perhaps his most famous book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams (1985) argued there could be no foundation for ethical reasoning because there is nothing that must necessarily count as a reason for acting. This means there can be no objective or external reasons for ethical behavior beyond the reasons an agent already believes herself to have and those she could come to recognize on the basis of her existing beliefs. He also criticized both Kantian and utilitarian ethics for suggesting that philosophy can tell people what is the moral thing to do in a given situation on the basis of highly general concepts, such as rational consistency or general utility, that separate out and give priority to specifically moral reasons for action over other sorts of practical considerations. Williams rejected the idea that there is a specific class of necessarily ethical reasons and argued instead that philosophy ought to return to the older, Aristotelian tradition of moral psychology. For Aristotle, the study of ethics involved understanding the virtues that allowed a particular sort of person—the good man—to thrive in a particular form of collective social organization—the Greek polis. Williams did not believe that Aristotle's virtues could be much of a guide to modern life, but he held that philosophy could contribute to the ethical life by examining the "thick ethical concepts" that people and communities use to create reasons for action by uniting judgments of fact and value (1985, 140–45). In his view moral psychology then analyzes thick ethical concepts and relates them to ways of thinking and acting that express or are in conflict with them, recognizing that no particular concept will determine a person's behavior in all circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> "The Morality of Power" was the title of a speech Alinsky gave at the University of Notre Dame in 1961 containing material that would later be published in *Rules for Radicals* and one of that book's working titles, but it was not a term he used regularly (Horwitt 1989, 532). In a letter to Jacques Maritain, Alinsky said his publisher wanted to call the book "The Poor Man's Machiavelli," hence the title of this article (Maritain, Alinsky, and Doering 1994, 89).

Williams's meta-ethical theory calls on realists to take the perspective of agents who exist within the political system they are trying to understand. This does not mean that they must take the perspective of statesmen, though it is not hard to see why realists have gravitated to that figure. Like Machiavelli, realists attempt to take power seriously by looking at the most visible political actors and institutions of their time. For Machiavelli, this meant the new prince and the independent principality. Contemporary realists, in turn, try to understand the uniquely political virtues that allow statesmen to successfully wield the power of the dominant form of political organization in modernity, the sovereign state.

By using the term "statesman" I want to call to mind Max Weber's "Politics as Vocation," one of the touchstones of contemporary realism (Geuss 2008, 34–55; Philp 2007, 80–84; Williams 2005, 72; see Satkunanandan 2014 for a response to these readings of Weber). More precisely, I use "statesman" to refer to a person whose power derives from having been authorized to make decisions about the use of violence by an institution or hierarchically organized collective agent of another sort. Though this institution or agent usually means the state, it does not have to. The most important element of this definition comes directly from Weber, who asked, "Can the ethical demands made on politics really be quite indifferent to the fact that politics operates with a highly specific means, namely, power, behind which violence lies concealed" (2004, 80–81)? For Weber, the exercise of power is not what makes politics ethically distinctive; the ability to use and command violence for political ends is what matters, and political ethics are about taking responsibly for violence. This means that political ethics are only needed by statesmen who wield the coercive authority of the state and by revolutionaries who seek to usurp the state's right to the legitimate use of violent force. Weber had nothing to say about the political ethics required by ordinary citizens trying to control the actions of the state in which they live through nonviolent means.

Weber's influence can be found even when realist scholars explicitly try to examine political actors other than states and statesmen. When Mark Philp looks at political actors operating outside the state in his chapter on "Resistance and Protest" in *Political Conduct*, he is most interested in the ways in which movement leaders, like statesmen, become responsible for the violence inflicted by or on their followers when that violence is a predictable response to protests, even when the protesters themselves are nonviolent (Philp 2007, 169–92). Similarly, Karuna Mantena's (2012) study of Gandhi focuses on the relationship between means and ends in nonviolence, particularly the ability of *satyagraha* to disrupt the cycles of violence so often characteristic of revolutionary political action. Mantena's emphasis on nonviolent power is an important corrective to most realist scholarship, but the idea of the Weberian statesmen still informs her argument insofar as Gandhi appears as a leader who must deal with, and bear the responsibility for, the violence resulting from his personal ability to command collective political ac-

tions. In other words, Mantena commends Gandhi as a theorist of statesmanship because his political ethic of nonviolent *satyagraha* is, counterintuitively, the most responsible way to use violence as a means for achieving political ends.

This is not to say that realists are wrong to follow Weber in insisting that the power of violence is at the core of the ethical problems of statesmanship. Their mistake lies in conflating the specific ethical demands of statesmanship with the ethical demands of politics in general, which concern the use of power in all its forms, not simply with respect to violence. Furthermore, focusing on the monopolistic control of violence leads realists to exaggerate the importance of statesmen at the expense of more democratic forms of political agency. The young Barack Obama expressed the limits of statesmanship when he described Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor. "At the margins," he wrote, "Harold could make city services more equitable. Black professions now got a bigger share of city business. We had a black school superintendent, a black police chief, a black CHA director...but beneath the radiance of Harold's victory, in Altgeld [the public housing project Obama was organizing] and elsewhere, nothing seemed to change" (Obama [1995] 2004, 230). Obama's fears were duly confirmed when Washington died unexpectedly, leaving "no political organization in place" for blacks in Chicago to keep his political machine intact or to choose a successor (288). Though Obama eventually decided to abandon organizing and pursue political power as a statesman, his insights into the limits of the kind of power wielded by statesman should make us wonder how realistic it is to believe that statesmanship can overcome the antidemocratic forces dominating America politics.

