THE NEW SOCIAL ACTION TREND AND THE ALINKSY MODEL

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Social action has become fashionable in America. In the past year, there has been a considerable increase in interest in a variety of social action approaches, ranging from Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, to the developments taking place in Mobilization for Youth and the plans for the HARYOU Project. Suddenly, social science and social work circles have become attracted to social action approaches. While most of social work itself has always been quite alienated from Alinksy and his Reveille for Radicals, there is considerable new excitement about the Alinsky model as evidenced by Charles Silberman's recent article "Up from Apathy" in Commentary magazine (May 1965) and the Saturday Evening Post article by Hillel Black, entitled, "This Is War" January 25, 1964).

It is always interesting to observe just when trends such as this appear. The social action focus of the present period is arising in a context of Negro and Civil Rights revolt. Social action is taking place quite independent of government-sponsored projects such as Mobilization for Youth and HARYOU and quite independent of social workers and Alinsky. In a short space of time, rent strikes spread to twenty-five cities in the United States. They were not led by social workers, government-sponsored projects or Alinsky's self-organized communities. Alinsky's forty-four communities have been developed over the last thirty years and Alinsky claims to have organized over 2,000,000 people in this period of time. It is a rather unusual phenomenon that so many people can be organized in the United States with practically no one knowing about it. Until very recently, most social scientists never even heard of Alinsky and the communities he has helped to build. It has been a most quiet revolution. But everyone seems to have heard very quickly of the Negro movement, of the rent strikes, school boycotts, etc. Unquestionably, this has something to do with the current press which has given much attention to Negro might. But we suspect also, that the millions organized by Alinsky have had little influence, outside of narrowly confined local areas (with all due credit to him and his small staff organizers who work on a low-cost budget).

The Meaning of Social Action

Miller and Rein point out that there is a great vagueness about the nature of social action. They note that there are many different types of social action programs, although the types have not been adequately conceptualized.

> "One type is directed toward social criticism. It is organized so as to raise questions about the functioning of institutions. Another type is concerned with giving political power to inarticulate groups to counter-balance elite power groups. The task is to organize new centers of power for the urban setting. A third type of social action program involves people, so as to foster in them the hope that as people try to change their world they also change in the process. Thus, self-esteem replaces social stigma. The assumption here is that individuals who can learn to cope with their environment can also in time learn to cope with their own personal problems (this is a type of socio-therapy). The emphasis is not on changing the community as a result of social action but changing the mental health of the people involved; or more precisely, it is assumed that these aims are mutually reinforcing. It is our impression that this is a growing purpose of social action. A fourth type of social action calls for community involvement and participation to reduce the problems of social alienation in the urban center. Community action becomes a goal in itself. A fifth variant is self-help where the stress is on a block improving their particular conditions by sweeping the sidewalks or holding a festival: action towards the political and social service caretakers is not involved."*

Whether this particular typology is to be accepted or not, it is fairly clear that social action can have different goals, ranging from sociotherapy to social change.

Strategies of Change

It would seem that one of the most important questions to examine in evaluating any social action program is its relationship to social change. Specifically, how is the social action viewed in relation to other variables in the change process?

Theorists advocate different forces as strategic in producing major institutional changes--changes such as the development of the community mental health movement; changes in the educational system directed

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* S. M. Miller and Martin Rein, "The Demonstration as a Strategy of Change," paper presented at the Columbia University Mobilization for Youth Training Institute Workshop, April 30, 1964. pp. 49-50.

toward better education for the disadvantaged; changes aimed at reducing poverty. The strategies put forth include: the demonstration project; such as Mobilization for Youth and HARYOU; new methods of training, both in-service and pre-service, such as the teacher training programs emphasized by James Conant and the organization training noted by S. M. Miller; consultation and the development of improved communication; the use of nonprofessional personnel in new capacities, as advocated by Arthur Pearl, Robert Reiff and Leonard Duhl, to change the character of service provided by the helping professions; and the role of negotiation, as suggested by Daniel Bell, particularly with reference to the integration problem.

Literature and the public expression of ideas can be potent change forces, as evidenced by Michael Harrington and the poverty issue. And the contributions of John Maynard Keynes, Erich Fromm, David Riesman; and other ideologists, including Freud and Marx, must also be considered in the broader historical context.

