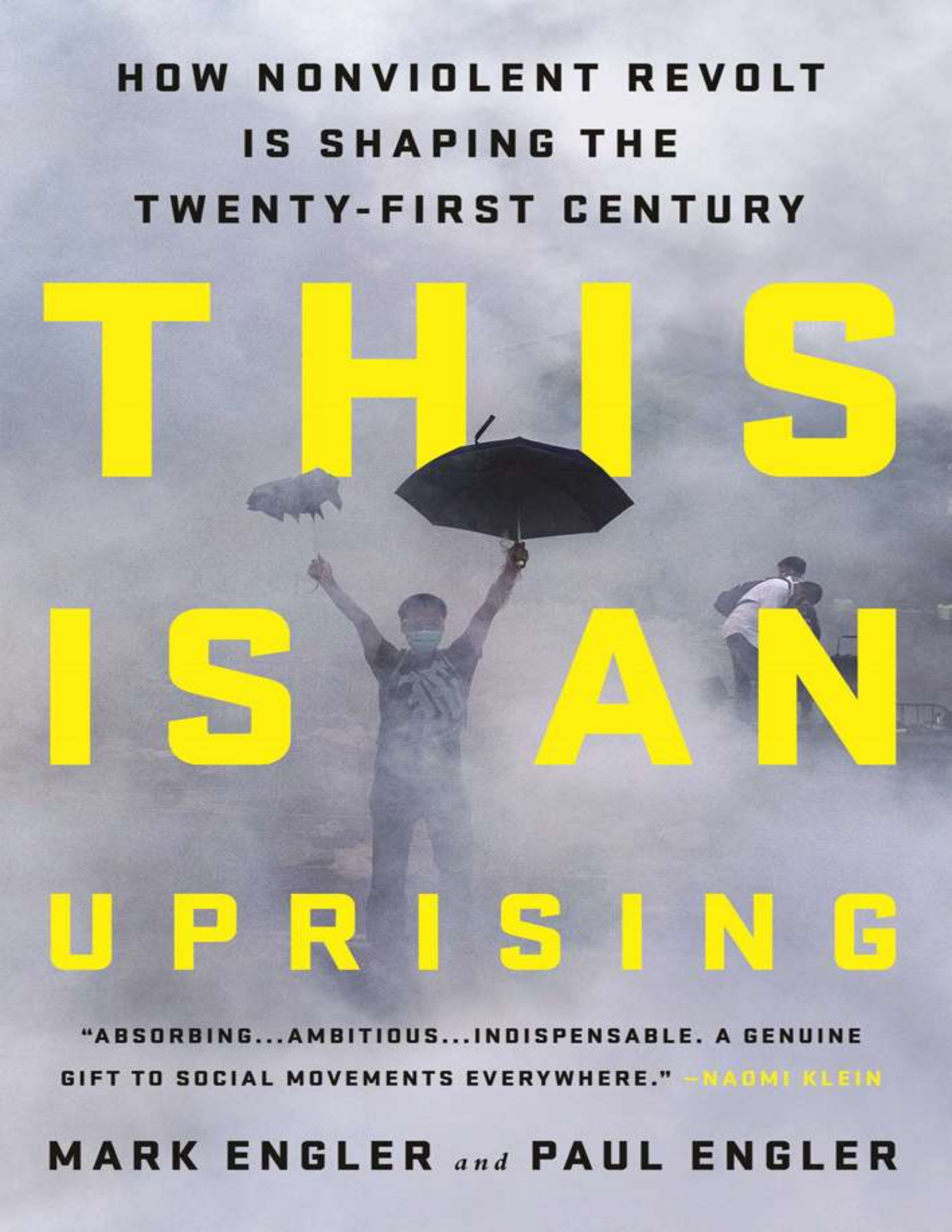
HOW NONVIOLENT REVOLT IS SHAPING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

THIS IS AN UPRISING



"ABSORBING...AMBITIOUS...INDISPENSABLE. A GENUINE GIFT TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS EVERYWHERE." —NAOMI KLEIN

MARK ENGLER *and* PAUL ENGLER

CHAPTER TWO

STRUCTURE AND MOVEMENT

TWO SCHOOLS STAND at opposite poles of thinking about how grassroots forces can promote social change. Each has a champion.