Recently, a few scholars identified with realism have started to push the theory away from its attachment to statesmanship. In an article on the political realism of America's nineteenth-century populist movement, Jason Frank points out that "the state and leader-centric focus of much of the new realist scholarship necessarily confines the historically situated political theory it proclaims," though he does not present an alternative political agent to replace the statesman in constructing a realist approach to political ethics (Frank n.d.; on Alinsky and populism, see Boyte 2012; Bretherton 2012). J. S. Maloy (2013) argues that the "reason of state" tradition is a useful guide for thinking about the ways in which the people are able to exercise the power needed to hold their leaders accountable; however, he retains the traditional understanding of power as a command backed up by violence—with the result that the institutions he looks to for accountability remain largely tethered to states that have little reason to create them. In *Demanding Democracy*, Marc Stears presents an "American radical tradition" running from the Progressives to the New Left that sought to combine realism's interest in the means of power politics with an idealistic account of the democratic ends of action. However, Stears, who inexplicably ignores Alinsky (aside from a passing mention in a footnote), also remains beholden to the idea of statesmanship: He



concludes by arguing that citizens may be dependent on leaders to build “institutions for the rest of us to live and work in” (Stears 2010, 219). Though the transformational role that the organizer plays is similar to what Stears asks of a leader, the key difference is that an organizer teaches an approach to political ethics and action that enables the people to build their own institutions without relying on the vision of the organizer to tell them what their better world should look like. To the extent that “organizing the disorganized to identify and develop their own sense of their own self-interest may be one of the best ways to avoid the imposition of a priori rules or ethical goals upon politics from without,” the organizer can do a better job of fulfilling realism’s core theoretical commitments than the statesman.<sup>3</sup>

### SAUL ALINSKY: THE ARCHETYPE OF THE ORGANIZER

Alinsky’s work provides an important supplement to the existing realist scholarship because he shows how the organizer can be used as a paradigmatic political actor for developing an approach to political ethics that treats power and self-interest as ethical concepts on which to construct a radical vision of democratic politics. Rather than describing his theory of organizing from a how-to perspective, as other scholars have often done, my aim is to clarify Alinsky’s ideas about power, self-interest, and the educational character of organizing in a way that illuminates how these concepts are used in the course of political deliberations that develop the political and ethical capacities of ordinary people in a democratic way. Although Alinsky, like Williams, refused to draw a sharp distinction between moral and strategic reasoning, his emphasis on relational power and the social basis of self-interest underwrites both a principled commitment to democracy and an ethical approach to political conflict. Thus, Alinsky provides us with a realist approach to democratic ethics, not simply a handbook of political tactics.

Alinsky’s realism comes directly from his experiences as an organizer and is impossible to appreciate without knowing something of his life and work. He was born in 1909 to an Orthodox Jewish family in the slums of Chicago and attended the University of Chicago on a scholarship.<sup>4</sup> After graduating, he received a fellowship to do graduate work in criminology, which he used to study Al Capone’s criminal organization in person. He later went on to study youth street gangs and work as a criminologist for the Illinois prison system. Around this time, he also became committed to the antifascist politics of the Popular Front, working with the Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO) on progressive organizing efforts intended to prevent the rise of fascism in the United States. CIO leader John L. Lewis became Alinsky’s lifelong friend and,

along with Bishop Bernard Sheil, one of his chief political mentors. In 1939, he began building a community organization in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood. The organization he helped create, called the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), successfully brought together the Catholic Church and the CIO, the two previously hostile institutions to which most of its Eastern European residents belonged. In 1940, Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) to refine and spread his approach to community organizing. He spent the rest of his life organizing in communities around the United States until his death in 1972.

A few examples of early organizations founded under the auspices of IAF help illustrate the range of Alinsky’s efforts. The Community Service Organization (CSO) in California organized Mexican Americans to register to vote and helped them acquire citizenship, as well as being the launchpad for the organizing careers of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. The Organization for the Southwest Community (OSC) sought to ease racial tensions and reduce white flight in southwest Chicago. The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) organized a nearby African American community, thereby bringing “the first large-scale modern civil rights organization to Chicago” (Horwitt 1989, 363). His last major organizing effort, FIGHT, was a black power organization created after large-scale race riots occurred in Rochester, New York. Among Alinsky’s most well-known antagonists were two of Chicago’s most powerful mayors, Joe Kelly and Richard Daley; Eastman-Kodak, then one of America’s largest corporations; and his own alma mater, the University of Chicago, which tried to force an unpopular urban renewal program on the African American residents of Woodlawn. He also wrote two bestselling books on organizing, *Reveille for Radicals*, first published in 1946, and *Rules for Radicals*, first published in 1971, a year before his unexpected death.

Alinsky’s intellectual formation and influences are reflected in his life story.<sup>5</sup> From the urban sociology he studied at the University of Chicago, he learned to define communities as patterns of meaningful relationships and repeated interactions. As Luke Bretherton has shown in his intellectual genealogy of IAF organizing, Alinsky also pulled from sources as diverse as the rabbinic tradition; the Christian social thought of theologians like Jacques Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr; the emphasis on compromise and the suspicion of excessively principled approaches to politics expressed by pragmatists like John Dewey and John Herman Randall Jr.; and the close relationship between freedom and conflict expressed by early American thinkers such as Thomas Paine, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson (Bretherton 2014, 21–56). Bretherton claims the IAF embraced “a broadly Aristotelian conception of politics” only after Alinsky’s death, but Alinsky’s abundant references to Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides,

<sup>3</sup> I owe this valuable formulation to an anonymous reviewer from the APSR.

<sup>4</sup> Alinsky’s standard biography is Horwitt (1989).

<sup>5</sup> All citations to Alinsky’s two major books are from the most recent Vintage editions, but the pagination is the same in the originals.

and Heraclitus show that ancient political and ethical thinkers had long been an important source of inspiration for him. The most important canonical figure for Alinsky, however, was Alexis de Tocqueville, whose views on the relationship between self-interest and community are foundational to IAF's form of organizing. From these sources came his view that if, beginning at the local level, people were able to gain the power they needed to take control of their lives in small ways, they would be driven by necessity to confront, step by step, the larger structures that limited the exercise of their newly acquired power, building their own freedom from the bottom up.

Though Alinsky is often thought of as a 1960s radical, his relationship to the New Left was quite contentious, and his intellectual anchor was in the radical politics of the 1930s and 40s. Of the various groups involved in the New Left, he was most sympathetic to the black power movement. Though opposed to the Vietnam War, he was strongly critical of the antiwar movement for what he saw as its neglect of organizing in favor of middle-class cultural politics. He never seriously engaged with feminism and saw organizing in the macho terms of a stereotypical 1930s CIO organizer. At the same time, there are striking similarities between aspects of Alinsky's organizing work, such as the house-meeting approach pioneered by the CSO, and practices like consciousness-raising circles that were used around the same time by second-wave feminism (Stout 2010, 149; on feminist approaches to organizing that build on and revise Alinsky, see Schutz and Miller 2015, 245–73; on Alinsky's debt to Jane Addams, see Hamington 2010; on realism and feminism, see Finlayson 2015). These similarities point to ways in which Alinsky's views on power, agency, and self-interest can be enriched by looking at how these concepts have been developed by contemporary feminist theorists.

