Review of Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race: Community Organizing in the Postwar City // Review of God and Community Organizing: A Covenantal Approach

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Efforts these days to improve race relations are of related types. There is *virtue signaling*, as in ubiquitous TV ads featuring a mixed-race couple or the obligatory progressive statements from businesses and national religious denominations. There is *social therapy*, as when church-sponsored groups examine and then admit to their racism. Thirdly, justifiable racial grievances are expressed through marches and rallies that unfortunately lack any specific goal.

Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), considered the dean of community organizing, was known for his confrontational yet non-violent tactics, his sharp-edged comments and his exaggerated personality. Alinsky was a person of “keen sociological imagination” and “thoughtful action,” as Mark Santow details in *Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race* (University of Chicago Press, 2023). Alinsky never wavered from a commitment to equal dignity, regardless of race or ethnicity. Yet he was not ideological. He did not crusade for integration per se. He believed that if people have confidence in their own agency and in the democratic process, they will usually make better choices and support true pluralism. The problem, as Alinsky saw it, was the lack of power at the local level. There were too few viable mediating institutions through which people could effectively engage others. Thus, Alinsky dedicated his career to forming peoples’ organizations.

In 1938 Alinsky (then 29-years old) left his job at a university institute to, with Joseph Meegan (1912-1994), organize Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (www.bync.org) in Chicago’s stockyards area. This is the first of Santow’s case studies. BNYC had a promising beginning. However, BNYC feared a possible influx of Black residents. The declining stockyards affected the neighborhood economy. The older housing stock might appeal to Blacks. Thus, BNYC launched a *conservation program*. On the surface its beautification theme and its opposition to panic peddling and its campaigns to upgrade infrastructure was constructive. The unspoken premise, however, was retaining white families in the area and prohibiting integration. Those white families and their institutions (principally churches) felt their defensiveness “was sanctioned by public opinion, economic sense and the law.” Many of those whites, Santow explains, did not realize how government housing programs were designed to “resist integration [through] subsidized suburban home ownership for whites while consigning Blacks to segregated urban neighborhoods.” (See *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein, W.W. Norton, 2017.)

A disappointed Alinsky avoided public criticism of BYNC. He only slowly admitted that his effort “contributed to both the ability and willingness of [BYNC] to engage in racial containment…to protect and preserve an island of segregation,” as Santow writes. Today BYNC says it “substituted an emphasis on community and economic development for Alinsky’s confrontational methods.”
In 1940 Alinsky formed his Industrial Areas Foundation. About 20 years later IAF returned to Chicago’s neighborhoods, starting with Organization for Southwest Community (Santow’s second case study).

Though OSC is overlooked in most chronicles of Alinsky, including the website of his foundation, the section on OSC in *Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race* is the most interesting. The area in 1959 was white with some upwardly mobile Black residents around its perimeter. IAF never said that integration was a goal of OSC. In fact, its organizers patiently and persistently solicited those mistrustful of Blacks. But many of those active in OSC were at best ambivalent, suspecting the goal was to move Blacks into the neighborhood.

OSC unraveled. Member groups exited. First, over an internal proposal to abolish term limits for officers. It was opposed by a faction who thought the hidden reason for the proposal was the retention of racially tolerant clergy officers. More groups quit OSC when its leadership drafted a letter to support an Illinois State bill on open occupancy. The measure could help neighborhood stabilization by giving Blacks more housing choices, particularly in the suburbs. But again, some OSC groups wanted nothing to do with racial improvements.

To judge by the Chicago neighborhood examples, Alinsky’s success was quite limited. Yet his moral stature, now 50 plus years since his death, remains high. Alinsky was consistently willing to risk failure in order to act in the real world. For Alinsky, too many people are “dismissive of messy compromises and far too enamored of the power and sufficiency of legislation and goodwill,” Santow concludes. Moralizing from the sidelines about race (or other issues) is cowardly.

Alinsky was constantly evaluating: Maybe a single neighborhood lacks enough power to deal with larger divisive forces. In 1970 his IAF organized a metropolitan organization, Campaign Against Pollution, soon called Citizens’ Action Program. Today the IAF has 63 county-wide or metro-wide organizations in the United States. Each is multi-issue and, like Alinsky, each believes that racial and ethnic relations improve as its member groups strive for the widest public conversation possible.