One, Saul Alinsky, is widely regarded as the founding father of community organizing; having cut his teeth bringing people together in the ethnically diverse neighborhoods near Chicago's meatpacking district in the 1930s, he would become an author and troublemaker of national renown by the start of the social upheavals of the 1960s. The other, Frances Fox Piven, is an eminent sociologist who played an influential role in the welfare rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and who subsequently led a successful push to make it easier for Americans to register to vote.

The two have been grouped together in sometimes creative ways, most prominently by conservative commentator Glenn Beck. In early 2010, the popular radio host and Fox News personality had emerged as a champion of the Tea Party movement, and he was at the height of his influence. One of Beck's preoccupations was mapping the workings of the Left, often making use of impressively arcane diagrams. During one program, he unveiled for viewers the "tree of radicalism and revolution." The chart laid out what he imagined to be a vast left-wing conspiracy to take over the nation. At the root of the tree, Beck placed Alinsky. Meanwhile, on the tree's trunk, he

wrote Piven's name—along with that of her late husband and coauthor, Richard Cloward. Although Piven was in her late seventies at the time, Beck argued that she was not merely "an enemy of the Constitution" but one of the "nine most dangerous people in the world."[1]

Beck's paranoid theories contained too many errors and unfounded leaps to easily enumerate. Nevertheless, he was correct to identify both Alinsky and Piven as groundbreaking social movement thinkers. Where he went wrong was in concluding that they were part of a unified and malevolent scheme. In truth, what may be most notable when considering Piven and Alinsky together are not their commonalities but rather the ways in which they disagreed. Although the two have similar commitments to grassroots democracy, they promoted distinctly different methods for creating change. As a result, their followers have sometimes found themselves sharply at odds with one another.

Alinsky was a guru in the art of the slow, incremental building of community groups. Like organizers in the labor movement, his approach focused on person-by-person recruitment, careful leadership development, and the creation of stable institutional bodies that could leverage the power of their members over time. As an organizing tradition, this approach can be described as one based on "structure."

Piven, in contrast, has become a leading defender of unruly broad-based disobedience, undertaken outside the confines of any formal organization. She emphasizes the disruptive power of mass mobilizations that coalesce quickly, draw in participants not previously involved in organizing, and leave established elites scrambling to adjust to a new political landscape. In contrast to the structure-based approach of labor unions and Alinskyite groups, her tradition can be dubbed "mass protest."

The future of social change in this country may well involve integrating these approaches—figuring out how the strengths of both structure and mass protest can be used in tandem—so that outbreaks of widespread revolt complement long-term organizing. The emerging field of civil resistance offers considerable potential in addressing this task, providing tools that can help to create a synthesis between competing traditions. But for that to happen, it is helpful to recognize the unique histories and habits of each

school and to understand how the rift between them emerged in the first place.



Saul Alinsky passed away in 1972, and although his landmark book *Rules for Radicals* is now nearly forty-five years old, the principles that emerged from Alinsky's work have influenced every generation of community-based activists since. In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky presented a variety of tactical guidelines—ideas expressed by memorable quotes such as "ridicule is man's most potent weapon" and "power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have." But Alinsky's most enduring principles are not contained in such aphorisms. Rather, they are embedded in a set of organizational practices and predispositions, a defined approach to building power at the local level. Hang around social change campaigns for a while and you will no doubt be exposed to the laws of Chicago-style community organizing. In 2014, veteran labor journalist David Moberg described several of them: "Don't talk ideology, just issues. . . . Build organizations, not movements. . . . Focus on neighborhoods and on concrete, winnable goals."[2]