Alinsky, however, was not a professional political theorist, and the goal of his books was not to provide organizers with systematic arguments. Instead, his aim in writing was to produce the organizers themselves. The “rules” of *Rules for Radicals* were really “principles that the organizer must carry with him into battle” or, as Andrew Sabl puts it, “dispositions of character he thought vital” to the work of organizing (Rules, 138; Sabl 2002, 270). Alinsky's writing style performed his psychological objectives by both adopting and challenging the values he believed his readers would bring to his text. Frequently, his writing works as a form of shock therapy, using jarring language to startle and even offend readers accustomed to talking about politics according to the conventions of “middle-class moral hygiene” (Rules, 62). As his close friend Nicholas von Hoffman writes, “It is astonishing that anyone can read *Rules for Radicals* and not realize that its author was consumed by the demands of ethics.... His words and phrases are harsh, pungent and provocative. That is as it must be because he was sounding the trumpet blast for democracy” (von Hoffman 2010, 181). He was, in other words, a practical moral psychologist who wrote to shape agents rather than arguments. And the key to agency is power.

## POWER: WHY ORGANIZATIONS EXIST

A cardinal principle of the morality of power is that political actors must accept that politics is and ought to be about power. In the most famous passage from *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky differentiated his radicalism from a liberal approach to social justice according to their respective understandings of the ethical significance of power: “A fundamental difference between liberals and radicals is to be found in the issue of power. Liberals fear power or its application. They labor in confusion over the significance of power and fail to recognize that only through the achievement and constructive use of power can people better themselves” (Reveille, 21–22). In *Rules for Radicals*, he lamented the negative connotations attached to words like power, self-interest, compromise, and conflict by people who wish to either avoid politics or transcend it: “Every organization known to man, from governments on down, has only one reason for being—that is, organizing for power in order to put into practice or promote its common purpose.... *To know power and not fear it is essential to its constructive use and control*” (Rules, 52–53, emphasis in original). Here Alinsky asked his readers to see organizing as something all institutions and collective actors interested in power necessarily do, regardless of whether they do it well or poorly, deliberately or naively. Power is the essential component of political agency, both the necessary prerequisite and the central objective of political action.

When defining power, Alinsky typically quoted Webster's definition, which told him power is simply “the ability to act” (Reveille, 212). This may seem bland, but it is almost identical to Amy Allen's definition of power as “the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act” (1999, 127). Allen argues that only such a broad definition of power can encompass the full range of reasons that feminists are interested in power and the different forms it takes: what she calls power-over (as in the case of some people dominating others), power-to (as when people resist domination), and power-with (as when people join in solidarity to challenge domination together). Organizers have much the same reasons for being interested in power as feminists in that they must understand the forms of power that are used to dominate people, and the ways in which those people are able to resist domination, in order to help them organize their own power to oppose it. Alinsky, like Allen, thought power had to be understood broadly if it was to be mobilized strategically.

But what is the ability to act? Alinsky was fond of saying that “the real action is the reaction of the opposition” (Rules, 74, 135). This is a philosophical point about his conception of agency as much as an insight into the dynamics of political conflict. According to Sharon Krause, “to be an agent is to have an impact on the world that one can recognize as one's own.” Agency is, however, “a socially distributed phenomenon,” because “our effects frequently depend on the social uptake provided by other people—on how they interpret what we are doing and how they respond to it” (Krause 2015, 4). The ability to act, therefore, is the ability to

elicit a reaction from others; agency means not being ignored. Someone who does not have power is unable to act in this intersubjective sense, to engage in conflicts, or to craft solutions to shared problems. To be an agent, a person must exist in relationships with others whose uptake is the source of a given action's effects. This is the driving insight behind Alinsky's relational theory of power.

"Power," Alinsky wrote, "has always derived from two main sources, money and people. Lacking money, the Have-Nots must build power from their own flesh and blood. . . . Against the finesse and sophistication of the status quo, the Have-Nots have always had to club their way" (*Rules*, 127). Though the language he used was often violent, the point is that power can only be built through the difficult and dirty work of building an organization; a mass of people unable to coordinate or act together is incapable of exercising power in a sustained way. The organizer creates relationships, brings together different groups on the basis of mutual self-interest, and helps the organization increase its power. When building an organization, "every move revolves around one central point: how many recruits will this bring to the organization. . . . If by losing in a certain action he can get more members than by winning, then victory lies in losing and he will lose" (*Rules*, 113). As von Hoffman wrote in a paper on organizing from 1963, "The organizer's first job is to organize, not right wrongs, not avenge injustice, not to win the battle of freedom. That is the task of the people who will accomplish it through the organization if it ever gets built" (quoted in Schutz and Miller 2015, 81).

Ed Chambers, Alinsky's successor at the IAF, developed the idea of relational power by drawing on the work of political theorists like Hannah Arendt, Bernard Crick, and Sheldon Wolin. Employing some of the same terms as Allen, Chambers defines relational power as a form of "power with," rather than the unilateral "power over" of command backed by violence. When people come together on the basis of common concerns, they are able to act to support each other in pursuit of their goals. Jointly, they are even able to force powerful opponents to enter into ongoing agonistic relationships with them, relationships in which conflicts and interests are accommodated through political means. In line with Arendt, Chambers argues that violence is a form of unilateral power qualitatively distinct from and incompatible with relational power (Chambers and Cowan 2003, 20). Alinsky, however, did not make absolute distinctions between relational power and other forms of power, including violence. The relevant difference for him was not between different forms of power so much as the different bases of the relationships from which power is derived and the ways in which it is brought to bear on opponents.

Alinsky's early experiences studying organized crime gave him a different understanding of the interaction between relational power and violence from that held either by Chambers or by contemporary realists. What he saw in 1930s Chicago was that violence, even violence that was seen as legitimate, was by no means an exclusive tool of the state. It was not always

possible to differentiate between violence carried out by the city government and violence carried out by organized crime because organized crime effectively was the city government. Years later, he told an interviewer, "The Capone gang was actually a public utility." By studying that gang, he "learned a hell of a lot about the uses and abuses of power from the mob, lessons that stood me in good stead later on, when I was organizing" (Norden 1972). His intimate involvement with organized crime taught him that violence was not the sole source of the mob's power. The mob's ability to use violence depended on relationships of trust and reciprocity built around family bonds, common ethnic identities, and shared interests. As Bretherton argues, "Trust and strong relationships, in addition to the threat of violence, are crucial to maintaining the effective management and power of any organized criminal group. . . . In his work in Back of the Yards, Alinsky sought to use the same emphasis on trust and relationships in organizing the poor to resist the power of organized crime, substituting the threat of violence with the threat of nonviolent means of exerting pressure" (Bretherton 2014, 26).

