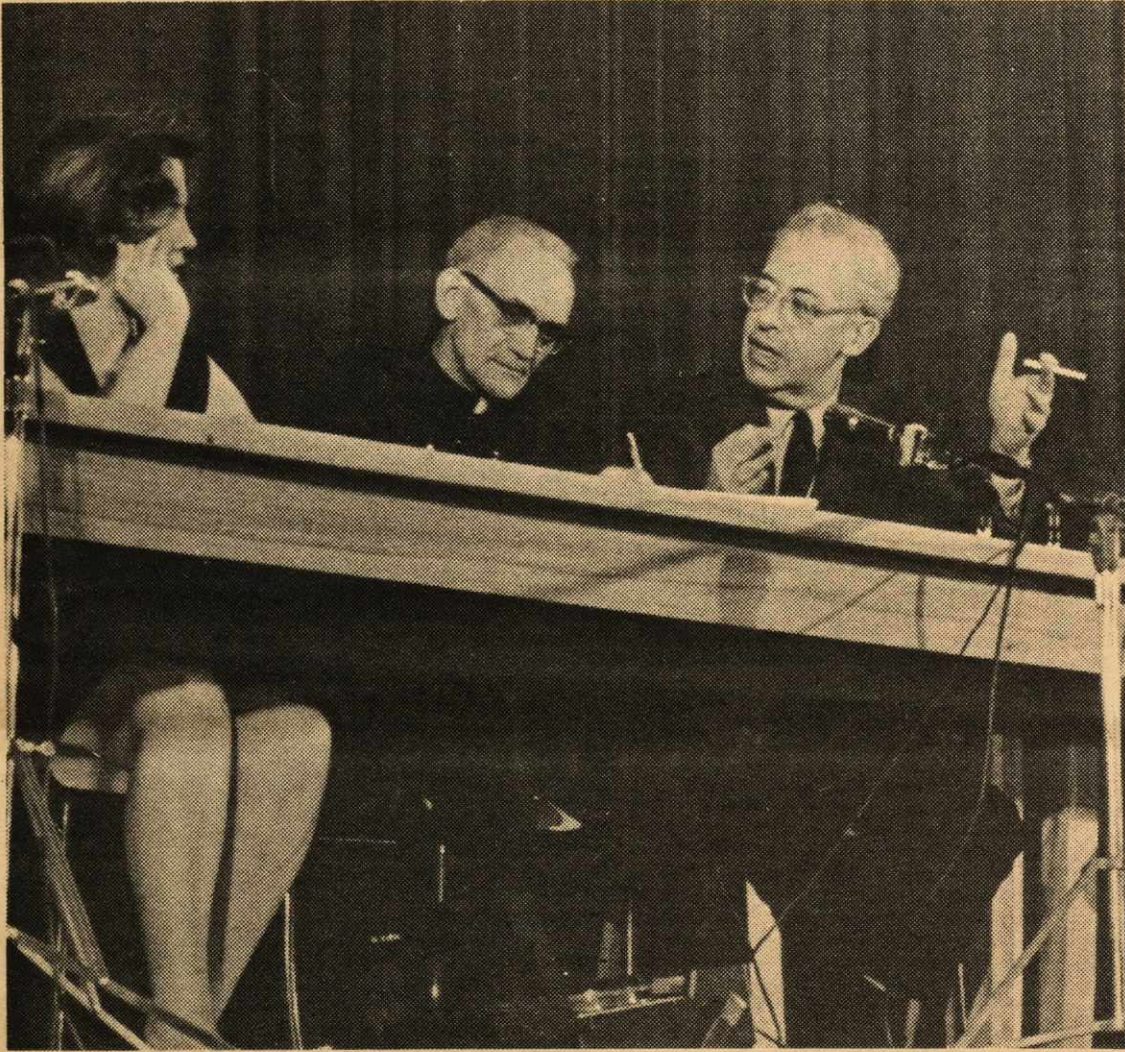


Saul Alinsky a disappointment



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"Step right up, lay-deez an' gennulmun! See and hear America's number one social activist and organizer. The radical's radical, the greatest pusher of 'people power' on the face of this earth! He'll thrill you, he'll chill you, he'll make you laugh and he'll set your chickenshit heart all a-twitter! Lay-deez an' gennulmun, all this for only one thin dime, the tenth part of a dollar. Step right up (go away, son, ya bother me).