Out of such principles has come a far-flung web of social change groups. The organization Alinsky himself founded, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), is now a national network with more than sixty affiliates, spread over some twenty-two states. Moreover, Alinsky's direct influence is felt in other organizing networks ranging from PICO, Direct Action and Research Training (DART) Center, USAction/Citizen Action, and the Gamaliel Foundation, to the former branches of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform (ACORN) and the current affiliates of National People's Action—whose member groups include Community Voices Heard in New York, Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts, and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. Collectively, these organizations claim several million members. Together they have won untold numbers of state and local victories around issues such as affordable housing, local hiring, fair lending, living wages, and community investment.

A Chicago native and son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Alinsky got his start organizing in the 1930s, inspired by CIO and United Mine Workers leader John L. Lewis. In spite of mentoring from Lewis, Alinsky was convinced that the labor movement had grown lethargic and that American democracy needed "people's organizations" based outside the workplace—citizens' groups with roots in local communities. In his first attempt to create such a group, he founded the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, an effort to organize those who lived behind the meatpacking plants featured in Upton Sinclair's muckraking 1906 novel *The Jungle.* To fight the slum conditions facing this neighborhood, Alinsky formed committees of local leaders, packed the offices of bureaucrats with hundreds of angry residents, and steered marches in front of the homes of local officials. It worked. "Many confrontations and several months later," author Mary Beth Rogers writes, "Back of the Yards claimed credit for new police patrols, street repairs, regular garbage collection, and lunch programs for 1,400 children."[3]

By 1940, with the help of funding from wealthy liberal Marshall Field III, Alinsky had created the IAF, tasked with spurring organization in other urban neighborhoods. In the 1950s, Alinsky and Fred Ross worked through one IAF-supported group, the Community Service Organization, to improve living conditions for Mexican Americans in California. There, Ross recruited a young organizer in San Jose named Cesar Chavez and another in Fresno named Dolores Huerta. (Only after years of training did Chavez and Huerta leave to form what would become the United Farm Workers.)

Among Alinsky's other prominent campaigns, he worked in the 1960s with black residents in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood to fight exploitative landlords and to challenge school overcrowding, and he would help community members in Rochester, New York, compel the Eastman Kodak Company to create a hiring program for African American workers.

Alinsky taught through stories, usually exaggerated, always entertaining. In 1971 writer Nat Hentoff stated, "At 62, Saul is the youngest man I've met in years."[4] *Playboy* interviewer Eric Norden agreed. "There is a tremendous vitality about Alinsky, a raw, combative ebullience, and a consuming curiosity about everything and everyone around him," Norden wrote. "Add to this a mordant wit, a monumental ego coupled with an

ability to laugh at himself and the world in general, and you begin to get the measure of the man."[5]

Alinsky's first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, became a best seller when published in 1946. It blasted liberal-minded charity efforts and called for an indigenous American radicalism based in citizen action. *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* came in 1971, near the end of Alinsky's life, and remains popular. Early in the Obama era, it was circulated by Republican Dick Armey's organization Freedom-Works and handed out to Tea Party members who were curious about the book's methods, even if they were opposed to its goals. The book's first chapter begins: "What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be. *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away."[6]

Frank Bardacke, author of a sweeping history of the United Farm Workers, recounts how Alinsky's principles for building power solidified into an identifiable organizing tradition: "With Saul as the fountainhead, community organizing has become a codified discipline, with core theoretical propositions, recognized heresies, disciples, fallen neophytes, and splits." Bardacke quotes Heather Booth, founder of the Midwest Academy, an Alinskyite training center for organizers, who calls Alinsky "our Sigmund Freud."[7]

"What Booth means is that both Freud and Alinsky founded schools of thought," Bardacke explains, "but there is another, deeper link: the role of training and lineage. Just as psychoanalysts trace their pedigree back to the grand master (they were either analyzed by Freud or by someone who was analyzed by Freud, or by someone who was analyzed by someone who . . .), so Alinskyite and neo-Alinskyite organizers trace their training back to Alinsky himself."