For an organizer, relationships are the foundation of political power, not violence. Even statesmen are able to exercise violence only because the state is composed of institutionalized relationships of office that give them the authority to do so. The power of violence itself can often be understood in relational terms insofar as it is used to coerce people into unequal relationships upheld by fear. This underscores a larger point about Alinsky's approach to political ethics. Violence is not the reason why politics requires its own morality, because violence is just one way among many in which political power can be exercised. Political ethics must be concerned with the acquisition and exercise of power in all its forms. Not all the relationships people have in their lives are or should be concerned with the pursuit of self-interest by way of power, at least not all of the time, but political ethics are needed whenever they are.

Because Alinsky did not think that the use of violence was an essential feature of politics, he did not have an absolute position on when the use of violence is justifiable or not. His suspicion of violence came from his doubts about its value as a means for expanding a democratic organization's power, rather than from a moral commitment to nonviolence. According to von Hoffman, Alinsky saw power "in terms of vote power or money power or public opinion power, never violent power." At the same time, "Saul had a lot to say in private about how hard it is to control violence. It is not like an electric wall switch to be flipped on and off. Judicious and measured, he would tell you, is quite a trick to pull off. People can get violent when it is a tactical disaster or stay cowed and quiet when one punch would do a world of good" (von Hoffman 2010, 194). The other problem with violence, in addition to how difficult it is to control, is that there is no reason to think that democratic groups will get the better of violent conflicts. As Alinsky quipped, "'Power comes out of the barrel of a gun!' is an absurd rallying cry when the



other side has all the guns” (*Rules*, xxi). The difference between a punch and a gun is also a reminder that he was far too concrete and specific a political thinker to believe that an argument justifying the use of one could also justify the other. Violence is an abstract concept containing many different kinds of action that must be treated separately. Nor did Alinsky agree with Gandhi that suffering can be a morally purifying or self-limiting force for containing resentment and converting opponents. Consequently, he shied away from tactics of non-violent resistance that relied on exposing his own side to the violence of the state. He believed that organizers who knew how to acquire power through the full range of relationships and resources available to them could find surer means of achieving their goals.

Some leading scholars of the IAF, such as Harry Boyte, have argued that Alinsky’s theory of relational power “neglects to acknowledge power based on control over the flow of information, communications, professional practices, and cultural productions — what can be called knowledge power” (Boyte 2012, 306). “In the 1960s, Alinsky severed the connection between community organizing and the cultural organizing necessary to develop broader democratic possibilities,” resulting in “an absence of [IAF-style organizing] from elections, the professions, higher education, intellectual life, and the struggle over the meaning of the nation and the identities of its people” (310–11). Whatever the merits of this argument with respect to the practices of the contemporary IAF, it is hard to see how Alinsky, who devoted the last decade of his life to writing, speaking, and spreading the gospel of organizing any way he could, can be accused of neglecting cultural and intellectual production. He wrote *Rules for Radicals* because he believed that the isolation and disillusionment of New Left activists resulted from the way that McCarthyism had cut them off from the larger of history of what Stears calls the American radical tradition. “My fellow radicals who were supposed to pass on the torch of experience and insights to a new generation were just not there,” Alinsky admitted (*Rules*, xiii–xiv). Culture and ideas matter, but they become forms of power only through people. For example, when TWO hired its own urban planners to professionally critique the University of Chicago’s urban renewal proposal, it used expert knowledge to further its own power in what was then an innovative way. TWO not only used “hard-power” tactics such as rent strikes but also cultural activities like a community fashion show. In other words, there is no reason to think that Alinsky’s emphasis on organized people as the source of relational power prevented him from seeing that knowledge, culture, and ideas play an essential role in determining whether and how people become organized at all.

Finally, relational power has important ethical implications for how an organization should deal with its opponents. One of the central rules that the IAF instills in its organizers, leaders, and members is “No permanent enemies, no permanent friends.” Because political relationships are built on self-interest, an organization might later have common interests with one of its current opponents, and being able to build a relationship

later will allow the organization to increase its power. Hence, IAF organizers place a premium on “depolarizing” their relationships with their opponents after a particular political conflict has been resolved. For a particularly humorous example, after FIGHT reached an agreement with Eastman-Kodak to create a hiring and training program for African Americans, Alinsky told reporters that he only wanted his photos taken with Kodak film because Kodak’s financial interests were now FIGHT’s (Horwitt 1989, 502). The idea that opponents should always be seen as future sources of power places an internal limit on how they should be treated. Making a permanent enemy harms the organization’s ability to build power in the future and, for that reason, is counterproductive. Yet this principle does not draw a clear line between which tactics are acceptable and which are not, nor is it meant to. Alinsky did not believe that he could tell people what they could or could not do: They had to decide that for themselves. But making permanent enemies was an ethical and political failure on the part of the organization. The morality of power, therefore, treats power in terms that are both strategic and ethical.

## SELF-INTEREST: THE LOW ROAD TO MORALITY

An organizer can only build power if she understands the role that self-interest plays as an ethical principle in politics. Alinsky’s intense focus on self-interest might seem to go against realism’s commitment to “a moral psychology that includes the passions and emotions,” but the distinguishing feature of his theory of self-interest is the psychological thickness and complexity he brings to understanding just what is a particular community’s self-interest. By itself, self-interest is akin to what Bernard Williams called a “thin” ethical concept, one that lacks a strong connection to an agent’s sense of self. If self-interest is to actually guide people in making political decisions, an organizer must find a way to thicken the concept of self-interest by connecting it with the specific experiences and aspirations that people already have. Alinsky understood the thickening of self-interest to work in two ways: first, by deepening the idea of interest to show agents how that sense of self gives rise to specific political interests, and second, by broadening the sense of self to include as many of the social relations that define an agent’s sense of self as possible. Self-interest is not thickened through reflection, but as part of the activity of organizing itself. Thick self-interest gives Alinsky’s vision of agonistic democracy its normative underpinning by explaining the general significance and social content of political conflict.