Currently, the most popular strategy of change has been concerned with the notion of pressure from below, social action, mass movement as decisive variables in producing change. This has been emphasized by Mobilization for Youth, and is built into the design of HARYOU. Social action seems to be a decisive force producing changes with regard to integration in many areas as well as new trends in education of the disadvantaged. The concern in these areas seems to be related, as many school administrators freely report, to the "demand from below," the demand for changes coming about from mass action of "the people." There can be little question that social action is an important ingredient in certain kinds of changes. The relevant question is: for what kinds of change is social action decisive and how does social action relate to other parameters of the problem? In some cases it would appear that mass pressure for change has not been, at least not directly, decisive. Thus, with regard to the community mental health movement emanating from the Kennedy Act and the Report of the Joint Commission on Mental Health, there does not seem to be much evidence that pressure from below was a determining element in providing the impetus for this type of change. In this respect it seems quite different from the education situation and the integration area.

Changes in the poverty area, while they may be related to developments of the Negro movement, do not altogether seem significantly propelled by action from below..

It may well prove true that mass pressure, social action by the poor themselves, is a crucial force in many forms of change. It still may be

important to determine the degrees of freedom within which the change occurs. For example, the demand of minority groups for improved education for the disadvantaged has led to a variety of proposals. The Ford Foundation through its demonstration pre-school projects, particularly the project of Martin Deutsch, is having a wide influence on the type of institutional change the school systems throughout the country are considering in educational programming for the disadvantaged. The poor themselves never demanded this pre-school emphasis and might not even be especially attracted to it. Nevertheless, it seems to be a major response of the educational system to the need for improved education for the disadvantaged and to the demand for this improved education by the educationally deprived. Thus, there appears to be considerable latitude in what types of changes occur in response to demands from below. Our thesis is that there are many elements involved in social change--that social action is one very important element, perhaps one that provides the motor force or power under a variety of conditions--but that there are other elements that groups dedicated to various kinds of institutional changes might do well to consider. This is not intended to gainsay in any way the value of a social action approach as a major lever of social change. What is being suggested rather, is that it is not the only element in institutional change, albeit an important one, particularly in producing a changed equilibrium, a crisis, an opening, around which other elements in the change process may operate. The issue then is what kind of social action is most appropriate as a significant element in major social change. It is in this context that we should now like to turn to an analysis of the Alinsky model.

The Alinsky Model of Social Action

Various reviews of Saul Alinsky's approach to community organization and social action have appeared recently.* They all use the highly successful TWO (The Woodlawn Organization) in Chicago as the main prototypes, although Alinsky has organized numerous other communities.

*See Warren C. Haggstrom, "The Power of the Poor" in Mental Health of the Poor, edited by F. Riessman, J. Cohen, and A. Pearl, Free Press, 1964, pp. 205-223; Charles Silberman, "Up from Apathy - The Woodlawn Experiment", Commentary, May 1964; Hillel Black, "This is War," Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 25, 1965; Stephen C. Rose, "Saul Alinsky and His Critics: The Future Democracy in the Metropolis," in the July 20, 1964 issue of Christianity and Crisis.

Alinksy's Industrial Areas Foundation, functioning on a low budget without government support, has two major objectives in the communities it helps to organize: eradication of local grievances, e.g., consumer fraud, and the development of independence and dignity on the part of the presumably apathetic, dependent peoples who are organized.

To achieve these goals, Alinsky--who will not help a community unless he is called in by a group representing at least some of its different interests--stresses conflict, looks for some enemy ("This is War") who is weak enough to be defeated and/or can be united in opposition diverse elements in the community (by serving as the "big" outsider, e.g., The University of Chicago).

His announced aim is to surrender his power, to leave within three years, and to develop sources of power, particularly funding, in the local organization itself (although he and the IAF may continue to advise from afar).

While strongly supported by Catholic groups, Alinsky has been able to bring together many religious denominations as well as local merchants, workers and a wide range of local groups.

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* (Cont.)
The Following are the main materials written by Alinsky himself regarding his approach:

Alinsky, Saul D., Action to Equality of Opportunity. Chicago: Industrial Areas Foundation, 1962. 11 pp.

Alinsky, Saul D., Citizen Participation and Community Organization in Planning and Urban Renewal. Chicago: Industrial Areas Foundation, 1962. 17 pp.

Alinsky, Saul D., "Community Analysis and Organization," American Journal of Sociology, 46, 1941.