Beyond spawning networks of community organizing groups that reach across the United States, the tradition has spread internationally, with organizing trainings taking place in Europe, South Africa, and the Philippines. Each of the prominent networks now active, writes sociologist

David Walls, is “indebted, in greater or lesser degree, to Alinsky and his early organizing programs in Chicago through IAF.”[8]

Well after his death, Saul Alinsky would become known for his indirect influence on prominent figures inside Washington, DC. In the 1980s, Barack Obama, then a recent college graduate, began his professional life as an organizer in an Alinskyite community organization, an initiative on the South Side of Chicago known as the Developing Communities Project. Hillary Clinton, too, took interest in the organizing guru. Her undergraduate thesis at Wellesley College was entitled “There Is Only the Fight: An Analysis of the Alinsky Model.” These links eventually attracted the attention of not only Glenn Beck but also other right-wing pundits. Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, for example, regularly used Alinsky as a foil on the campaign trail in 2012.

These beltway associations are ironic, given that Alinsky built his reputation as an antiestablishment radical who largely avoided electoral politics. The Alinskyite tradition held that community organizations should be pragmatic, nonpartisan, and ideologically diverse—that they should put pressure on all politicians, not express loyalty to any. Alinsky himself was not antistate. As sociologist P. David Finks writes, for him “the problem was not so much getting government off our backs as getting it off its rear end.” But the focus of Alinsky’s efforts was squarely outside the electoral arena. Although a variety of community organizing networks, over the decades, have experimented with taking stands in elections (as did Alinksy himself), the IAF holds a lingering pride in its “independent, nonpartisan” status. The group’s desire is to recruit members from across the political spectrum in any given community, not merely to engage the usual suspects of progressive activism with appeals to an ideologically coded platform of beliefs.[9]

Such “nonpartisan” avoidance of ideology relates to perhaps the most interesting precept in the Alinskyite tradition: a stance that distances community organizing from mass mobilizations. As Rutgers sociology professor and former ACORN organizer Arlene Stein wrote in 1986, “Community organizers today tend generally to shun the term *movement*, preferring to see themselves engaged in building *organization*.”[10]

Why would someone promoting social change see themselves as wary of movements?

There are several reasons, and the way in which the terms “movement” and “organization” are understood by Alinskyites connects to some defining aspects of their model. For Ed Chambers, Alinsky’s successor as IAF director, an aversion to movements is a part of his long-term commitment to community members. As he writes in his book *Roots for Radicals*, “We play to win. That’s one of the distinctive features of the IAF: We don’t lead everyday, ordinary people into public failures, and we’re not building movements. Movements go in and out of existence. As good as they are, you can’t sustain them. Everyday people need incremental success over months and sometimes years.”[11]

Alinsky, too, saw a danger in expecting quick upheavals. He argued, “Effective organization is thwarted by the desire for instant and dramatic change. . . . To build a powerful organization takes time. It is tedious, but that’s the way the game is played—if you want to play and not just yell, ‘Kill the umpire.’” Before entering a neighborhood, Alinsky planned for a sustained engagement. He would not hire an organizer unless he had raised enough money to pay for two or more years of the staffer’s salary.[12]

Beyond setting expectations for time frame, a dedication to “organizations not movements” is reflected in several other Alinskyite norms. The tradition’s connection to churches and other established institutions is one. Its selection of bottom-up demands rather than high-profile national issues is another. And its attitude toward volunteers and freelance activists is a third.

First, Alinsky believed in identifying local centers of power, particularly churches, and using them as bases for community groups. The modern IAF continues to follow this principle, serving as a model of “faith-based” organizing.