“Political realists,” Alinsky said, “see the world as it is: an arena of power politics moved primarily by perceived self-interests, where morality is rhetorical rationale for expedient action and self-interest” (*Rules*, 12–13). When Alinsky opposed self-interest to more conventional moral considerations, he was trying to show why self-interest is a more reliable basis for

political action. Sometimes, he treated morality as a psychological and social device for justifying shifts in a political actor's real or perceived self-interest. "Drastic shifts of self-interest can be rationalized only under a huge, limitless umbrella of general 'moral' principles such as liberty, justice, freedom, a law higher than man-made law, and so on," he wrote. "Morality, so-called, becomes a continuum as self-interest shifts" (*Rules*, 55). Alinsky's skeptical treatment of morality is one of the points on which he is most frequently criticized by his friends and demonized by his enemies (see Stout 2010, 117–18). However, as Bretherton rightly argues, this "suspicion entails asking what motivates morality and what function morality plays in any justification rather than skepticism about morality as such" (2014, 143). It is especially important to emphasize self-interest when dealing with people who have been oppressed by existing political institutions. As Lois McNay notes, "For many individuals, a consequence of the lived reality of oppression is that they may acquire a deep-seated dispositional reluctance to act as agents of their own interests" (2014, 16). Moral arguments, Alinsky knew, can be used ideologically to conceal and even legitimize this sort of disempowerment (see Geuss 2008). The rhetorical inversion of morality and self-interest is a useful device for overcoming the internalization of disempowerment and emphasizing the autonomy of political ethics.

Alinsky said that organizing "gives priority to the significance of self-interest. The organization itself proceeds on the idea of channeling the many diverse forces of self-interest within the community into a common direction for the common good and at the same time respects the autonomy of individuals and organizations" (1968, 94). Alinsky almost never used the term "interest" without "self" preceding it. This was not because he conceived of interests in individualistic terms, but because he wanted to emphasize the importance of people defining their interests for themselves by creating deep connections between their identities and political interests. As social movements scholar Sidney Tarrow has argued, "interest is no more than an objective category imposed by an observer. It is participants' recognition of their common interests that translates the potential for a movement into an action" (1998, 6). The difference between objective interests and thick, self-defined interests mirrors Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons in that self-interests, like internal reasons, must be developed from an agent's existing beliefs and desires (for recent experimental evidence on the role of internal reason-based arguments in political persuasion, see Feinberg and Willer 2015). Alinsky believed that the most important quality an organizer needs to have to uncover thick interests is "an abnormal imagination that sweeps him into a close identification with mankind and projects him into its plight" (*Rules*, 74). As Obama described it, "the self-interest I was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of the issues, that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received options people carried within them some central explanation of themselves. Stories full of ter-

ror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stores" (Obama [1995] 2004, 190). Without imagination, self-interest is only useful for people who are already political actors with well-defined interests. With imagination, self-interest becomes a tool for drawing people into politics as well.

The task of an organizer is to learn how the people understand their interests, to relate those interests to political strategies and objectives, and to seek out allies with similar enough interests to make cooperation on those objectives possible. In *Reveille*, Alinsky wrote, "The fact is that self-interest can be a most potent weapon in the development of cooperation and identification of the groups' welfare as being of greater importance than personal welfare" (94). In *Rules*, self-interest is part of what he called "the low road to morality" (23). Alinsky's views on self-interest came from Tocqueville's idea of "self-interest rightly understood" as an antidote to destructive individualism, as well as his training in urban sociology (Bretherton 2014, 142). He understood self-interest as an inherently social concept because a person's sense of self emerges from the social roles she inhabits, the institutions she belongs to, and the relationships she has with others. The intersubjective nature of self-interest makes it possible for organizing to broaden individual interests and turn them into collective actions.

Alinsky's friend Jacques Maritain described his organizing methods as follows: "Starting from selfish interests, they succeed in giving rise to the sense of solidarity and finally to an unselfish devotion to the common task" (Maritain, Alinsky, and Doering 1994, 20). Similarly, Romand Coles (2006) calls this movement from self-interest to the common good a form of "trickster politics," a phrase that nicely captures the flavor of Alinsky's approach. However, it would be a mistake to think that the common good ever comes to replace self-interest. "It was a disservice to the future to separate morality from man's daily desires and elevate it to the plane of altruism and self-sacrifice," Alinsky wrote. "It is not man's 'better nature' but his self-interest that demands that he be his brother's keeper" (*Rules*, 23). As Stout puts it, "The well-being of the city as a whole is actually in the interest of each individual and group in the city. There is no radical or permanent division between the pursuit of one's own interests and the promotion of the common good" (2010, 38). Political morality, therefore, does not depend on self-interest being superseded by altruism; it depends instead on the enlargement of self-interest that results from acquiring and exercising relational power.

Nick von Hoffman gives an example of how Alinsky broadened self-interest and used it as a low road to morality in the course of convincing a racist, but powerful, Catholic priest to support The Woodlawn Organization (TWO). Alinsky "began with real estate considerations," writes von Hoffman, "a topic which experience had taught him was of prime importance to members of the clergy. He said it was only a matter of time before a black family moved into the parish somewhere, that if someone set fire to their house and burned them out it would stampede white families into



moving away because parents are not going to bring up their kids in a battle zone. That would decimate the parish and crash real estate values” (von Hoffman 2010, 62). Alinsky knew the Catholic Church was hurting from white flight and could not afford the scandal of racial violence. By appealing to the financial interests that the priest had as a member of the Catholic Church, and revealing the extent to which these interests were threatened by racist practices of housing segregation, he gave the priest a broader vision of what his self-interests really were and with whom he needed to form relationships to protect them. The racist priest became one of TWO’s most important supporters. In politics, as Alinsky often said, “the right things are done for the wrong reasons” (*Rules*, 76).

