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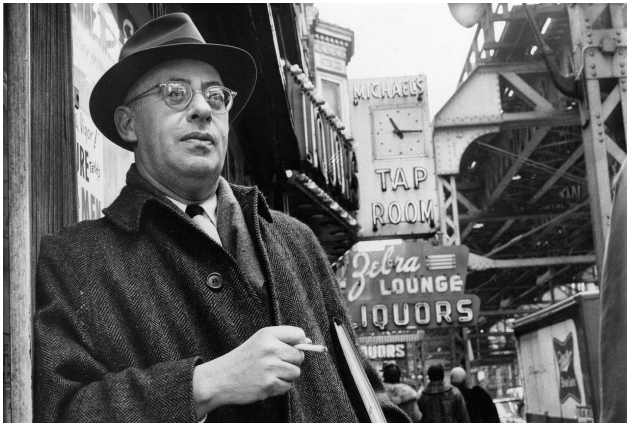
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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Better Call Saul: The U.S. Needs Radicalism, Not Extremism

Alinsky is one of the most misunderstood figures of the 20th century. Let's set the record straight.



Saul Alinsky in the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago's south side in 1966. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Mike Gecan*

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It may seem strange to argue that the U.S. needs more radicalism, especially in this period of outrageous rhetoric and intense overreaction. But the right kind of radicalism can improve American politics by focusing on fundamental public goods. Leaders should replace showmanship with a radical approach that galvanizes ordinary American citizens.

This concept of political radicalism has a storied history, but the term has faded from the popular lexicon. In 1951 *Wall Street Journal* editor William H. Grimes described this newspaper's philosophy: "We are not much interested in labels, but if we were to choose one, we would say we are radical."

Saul Alinsky had a different perspective, but he also considered himself a radical who wanted to serve the interests of ordinary Americans. In 1940, while the world was being torn apart by war, it was radical to organize

beleaguered stockyard workers in immigrant neighborhoods. Many policy makers doubted that American democracy could contend with the military might of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and preferred placing power in government rather than the fractured American public.

Even some of Alinsky's supporters doubted whether the time was right to pit citizens against government. He had founded the Industrial Areas Foundation in 1940 to "petition the Government for the redress of grievances," as the First Amendment empowers citizens to do. But the business, religious and civic leaders on IAF's board struggled to balance public spiritedness with the group's often adversarial relationship to government.

Alinsky put the unease to rest by reminding the board that standing against ineffective government is part of good citizenship. This approach to politics, he wrote in 1942, could break the "strangleholds of undemocratic practices" and force government to serve the needs of the people. The IAF remains committed to helping communities and individuals hold government and bad corporate actors accountable.

The radicalism of the IAF is an antidote to the utopian fever that often courses through American politics. Alinsky disappointed many student activists in the 1960s by insisting that the purpose of politics is not to enact an idealistic fantasy. Rather, he argued, most people want to participate in America's existing free and democratic system. The goal of organizing is merely to ensure that citizens have real power and equal access. When government is open and accountable, workers can protect their health and safety and negotiate for better wages, and residents can improve their communities so that their children can live on safe and decent blocks.

This pragmatic radicalism attracted me and many of my longtime colleagues to the IAF nearly 40 years ago. The organization's focus on the gritty details of public life has allowed us to see through bad actors and ideas on both sides of the political aisle. We rejected the rhetorical posturing of the New Left movement, which was led by privileged young people who often viewed working-class Americans with contempt. We opposed the Democratic leaders of Chicago, who built a brutal political machine by barring independents and reformers from power. And we saw through the ideological fairy tales of corporate elites and the far right, who sought to maximize economic freedom without regard for the needs of ordinary citizens.

We continue to teach those ordinary citizens how to build and wield power. But we do not treat politics as "an endless war" against elites, as the New York Times's David Brooks falsely described Alinsky's view in a recent column. Our mission is to enable citizens to compel their leaders to serve them with attention and respect. When that happens, people cease to be have-nots and become full citizens, or "have-withs."

From East Brooklyn to South Texas, IAF-backed organizations have helped

people delete the “not” and add the “with.” East Brooklyn Congregations turned former ghettos into livable communities with thousands of affordable homes, while Valley Interfaith has made sure that roads and water lines reach Mexican-border neighborhoods. These and scores of other organizations have nurtured generations of local leaders who do not overreact to their critics, or re-enact old political dramas. These leaders act with purpose and secure policy changes that improve the lives of communities and individuals.

Democracy is as much a muscle as a value, and like any muscle, it needs to be exercised regularly. The approach to politics that IAF champions builds democratic strength at the community level. And it will take incredible strength to push away extremism and replace it with a new era of pragmatic radicalism.

Mr. Gecan is a co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation and author of “Going Public: An Organizer’s Guide to Citizen Action.”

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