Second, instead of picking a galvanizing, morally loaded, and possibly divisive national issue to organize around—as might a mass movement—Alinsky advocated action around narrow local demands. Mark Warren’s *Dry Bones Rattling*, a study of the IAF, explains: “As opposed to mobilizing around a set of predetermined issues, the IAF brings residents together first to discuss the needs of their community and to find a common ground for

action.” Practicing what is sometimes called “stop sign organizing,” those working in this vein look for concrete, winnable projects—such as demanding that city officials place a stop sign at a dangerous intersection in a neighborhood. The idea is that small victories build local capabilities, give participants a sense of their power, and spur more ambitious action.[13]

They also meet some of the immediate needs of the community, far preferable, in Alinsky’s view, to the far-off calls for freedom and justice that regularly emanate from social movements. Throughout his career, Alinsky spoke the language of self-interest. He looked to build democratic power among people seeking to improve the conditions of their own lives. He was suspicious of volunteer activists who were motivated by abstract values or ideology, individuals drawn to high-profile moral crusades. Such suspicion would become a third norm in the Alinskyite tradition related to its distrust of “movements.”

Ed Chambers argues, “Activists and movement types are mobilizers and entertainers, not democratic organizers. Their script is their persona and their cause. They tend to be overinterested in themselves. Their understanding of politicalness is superficial or media-driven.” Moreover, Chambers contends, movement activists’ expectations for change are far too short-term: “Their time frame is immediate. ‘What do we want?’ ‘Freedom.’ ‘When do we want it?’ ‘Now!’ ‘No justice, no peace,’” he explains dismissively. “Movement activists appeal to youth, frustrated idealists, and cynical ideologues, ignoring the 80 percent of moderates who comprise the world as it is. . . . Organizing is generational, not here today, gone tomorrow.”[14]

Chambers’s view may seem harsh, but it was common among those drawn to community organizing in the early years. As Stein explains, “The revival of Alinsky-style organizations in the 1970s and 1980s often defined itself against the social movements of the previous decade—especially the civil rights, women’s, and student antiwar movements—which it tended to view as promoting collective identity formation over the achievement of strategic goals.”[15]

The community organizers who took up Alinsky’s mantle were burnt on short-term protest, and they were willing to pursue a less glamorous route to

change. What did they want? Lasting, community-based reform. When did they want it? Over the long haul.



On June 5, 1966, James Meredith, a former Air Force serviceman who had been the first African American student to attend the University of Mississippi, set out on a one-man “walk against fear” in the South. He planned to cover the more than two hundred miles between Memphis, Tennessee, and Jackson, Mississippi. On the second day of his march, however, a sniper’s shotgun blast left Meredith sprawling on the highway. Wounded, he was evacuated to a nearby hospital.

As chance would have it, Meredith’s hospital in Memphis became the site of an intriguing encounter that would highlight the tensions between “organization” and “movement.” When news broke of Meredith’s shooting, a variety of organizers and civil rights figures promptly assembled to show their support for the wounded activist and to make a plan for completing his march. Two of those who arrived at the hospital were Martin Luther King Jr. and Nicholas von Hoffman, a close Alinsky lieutenant.

In Memphis, King pulled von Hoffman aside for a brief conversation about the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s work in Chicago. The previous year, the SCLC had come to Alinsky’s home turf to mount its first Northern civil rights drive. “He did not say so, but I had the impression he was worried about it,” von Hoffman writes.[16]

The organizer offered King his advice about waging a campaign in Chicago: “I told him I thought it could succeed if he was prepared for trench warfare, which would demand tight, tough organization to take on the Daley operation,” von Hoffman writes. “I added it could not be done in less than two years.”

“He listened,” von Hoffman further notes. “I could not tell if he heard it before and didn’t believe it, or if it was so out of his previous experience he didn’t appreciate how decisive [the mayor’s] organizational advantages were. Then he said we ought to talk again, but it never happened.”