Another reason it is important for an organizer to initially separate self-interest from other moral considerations is that “a citizen’s organization needs to discover how narrow conceptions of self-interest currently operate in this or that segment of the community” (Stout 2010, 41). The IAF term for this mapping of the political terrain is “power analysis.” A power analysis requires both an internal examination of the organization’s own strengths, weaknesses, resources, and strategic position and an external power analysis of who the key players are on any given issue, what their interests are, and whether they will be friendly or hostile to the organization and to each other on issues around which the organization wants to create conflict (Stout 2010, 21–33). A power analysis makes it very clear that the most interested actors on most political questions are often not elected officials or statesmen. Chambers writes that most politicians are “errand boys, or brokers at best,” and “lacking an accurate power analysis, most citizens’ organizing efforts try to negotiate only with politicians and government bureaucracies,” while “the real decisions are sealed months before in elegant boardrooms” (Chambers and Cowan 2003, 136). For example, when FIGHT wanted to find a way to create jobs for Rochester’s African American population, it ignored municipal government and targeted the city’s largest employer, Eastman-Kodak, with tactics that threatened its national reputation, such as using stock proxies to confront Kodak’s management at its annual shareholder’s meeting. Its power analysis made it clear that the best way for FIGHT to advance its self-interest in employment was to focus on Rochester’s economic power holders, rather than its official political leadership.

Like the idea of relational power, Alinsky’s defense of the role that self-interest plays in politics has ethical implications for how his morality of power structures political conflict. Most importantly, by insisting that all people should be able to define their interests for themselves and pursue them on equal terms with others, he provided a justification for democratic politics. “Self-interest,” Stephen Holmes writes, “is a profoundly egalitarian and democratic idea. Only a few have hereditary privileges, but everyone has interests. To acknowledge the legitimacy of interests is to say that all citizens, no matter what their socially ascribed status, have concerns that are worth of attention” (1997, 63).

The idea that everyone has interests that politics must respect applies even to one’s opponents, adversaries, and oppressors. Alinsky was a strong advocate of polarizing and even personalizing political conflicts (*Rules* 130). He saw conflict as productive because it generates power and can be used to make unequal relations more equal, even when the dominating side would prefer to maintain the status quo. Organizers use conflict “to exploit political opportunities, create collective identities, bring people together in organizations, and mobilize them against more powerful opponents” (Tarrow 1998, 3). Conflict, however, is always a prelude to some kind of political agreement in which opposed interests are conciliated according to the distribution of power. Organizing shifts that distribution of power enough so that new agreements become possible, and it forces adversaries to acknowledge that shift.

Alinsky’s morality of power is recognizably a version of what political theorists call “agonistic democracy.” More precisely, it is an example of what Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears call “agonistic realism,” an approach to politics that combines an agonistic commitment to democracy with realism’s insights into “the nature of the opponent and of the circumstances in which the struggle for justice always – or at least often – takes place” (2011, 203). But Alinsky did more than show us what agonistic realism looks like in practice; he also helped remedy some of the agonism’s major weaknesses. Lois McNay faults agonistic democrats for ignoring the social basis of their theories of political agency, which leaves them “unable to address a series of issues about empowerment and participation that are crucial to their theory, such as how to mobilize individuals in the first place or why the ‘political’ should be the principal focus of citizen loyalty rather than any of the many other constitutive attachments and bonds of social life” (2014, 15). The “social weightlessness” of agonistic theory is precisely what Alinsky’s theory of thick self-interest is designed to prevent. The organizing process gives social weight to agonistic politics, explaining why political empowerment and participation follow from other things people value, without having to specify in advance which social conditions will be politicized and fought over. The democratic determination of the organization’s self-interest connects the agonistic dynamics of political conflict with organizing’s educational mission of teaching people how to be empowered political actors.

## ORGANIZING: AN EDUCATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC FAITH

Shortly before his death, Alinsky told an interviewer, “My only fixed truth is a belief in people, a conviction that if people have the opportunity to act freely and the power to control their own destinies, they’ll generally reach the right decisions” (Norden 1972). This is a statement of radical democracy in the most literal sense: the belief that it is good for people to have power as one’s sole unshakable commitment. Yet the word “generally” points to his awareness that people

do not always do the right thing; that doing the right thing requires a great deal of experience, knowledge, and deliberation; that the people can sometimes go disastrously wrong. Democracy, he knew, is always risky, “but we assume this risk on the basis of a faith in the democratic way of life” (Schutz and Miller 2015, 69). This democratic faith depends not on a view about the correctness of particular decision procedures, but on a belief about the possibilities of a people who have learned to appreciate power and use it intelligently. Organizing is not just about building power; it is also a form of political education for developing the democratic character and capabilities of the people. “Without the learning process,” Alinsky argued, “the building of an organization becomes simply the substitution of one power group for another” (*Rules*, 123). If organizers want to be political educators, and not just the new power group, they have to respect the people enough to also learn from them about how best to advance democracy and determine the purposes to which their organization's power will be put.

“The very purpose and character of a People's Organization is educational,” Alinsky said, and his emphasis on organizing as a form of democratic education illustrates why he thought organizing was a distinctive and important form of political agency (*Reveille*, 155). Bureaucratic mass-membership organizations focus on representing their members' interests rather than teaching members to fight for those interests themselves, and many of the criticisms of postwar labor unions made by Piven and Cloward in *Poor People's Movements* (1977) on this point were anticipated by Alinsky in *Reveille*, which was written as a wake-up call to the increasing complacency of the labor movement. Piven and Cloward's preferred alternative was for movements to be as disruptive as possible in order to extract concessions from elites in those rare moments when they are able to do so, meaning they too had little use for political education. Alinsky, in contrast, would have agreed with Sharon Krause, who writes, “In a free society, the experience of affirming one's subjective existence through concrete action in the world must be available to all, and available as a regular part of everyday life not just in exceptional moments of heroic opposition” (2015, 125). Neither disruption nor abstract representation is enough to secure the kind of agency that political freedom requires, but the process of organizing works to create an environment in which Krause's kind of agency becomes possible, and this objective marks the difference between organizers and other sorts of political agents. Andrew Sabl contrasts organizers like Alinsky and Ella Baker with both the office-holding politician and the activist who relies on moral exhortations and the exemplary force of extraordinary actions “to shrink the gap between high moral principles and harsh political practice” (2002, 249). Where realists have been too attentive to statesmen, Sabl argues that democratic theorists have been excessively focused on the activist's dramatic acts of moral suasion rather than the power- and interest-centric work of organizing. Neither the statesman nor the activist provides a useful perspective for under-

standing how people can learn to become democratic agents, which is the distinctive calling of the organizer.