Alinsky, Saul D., Memorandum to the Reverend Father Robert T. Dunn. Chicago: Industrial Areas Foundation, 1960. 13 pp.

Alinsky, Saul D., Reveille for Radicals. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946.

Alinsky contends that he has no values or political goals to impose on the communities--they are supposed to decide for themselves what they are going to do. But, most of his community groups seem to be fairly progressive with the notable exception of the Chicago Back of the Yards group which ultimately became anti-Negro.

Alinsky has a great flair for colorful tactics ("Truth Squads," "Death Watches") and Alinsky himself has frequently provided tactical advice to Civil Rights groups; however, in Chicago, his home base, he and his methods appear to be widely disliked by Civil Rights forces. It is not at all true, as pro-Alinskyites would have us believe, that only reactionaries and social workers attack Alinsky.

Alinsky employs a staff of organizers with varied backgrounds and skills, and this staff provides tactical advice and technical consulation where the local groups require it (e. g., a critique of an urban redevelopment plan). These organizers are typically very dedicated, frequently quite colorful, and willing to meet and talk about tactics until four in the morning on a fairly regular basis. (Quite a lot of talking is done!)

Alinsky's model deserves careful attention for a number of reasons:

(1) It demonstrates that social action and community organization can be accomplished in low-income communities. (The poor, apparently, are not as apathetic as they are said to be unapathetic about);

(2) It demonstrates that social action can be quite inexpensive and does not require a huge outlay of government funds;

(3) It demonstrates that representatives of all religions and classes can be united in community action groups;

(4) It demonstrates that social action organizations can withstand witch hunt tactics;

(5) It demonstrates that it is relatively easy to find indigenous leadership in poor communities.

Furthermore, Alinsky has developed some interesting approaches to organization and tactics regarding which any social action movement would want to be cognizant. (Although he has borrowed more heavily than is realized from traditional trade union and leftist practices.)

But the model has a number of fairly obvious limitations, the most important being its extremely localistic character. As Miller and Rein observe:

". . . only some of the problems of the poor can be solved through neighborhood, or even city, changes. Increasingly, national action is needed. Consequently, the poor have to be organized on a continuing and wide basis in order to gain the political clout that will produce sweeping reforms." *

A more severe critic states:

"Alinsky eschews ideology and program, seeking only to develop lower class protest movements which will, he has faith, evolve their own programs--as if in some mystical way lower class people will gain the technical and ideological means to fathom the larger economic and political forces that affect them. Alinsky's strategy is block-by-block, low level organization and 'no holds barred' techniques. He is true to the American pragmatic tradition which exalts action and denies the practical value of theory." **

Alinsky has no long range plan or theory. With the possible exception of some of the IAF groups in California, the communities he has organized remain essentially isolated from each other and Alinsky rejects the notion of bringing them together. *** They may change the local situation; but they have no influence on national issues of unemployment, housing and the like. Frequently they appear to function more as sociotherapy then social action oriented toward institutional change. **** They are socio-

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*S. M. Miller and Martin Rein, "Change, Ferment and Ideology in the Social Services," Address at Council of Social Work Education, Toronto, January 29, 1964, p. 29.

**National Committee for Full Employment, Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 3, September 1964.

***Personal communication from Nicholas von Hoffman, one of the key organizers of the TWO.

****While a sociotherapeutic approach is not to be confused with social action directed toward institutional change, we are not suggesting that sociotherapy may not be useful to the people of the community. What is being objected to is the confusion of this activity with social action oriented toward social change. From the sociotherapeutic point of view there is no objection to advising an individual to involve himself in some of the social action problems of the community. The advice may be given to him on therapeutic grounds. It may be seen as something valuable for his health or his psychological well being, but it is not the basis for developing broad social action.

therapeutic in the sense that the people who participate in them profit from this involvement psychologically, feel more independent, and this is all to the good. However, the question must arise: How long can sociotherapy continue if thorough-going deep changes in the social structure are not produced? Perhaps communities become very narrow (and as in the case of the Back of the Yards Project in Chicago) turn against minority groups.