As the encounter suggested, the Alinskyites in Chicago were not impressed by King’s approach. “Organizing is akin to stringing beads to

make a necklace," von Hoffman argues. "It demands patience, persistence, and some kind of design. King's campaign in Chicago was short on beads and bereft of design." Von Hoffman regarded King as a "one-trick pony" who relied too heavily on media-seeking marches and "dramatic gestures" like moving his family into an apartment in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. He did not believe that the SCLC's team had demonstrated the ability to build "the stable, ongoing kinds of organizations which get things done inch by inch, year by year."

Von Hoffman saw the outsiders King brought into Chicago as "a hodgepodge of young white idealists, college kids, and summer soldiers, most of whom had no knowledge of the people they were supposed to recruit." He noted the contrast with his tradition: "It was the antithesis of an Alinsky operation where outside volunteers were generally shooed away not only because they got in the way but also because they didn't have any skin in the game," he wrote. "Laudable as it is to volunteer to help other people wrestle with their problems, effective organizations are built with people who have direct and personal interest in their success."

This type of analysis reflected Saul Alinsky's broader critique of the SCLC's work. In a 1965 interview, Alinsky argued, "The Achilles' Heel of the civil rights movement is the fact that it has not developed into a stable, disciplined, mass-based power organization." He added, with King as his unnamed subject: "Periodic mass euphoria around a charismatic leader is not an organization. It's just the initial stage of agitation."[17]

It was not just with civil rights campaigners that Alinsky and his acolytes would clash in the 1960s; they also butted heads with the era's student activists. For Alinksy, the decision to stress the importance of strong organization was, in part, an effort to bridge a generation gap that had become glaringly evident by the middle of that decade. Those yelling "kill the umpire," in his estimation, were the members of the era's youth-driven New Left.

Alinsky felt that elders his age were partially responsible for the youths' ignorance. In writing *Rules for Radicals*, he sought to communicate with less experienced activists whom he saw as suffering from a lack of mentoring—the result of a missing generation of organizers. Of his own, older cohort, Alinsky argued that too few had made it through the

anticommunist witch hunts of the 1950s. Of those who did survive McCarthyism, he wrote, “there were even fewer whose understanding and insights had developed beyond the dialectical materialism of orthodox Marxism. My fellow radicals who were supposed to pass on the torch of experience and insights to a new generation just were not there.”[18]

Alinsky believed that, as a consequence, young leftists were too easily seduced by quick fixes. In an afterword to a 1969 reissue of his first book *Reveille for Radicals*, he wrote, “The approach of so much of the present generation is so fractured with ‘confrontations’ and crises as ends in themselves that their activities are not actions but a discharge of energy which, like a fireworks spectacle, briefly lights up the skies and then vanishes into the void.”[19]

The creation of an alternative methodology—what Stein describes as “a highly structured organizing model specifying step-by-step guidelines for creating neighborhood organizations”—was an understandable response, and one that has shown great strengths. Patient base building and membership recruitment, long-term strategy and leadership development, incremental wins. Each of these ingredients would contribute to a lasting and influential model for building grassroots power, a means of using the strength of “organized people” to combat the influence of “organized money,” as Alinsky often put it.[20]

The question is whether the model, over time, has grown too inflexible—whether principles that Alinsky originally meant as loose guidelines have since hardened into rigid laws in the decades since his death—and whether community organizations, as a result, have missed opportunities to harness powerful outbreaks of popular discontent.



For the most part, the work of social change is a slow process. As Alinsky wisely counseled, if you want to see your efforts produce results, it helps to have a long-term commitment. And yet, sometimes things move more quickly. Every once in a while we see outbursts of mass protest, periods of peak activity when the accepted rules of political affairs seem to be suspended.

In the words of sociologist Frances Fox Piven, these are extraordinary moments when ordinary people “rise up in anger and hope, defy the rules that ordinarily govern their lives, and, by doing so, disrupt the workings of the institutions in which they are enmeshed.” The impact of these uprisings can be profound. As Piven writes, “The drama of such events, combined with the disorder that results, propels new issues to the center of political debate” and drives forward reforms as panicked “political leaders try to restore order.”[21]

Piven, the eighty-two-year-old Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, has made pioneering contributions to the study of how people who lack both financial resources and influence in conventional politics can nevertheless create momentous revolts. Few scholars have done as much to describe how widespread disruptive action can change history, and few have offered more provocative suggestions about the times when movements—instead of crawling forward with incremental demands—can break into full sprint.