In the same interview in which he expressed a faith in democracy as his “only fixed truth,” Alinsky also explained how organizing works as political education. “The central principle of all our organizational efforts,” he wrote, “is self-determination; the community we're dealing with must first want us to come in, and once we're in we insist they choose their own objectives and leaders. It's the organizer's job to provide the technical know-how, not to impose his wishes or his attitudes on the community; we're not there to lead, but to help and to teach” (Norden 1972). By emphasizing know-how and eschewing leadership for teaching, it might seem that Alinsky is trying to place the organizer above the people being organized as an unaccountable expert, but the key idea is that an organizer finds and develops leaders from within the community being organized. These leaders are the conduits of political education, learning the morality of power from organizers while also teaching the organizers about the community's interest and, when necessary, holding them accountable to the people. When meeting with a group of church and community leaders about the creation of TWO, Alinsky told them, “It is the community, and above all its leaders...who decide what the tactics are to be. It is their responsibility to do nothing they will ever be ashamed in having a part in” (quoted in Schutz and Miller 2015, 70).

Leaders and leadership are an important part of organizing, but unlike the typical realist statesman, these leaders are almost always independent of the state and have little to no control over violence or other sorts of coercive measures. Often, the spokesperson or president of one of Alinsky's organizations was a clergyman put forward by the organizers, but most of the leaders involved had no official or institutional authority outside the organization. Two of the pastors who invited Alinsky to Woodlawn described their first encounter with the leadership team he put together like this: “Some of us ministers found ourselves being escorted to meet pool hall proprietors, janitors, distracted looking women on relief, stern retired mailmen. These individuals, we were informed, were community leaders... Most of them had little education, they spoke peculiar English, and their areas of greatest knowledge had nothing to do with traditional organizations” (quoted in Schutz and Miller 2015, 60). Leaders are the people other people trust, to whom they go for advice, support, guidance, and help when it comes to making hard decisions. Leaders have people who follow them, not in the sense of giving orders, but because they have the respect of others. The problem is that leaders are not well known outside their immediate circles; they rarely even know each other, and different people tend to be looked to as leaders on different topics. For an organizer, finding leaders is a process of learning about the community's values, interests, and identities in order to understand which virtues and what sort of character are esteemed by these particular people (*Reveille*, 64–75).

Once an organizer has found leaders, the next step is to bring them together to form relationships with one

another and learn about their shared interests. Bringing together the community's leaders provides the organization with both power and democratic legitimacy, and the organizer plays a crucial role in helping leaders learn how to work together. Alinsky also emphasized developing the capabilities of each leader individually "so that they become recognized by their following as leaders in more than one limited sphere" (*Reveille*, 74). Developing leaders means putting them in situations where they have to learn about new issues, acquire new skills, and work with people they might not like. The organizer's role in this process is like that of a coach (see Allen 1999, 125, on how coaches exercise power-over in a nondominating way).

When leaders establish relationships, build power, and become political actors, they do not simply express the values and pursue the ends they already had. Political action has a transformative effect on a person's character, and the goal of organizing is to ensure that this transformation is for the better. "If people feel they don't have the power to change a bad situation," Alinsky wrote, "then they do not think about it.... It is when people have a genuine opportunity to act and to change conditions that they begin to think their problems through—then they show their competence, raise the right questions, seek special professional council and look for answers. Then you begin to realize that believing in people is not just a romantic myth" (*Rules* 105–06). In this way, leaders eventually become like organizers themselves, practitioners of the morality of power and teachers to the other members of the organization.

Perhaps the most important thing that Alinsky wanted political actors to learn was the orientation needed to hold a realistic appraisal of political possibilities together with a belief in the character and value of democratic life. Like Weber (2004, 77), who asked "how to forge a unity between hot passion and a cool sense of proportion in one and the same person," Alinsky saw this orientation as a problem of moral psychology. But whereas Weber used the seeming impossibility of combining passion and proportion to argue that a true statesman is a rare, even heroic, character, Alinsky believed that organizing could help people develop an attitude of "cold anger" to guide their political actions (Rodgers 1990). Cold anger is an affective orientation that integrates the contradictory demands and split perspectives involved in political conflict at an emotional level. Cold anger is reflective, self-conscious anger that allows a person to think strategically in the head of conflict without giving in to the paralyzing demand for objectivity. Alinsky said cold anger helped him realize that "actions are designed primarily to induce certain reactions," to never "confuse power patterns with the personalities of individuals involved," to eschew "the simple, hot, angry, personalized denunciation," and to be "the master rather than the servant of [his] tactics." Cold anger is the product of both experience and reflection, of accepting "the prime importance of the Socratic adage about the unexamined life" (*Reveille*, ix–x). Learning to be a political actor is, therefore, as

much about developing the right sort of character as mastering the right skills.

Alinsky often reached for ideas from Socratic philosophy to clarify the political and educational role of the organizer. "Socrates was an organizer," he wrote in *Rules*, because "the function of an organizer is to raise questions that agitate, that break the accepted pattern" (72). In the meeting with the Woodlawn pastors described earlier, he invoked a famous metaphor from Plato's *Theatetus*: "We have as much and the same kind of relationship to organization tactics as the midwife has to the birth of a baby" (Schutz and Miller 2015, 79). An organizer teaches, according to Horwitt, "not by unilateral action, but by raising alternatives, by engaging community members in a kind of Socratic dialogue" (1989, 175). As in an actual Socratic dialogue, the way an organizer uses questions to guide deliberation varies according to the needs of the moment. Sometimes, the questions used are genuinely open-ended, as when trying to understand the way people in a community understand their self-interests. But Alinsky also thought an organizer might need to "suggest, maneuver, and persuade" people toward a desired course of action, again like a coach (*Rules*, 91–92). This is necessary because people who have not had much experience with power do not know the uses to which it can be put or how those in power typically think. Organizers cannot assume that the people already have the political skills they will only acquire over the slow and difficult course of building an organization.