It is striking that Alinsky's most publicized project, The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) clearly reflects the Negro trend. Thus social action takes on real meaning when connected to significant social forces and movements in the larger society and is not dependent on the local area alone. Appraisals of the Alinsky model have over-emphasized The Woodlawn Organization Project as though it were typical of all of the communities that Alinsky has helped to organize. Actually, a case could easily be made that it is quite an exception. But, regardless of whether it is exceptional or not, attention should be called to other communities that Alinsky has organized such as the Chelsea Community in New York which was a complete fiasco, the Back of the Yards Community in Chicago which was successful in many respects but ultimately developed a powerful anti-Negro orientation, and many other Alinsky organized middle-class communities which have nothing special to recommend them. All these communities should be included in any overall evaluation of Alinsky.

The Alinsky model appears to be narrow, essentially localistic, not sufficiently concerned with large-scale institutional changes, and fails to bring together the various communities that are developed. It is unnecessarily manipulative* and "gimmick-oriented." It is unappealing to large ranges of people and fundamentally lacking in the social movement properties that characterize the Civil Rights Movement today or the Peace Movement of three years ago. Alinsky appeals, in the main, to only one level of social action interest, namely, the activist militant type. People who are appealed to by milder, more subtle forms, do not respond, for the most part, to the Alinsky model.

A Note on Mobilization for Youth and the Alinsky Model

In contrast with the Mobilization for Youth type government sponsored projects, Alinsky's model has two clear advantages: It has solved the funding and red-baiting issues (it does not have to play witch hunt) and Alinsky's organizations are typically well prepared for attack and well prepared for attack and well supported by their constituencies when it comes.

*In contrast to Civil Rights Movement which appears to be far less manipulative in its way of operating.

MFY and Alinsky are essentially focused toward the local community, have no broad theory or well developed strategy of change (which should include the relationship among the many variables involved in institutional change, including the various types of social action). Both attempt to capitalize on broader social movements such as Civil Rights Movement. But neither can really duplicate or imitate these necessarily citizen led movements and efforts to do so are likely to contaminate and distract the potentially unique and valuable contributions of MFY and Alinsky.

The great danger in both is that they are likely to enchant liberal professionals and intellectuals who may easily overestimate what these models can accomplish and erroneously come to believe that the contradictions in the professional's role can be defeated outside of participation as a citizen--that professional participation can incorporate the contributions of citizen action. This can easily lead to disillusionment and the historic retreat of the professional, rather than the necessary searching for new appropriate postures compatible with his occupational role and the present social awakening of growing sections of the citizenry including the supposedly apathetic poor.

Social Action and Social Movements

What then are the implications for social action in the present period in the United States and where does Alinsky fit in? What do we need to know about the relationship of social action to other variables in the change process in order to develop meaningful change strategies?

The task confirming strategists of change is to delineate carefully the different factors involved in social change: The role of negotiation at certain points, the role of ideas and ideology, and particularly the role of different types of social action and how these types of social action interpenetrate with other change producing forces.

In America, this should include an examination of some of the larger social movements that have emerged in our history. The Suffragette and the Populist movements should be re-examined. And in the modern period, the Peace Movement of the sixties, the Labor Movement of the thirties, the Progressive Party in 1948, all provide potentially illuminating illustrations. It is noteworthy that most of these Movements were relatively short-lived, and for the most part their demands were absorbed into the mainstream of American life. This is not to say that all of their demands were treated in this way, but much of the major thrust of these movements was incorporated by the established political parties and laws and institutions of our country. No enduring social movement, no broad well-developed ideology has emerged in the United

States has shown remarkable resiliency in being able to absorb, and even occasionally anticipate some of these social demands. Thus, the New Deal absorbed the Labor Movement, and it is quite possible that many of the demands of the present Civil Rights Movement will also be adopted by the power forces of this society. The Civil Rights Law passed by Congress reflects an acceptance of some of these demands. In similar fashion, President Kennedy adopted a significant portion of the demands of the Peace Movement. (This should not be confused with the changing demands of the Movement.) It is noteworthy that the Establishment not only can absorb some of the demands of various social movements, but can, in certain cases, anticipate them. Thus, we would suggest that the present War on Poverty reflects, in part, some anticipation of a powerful demand by segments of the poor for a basic involvement in the economic life of the nation. This demand is likely to find most advanced expression in the Negro Movement, as it becomes increasingly influenced by the Negro poor. The Administration has to some extent anticipated these pressures and has attempted to program for them. Sometimes these anticipations function as diversions, distracting the main energy and force of the potential social movement. But things are not necessarily so simple, and sometimes plans go astray. Thus it is possible that the War on Poverty might genuinely open the doors to a social movement of the poor. This is a possibility, but in no way a present actuality or immediate potentiality.