In *God and Community Organizing*, Lee writes: “Christians need a good public theology (that functions as a social philosophy).” To address that need he puts forth a concept he calls covenantal organizing. It will give Christians the framework for “fighting neoliberal oligarchy.” Covenantal organizing is similar to (though more comprehensive than) the theory of community organizing developed by Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), as Lee details in two of the book’s eight chapters. Lee promises that a sequel to *God and Community Organizing* will show what “covenantal organizing [would] look like today.” Lee’s subsequent book is *Christian Ethics: a Covenant Model* (Eerdman’s, 2021).

In *God and Community Organizing* Lee provides four examples of covenantal organizing: God organizing God’s chosen people during the Exodus and Sinai events; Jesus (God) organizing an alternative kingdom during the Roman rule of Palestine; the Puritans who organized a government suitable to their North American home; and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) organizing a beloved community to replace a racist culture in our country. Lee repeatedly says that covenantal organizing is relevant to our current day, yet his most recent example comes from 50 years ago.
Alinsky, who died over 50 years ago, enters Lee’s presentation. Lee admires Alinsky’s thoughts on democracy and Alinsky’s directives for improving public life. However, Lee gives only two sentences to Alinsky’s actual practice (the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in 1939) and his attempt to establish other groups in other locales by forming the Industrial Areas Foundation in 1940. Readers of God and Community Organizing would benefit from contemporary examples. If Alinsky’s ideas are close to Lee’s, why not tell about IAF experience from 1940 to 2022? Have the IAF groups in California, New York, Maryland, Texas, Great Britain and elsewhere had success? Have they modified Alinsky’s ideas in any way? Have Judeo-Christian and Islamic themes become part of the IAF practice? Have leaders in IAF groups incorporated their faith traditions into their community organizations?

The overarching obstacle to community is neoliberal oligarchy, Lee writes. His analysis is on target, though ordinary people don’t use the term neoliberalism oligarchy. Its side effects or “interlocked challenges” are “the demise of democratic values and institutions” and the disintegration of citizen agency. Both of these are marked by a withering of intermediate groups (neighborhood, union, church and more). Individuals are left to go it alone in a society in which big, impersonal business and government forces dominate. The challenges also include a global economy with mobile finance over which legal regulations have only a tenuous hold. There is also the pervasiveness of computer technology which further removes the decision-makers from mechanisms accountable to citizens.

Lee pauses now and then within each chapter to provide a helpful summary of his previous pages. His presentation is accessible, though like most academics he uses bigger words than necessary. And, for readers outside of theology circles, there are some unfamiliar terms like actional ontology, eschatological and hermeneutics.

Lee is a professor of Christian ethics at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in California. He previously authored two books on Martin Luther King Jr. and has written about several social topics. He is a founder of an institute on Asian-American Christianity.

Lee’s notion of covenantal organizing is “compatible” and “complementary” to community organizing. In reaching this conclusion he adds to several others who have participated in, reflected upon and written about community organizations. Recent titles from Catholic publishers include Inclusive Populism by Rev. Angus Ritchie (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) and Seeds of Justice: Organizing Your Church by Alex Tindal Wiesendanger (Orbis Books, 2020). Lee draws upon an earlier book, Blessed Are the Organized by Jeffrey Stout (Princeton University Press, 2010). The same publisher also has Dry Bones Rattling by Mark Warren (2001). Finally, Upon This Rock by Samuel Freedman (Harper Collins, 1993) is an inspiring case study of an evangelical church that participates in a Brooklyn, NY community organization.

Among other contributions, God and Community Organizing gives Biblical language to the arts of community organizing and it relates public life to worship, including to baptism and the Eucharist.
The New York Times (2/6/22) gave two pages to its columnist David Brooks so that he could examine the divide within evangelical Christianity over former president Donald Trump, sex scandals within evangelical leadership, racism and misogyny. Unlike Catholics, Brooks concludes, evangelicals do not have “an established doctrine of social teaching that helps them understand how the church can be active in civic life without being corrupted by partisan politics.” Brooks reports on a well-regarded evangelical pastor in Manhattan who enumerates an agenda for evangelical renewal. The pastor’s bullet points include a Protestant version of Catholic public theology with a strong component on faith and work.

Catholics indeed have a treasure; a sophisticated body of social principles derived from Scripture, reason and experience. However, this treasure is held by a small number of pastoral ministers, some academics, some retired union members, any remaining specialized Catholic Action veterans and those who subscribe to a handful of Catholic magazines. Lee and others who think “Christians need a good public theology” might ponder why Catholic social thought has yet to penetrate the majority of lay people in the pews.

William Droel edits INITIATIVES (PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629), a newsletter on faith and work.