"A community is not a classroom," Alinsky insisted, "and the people are not students coming to classrooms for education. The People's Organization must create the conditions and climate in which people want to learn" (*Reveille*, 165). To create this climate, the organization's actions must track the self-interests and objectives of the people, and this requires two-way learning between the organizer and the people. "An effective organizational experience," he wrote, "is as much an educational process for the organizer as it is for the people with whom he is working" (*Rules*, 123). An organizer helps people create this democratic way of life and, when necessary, prevents them from acting in undemocratic ways. But Alinsky often worried that organizers might try to impose their own views on the people being organized. He therefore felt it was better if organizers lacked clear normative prescriptions of their own, having only "a bit of a blurred vision of a better world" (*Rules*, 75). His regular injunctions against organizers having theories, creeds, or substantive programs of their own were not simply counsels of tactical flexibility; they were also a way of trying to keep organizers from having the sorts of beliefs they might want to impose on the organization in the first place. This conception of the organizer as someone who attends power—people power—more than any particular purpose or ideal is what led those on the right to attack him for being utterly amoral and some in the New Left to denounce him as "downright reactionary," but Alinsky saw this principle as what makes an organizer truly democratic (Stears 2010, 175 fn. 3).



Even on questions of organizational strategy, a good organizer must be able to learn from the people and not cling to ideas just because they worked in the past. Alinsky himself provides an example of this with TWO. Its first action was to target local merchants who were shortchanging, short-weighting, and otherwise exploiting their customers, an issue that surprised some of the local religious leaders but that came out of discussions with the organization's leadership team. However, following a rally for some of the Mississippi Freedom Riders that became the largest event yet staged by TWO, Alinsky and von Hoffman, neither of whom had been initially enthusiastic about the event, shifted their focus to civil rights issues such as voter registration and segregated schooling. Alinsky was generally wary of social movement organizing for focusing more on specific objectives than general empowerment, but the decision "pinpointed Alinsky's brilliance as a political tactician: he was able to shed even his most favored organizational concepts and assumptions when confronted with a new, unexpected reality" (Horwitt 1989, 401). It also demonstrated that he understood how important it is for an organizer to learn from the membership and ensure that the organization ultimately belongs to the people being organized.

"The basic difference between the leader and the organizer," Alinsky wrote, is that "the leader goes on to build power to fulfill his desires, to hold and wield the power for purposes both social and personal. He wants power for himself. The organizer finds his goal in the creation of power for others to use" (*Rules*, 80; Sabl [2002, 280–89] shows that Ella Baker drew a similar contrast between the organizer and leader). The organizer's desire that others have power, however, is not a form of altruism. It is a product of her extended imagination and awareness that her agency depends on others having the power to extend and respond to her actions. Thus, democratic empowerment is deeply tied to the organizer's identity and self-interest. "The ego of the organizer," Alinsky said, "is stronger and more monumental than the ego of the leader" (*Rules*, 61). The organizer wants power not just for one or another particular organization, but for as many people as possible because the creation of a democratic society is the highest expression of the organizer's own agency.

## CONCLUSION: MEASURING UP TO DEMOCRACY

Alinsky saw democracy as the messy, endless, and often unsatisfying interplay of conflict and compromise, organizing and counterorganizing. He had no interest in the dream of a world that would transcend the dynamics of power politics, and his realism was neither a brand of political minimalism nor a plea for chastened politics. Rather, it was a thoroughgoing critique of political sentimentalism, of appeals to harmony and moral consensus, rather than power and self-interest. He was an important theorist of political ethics because he saw how organizing could teach people how to fight for power using democratic means and use it for demo-

cratic purposes. He also knew the difficulty of holding these objectives together, of maintaining a long-term belief in the character of an empowered people to make the right choices when faced with the many failures of democracy he saw around him and the ethically compromising things the organized would have to do to fight back against their disempowerment. The morality of power "cultivates a sense of nuance, ambiguity, complexity, and the ironic, even tragic qualities of the human condition" (Boyte 2012, 305). This understanding was important to Alinsky because he, like Weber, saw that politics requires "the trained ability to scrutinize the realities of life ruthlessly, to withstand them and to measure up to them inwardly" (Weber 2004, 91). That is because "the ultimate product of political activity frequently, indeed, as a matter of course, fails utterly to do justice to its original purpose and may even be a travesty of it" (78).

Alinsky saw his purposes travestied by the Back of the Yards, the community where he began his career as an organizer in 1939. As the neighborhood grew prosperous, in large part because of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council he created, it used its power to enforce segregation and maintain itself as an all-white neighborhood. At first, he tried to convince the leaders to let in a few black families on a very limited scale, but to no avail. As the segregationism of the Back of the Yards became more widely known, he was put under increasing pressure to sever his ties with the organization—something he said an organizer always had the right to do if an organization betrayed basic democratic principles—but he refused to do so. He could not disown the organization he had helped create, even though it pursued what he saw as fundamentally undemocratic goals, because those goals were still an authentic expression of the values of the community and could not be wished or lectured away. As he told an interviewer,

I certainly don't regret for one minute what I did in the Back of the Yards. Over 200,000 people were given decent lives, hope for the future and new dignity because of what we did in that cesspool. Sure, today they've grown fat and comfortable and smug, and they need to be kicked in the ass again, but if I had a choice between seeing those same people festering in filth and poverty and despair, and living a decent life within the confines of the establishment's prejudices, I'd do it all over again. (Norden 1972).

Instead, Alinsky, started to organize new communities in Chicago to counter the racist policies of his first organization. Initially, he tried to organize whites elsewhere in the city to accept partial integration through racial quotes. Then he started organizing in Woodlawn to form "a powerful black community organization that could 'bargain collectively' with other organized groups and agencies," like the BYNC (Horwitt 1989, 368). The solution to the abuse of organized, democratic power was not the rejection of organized democracy, but its extension to new groups of people whose interests would challenge those of the old organizations. "It just might be necessary for me to go back

and organize against the organization I set up,” he told another reporter, “and then, ideally, someone else should come and organize against me” (quoted in von Hoffman 2010, 53). This was what it meant for Alinsky to measure up to the unforeseeable consequences of political action without losing faith in democracy.

The BYNC is still in existence today, long after most whites have left the area. It is now a service organization, of the sort Alinsky generally disliked, for the neighborhood’s primarily Hispanic residents, and it has no connection whatsoever to the IAF. Its website seeks to reassure anxious readers that it has “substituted an emphasis on community and economic development for Alinsky’s confrontational methods” (Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council 2009). Though a very different organization from the one Alinsky started in 1939, it still reveals something of his stamp and spirit in its motto, the same motto chosen at its first convention more than 75 years ago: “We the people will work out our own destiny!”

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