What is important to see, however, in evaluating social movements and social action, is that in America no such movement has developed long-term properties. This is not to say that these movements were uninfluential; on the contrary, they were quite influential. But it is important to recognize that enduring widespread movements had not emerged. This is essential to keep in mind in assessing social action on the American scene.

To return then to the question of strategies for social change. We have argued that it is necessary to evaluate the objective conditions, allowing for the possibility of social change, the types of strategy that may be available, the role of social action as one of these strategies, the types of social action possible from social therapeutic types to social criticism to self-help, to pressure for political power, etc. The Miller and Rein survey of types of social action described above, might serve as a starting point for such an appraisal. Finally, in developing strategy, it is most important to assess what possibilities for social change are available to the change agent being considered. To be specific: What roles can professionals play, in their roles and in their citizens roles, in introducing major types of social change in relation to poverty, mental health, community action, integration?

The role of objective conditions in producing possible openings or opportunities for social change can be presently examined with regard to the Civil Rights Movement. This Movement arose at a time in which the cold war was lagging, and the African Nations' freedom demands were on the rise. The Civil Rights Movement also coincides with increasing awareness of the automation trend in the economy, with its prospect for the decline in need for unskilled labor. Also in evidence in this period is the continued migration of the poor to the cities, the declining power of the rural area, particularly the South, long-term structural unemployment, and the failure of military expenditures to fundamentally buoy up the economy. These various factors reflect themselves in many different trends, including the Supreme Court decision regarding reappointment in the states. This decision, we believe, reflects the change in the rural-urban power distribution. Hence, the Civil Rights Movement could respond to these larger changes in the society with a vastly increased organized demand for the rights of the Negro people. The fact of a relatively friendly Kennedy Administration, and an establishment which had far less need for Negro segregation, lent further support to the possibility of a social movement arising in the 1960's. The widespread support for this movement came from many diverse sources; most outstanding perhaps, the communications media--the press and TV. The society was, so to speak, ripe for such a movement and Negro leadership was correct in assessing this and taking advantage of it.

What then are some of the possibilities for social action of different types in the present period?

(1) The Alinsky model, despite the limitations we have discussed, suggests one extremely important possibility: namely that the various Alinsky-organized communities could, in fact, be brought together. They could be united around larger issues of relevance to the poor thus increasing their political clout and removing them from their over-emphasis on local concerns. This could provide the potential for a larger social movement. Such an undertaking obviously presents many difficulties as social movements have rarely been built in this way. The question arises immediately as to what are the larger issues that would unite these diverse local groups.

(2) Another possibility in the present period rests with the labor movement, and its potential unity with community organization groups and with the War on Poverty. Walter Reuther has spearheaded the Citizen's Crusade Against Poverty. C.C.A.P., which could play a powerful role in developing community action, and conceivably at a certain point, could integrate with Civil Rights Movement and the Alinsky community groups.

(3) The Civil Rights movement has numerous possibilities for expansion in the present period. It could unite more firmly with the community action programs being developed through the Office of Economic Opportunity, the anti-poverty forces; it could unite with the labor forces as suggested above, it could unite with the Alinsky forces, and finally it could unite with the intellectuals, who are searching for new forms of citizen involvement. Thus, the integration movement which must search for solutions to the unemployment problem could unite with groups of intellectuals, who could be encouraged to develop programming for job creation. Such groups as the National Committee for Full Employment provide one such example, but there are numerous other possibilities. What we are suggesting in that the Civil Rights Movement could use its clout best in support of well-developed, well-thought-out, economic, political and social programs related to housing, education, integration, employment, anti-poverty measures. Intellectuals, because of their isolation from the power forces in the society, could benefit enormously by being stimulated to develop programs in these areas. Through the demand of Civil Rights forces, intellectuals would recognize that they had an audience and a power force behind them to implement these programs, and a new and exciting unity might emerge. Similarly, intellectuals might work together with the Alinsky groups, with the labor movement led community action organizations and both the intellectuals and the groups they work with, might profit enormously from this form of involvement. Intellectuals' criticisms from afar, their distance from involvement and their feelings of powerlessness could be greatly reduced in this fasion, and the movements they work with could achieve far greater breadth and theoretic focus from this suggested coalition.

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