The unfortunate thing about Saul Alinsky's two-day excursion to Halifax was that the advance billing he got had the same effect as the midway Barker's cheap-thrill come on. And he got the same kind of audience.

Unfortunate because Alinsky is genuine, not a phony or a side-show freak. He's helped oppressed people all over the U.S. to get it together and spit back the crap coming from the corporate asshole above. Labor, blacks and tenant and welfare groups have all found that people power is a real and powerful weapon.

Possibly because of the sensationalistic buildup given him by the local media, the impression was created in some minds that Alinsky was coming to do his organizational thing here and not just talk about it. These people became impatient and confronted him during the final session Thursday night, demanding an end to the jokes and "war stories" in favor of some answers to the problems of this area as they now stand. But the Saviour they thought had come to straighten out some of the white cats said that he could do nothing in two days.

But most of the people who came to hear Alinsky didn't need his experience and organizational know-how. They were comfortable and middle-class, and to them "going to hear Alinsky" was like driving at 70 miles an hour or feeding the bears... mildly titillating but not really dangerous.

In many ways, Alinsky tailored his pitch to suit this audience, or so it seemed. He wasn't in the streets organizing and what was probably a harder approach than most was diluted to the consistency of pabulum in the auditorium. The folks wanted a show and Alinsky entertained them with stories of how it had been in Rochester and Cleveland, and he said "crap" and "pimp" and everybody had a good time. His message was there all the time; it was just harder to extract.

There is an alternative explanation, however, one reflecting a change in Alinsky's tactical thinking. He now maintains that middle class allies are needed if organized people's groups are to meet with any success, since the middle class is larger, more powerful and therefore more valuable as an organized ally than an obstruction.

Alinsky sees working alliances between lower and middle class groups as the most practicable tactic. The basis of agreement would be self-interest, certainly not trust, since people's groups have so often been sold down the river by middle class confederates in the great bourgeois cop-out. Each would support the other in certain specific demands, nothing more, and when the demands had been met on both sides the contract as such would be dissolved.

Even this 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' approach was greeted skeptically by most

of the black community workers at Thursday night's session. They had been stabbed in the back in return for a trusting scratch too often to let by-gones be by-gones that easily.

Buddy Daye was incredulous. An alliance with the middle class? Speaking of the middle class audience, white and black around him, Daye told Alinsky "These are the roadblocks to black organization. If you people here really want to help, you can come down and listen to black people. Don't try to lead them, just listen."

"We've been silent too damn long."

Daye's comments point out the weaknesses in Alinsky's methodology. He's 'the organizer' they're 'the organized'. They want certain things, he shows them how to get them, but in the end, 'they' have no understanding they didn't have in the first place about why they didn't have the things they should have, why they had to use certain tactics to gain them or how and why they should continue and expand their organizational work.

His is top-down organizing and as such is unconstructive and transient. Alinsky told local workers that he had help up a mirror in which they had seen that they really had "nothing going" at all.

Perhaps this is due to unimaginative tactics, but the lack of concrete mass organization he pointed out is probably due to years of frustration caused by the very methods he advocates. Knowing what won't is just as valuable as knowing what will, and Buddy Daye and his co-workers are way 'ahead of Alinsky's 'veni, vidi vici' approach when it comes to theory.

Alinsky is tactician without a strategy; he fights battle after battle without knowing what the war's all about. This may work for him, but if those he veaves behind are to be all consistent subsequent action some framework has to be communicated along with the feel for tactics that is his specialty.

Alinsky is not a Marxist, he says, which is too bad. His non-ideological 'people power' line probably has very clear implications for him, but it could mean many things to those practising it in the streets different. He may be a humanitarian seeking only a fair distribution of wealth and power in society, but his approach is more likely to set off a new era of materialist war-games and power-plays based solely on the same greedy dog-eat-dog social Darwinism causing all the problems guys like Alinsky feed on. Street level Junior Achievement isn't going to do anybody any good in the long run.

Community workers have to talk analysis as well as organization. When Alinsky says ideology is oppressive he's right, at least when it becomes separated from reality and practical application in the mouthings of a hack. But in organizing around real injustice and specific issues arising from it, ideology is indispensable. It provides the only baseline by which action like Alinsky's can take on a more general significance than the issue itself.

Otherwise, organization is a waste of time. The same situation is perpetuated, even intensified, in a cannibalistic orgy of reciprocal ear-screwing. People already know all about the shaft. It's up to the organizer to talk about alternatives as well.