Piven grew up in the 1930s in Jackson Heights, Queens, a child of working-class parents who had emigrated from Belarus and who struggled to adjust to life in America. As a precocious fifteen-year-old, she earned a scholarship to attend the University of Chicago. But, by her own account, Piven was not a serious student at that point, avoiding reading and relying on her skill at taking multiple choice tests to pass courses. She spent most of her time waitressing at late-night restaurants such as Hobby House and Stouffer’s, hustling to cover the living expenses not provided for in her tuition scholarship.[22]

In the early 1960s Piven moved back to New York City. It was only after working as a researcher and helping to support rent strikes with the Mobilization for Youth, an early antipoverty group on the Lower East Side, that she was ultimately hired to teach at Columbia University’s school of social work. At the Mobilization for Youth, she also met sociologist Richard Cloward, who became her husband and lifelong collaborator. (Cloward passed away in 2001.)

“A lot of the people who became welfare rights organizers were entranced with Alinsky,” Piven says. “And, as I worked with them, I began

to develop a kind of critique." In one of their first major articles together, written in 1963, Piven and Cloward made an argument that reflected what they had observed at the Mobilization. They contended that, since "the poor have few resources for regular political influence," their ability to prompt social change depends on the disruptive power of tactics such as "militant boycotts, sit-ins, traffic tie-ups, and rent strikes." What was important was not the organizational structures these activities built, but the willingness of participants to interrupt business as usual. Protest movements, they explained, gain real leverage only by causing "commotion among bureaucrats, excitement in the media, dismay among influential segments of the community, and strain for political leaders."[23]

Piven has been refining and elaborating this thesis ever since. Indeed, it was only after a decade and a half of further work that the argument would make its most controversial appearance, in 1977's *Poor People's Movements*. In the still-young world of academic social movement theory, this book would be recognized as a daring and original intervention—and also, in many ways, as a heresy.



Once a fringe radical, Alinsky had won significant influence in organizing circles by the 1970s, and likeminded scholars, focused on the importance of popular organizations in leveraging social change, were making inroads in academia as well. Today, social movement theory is a well-established area of focus within sociology and political science. During the Vietnam era, however, it was just barely gaining a foothold in the academy. Stanford professor Doug McAdam tells the story of how, as a student activist in the late 1960s, he sought out classes on social movements at his university, searching the catalogue of the political science department. None were listed. When he finally did find discussion of movement activism, it took place in a very different setting than he had expected: namely, in a course on abnormal psychology.

At the time, McAdam writes, "movement participation was seen not as a form of rational political behavior but a reflection of aberrant personality types and irrational forms of 'crowd behavior.'" As Piven and Cloward put

it in a 1991 essay, movements were seen "as mindless eruptions lacking either coherence or continuity with organized social life."[24]

In the 1970s, this view began losing its hold, and something closer to the perspective of structure-based organizers began to take its place. Graduate schools became infused with a generation of New Left scholars who had direct ties to civil rights, antiwar, and women's liberation movements. Coming from a more sympathetic standpoint, they sought to explain social movements as rational forms of collective action. They argued that protests should be seen as politics by other means for people who had been shut out of the system. A leading stream of thought that emerged in this milieu was known as "resource mobilization theory."

In many respects, resource mobilization served as an academic analogue to Alinsky's vision of building power through the steady, persistent creation of community organization. It also lined up with the activities of the labor movement. Scholars in the resource mobilization school put social movement organizations at the center of their understanding of how protest groups effect change. As McAdam and W. Richard Scott write, resource mobilization theorists "stressed that movements, if they are to be sustained for any length of time, require some form of organization: leadership, administrative structure, incentives for participation, and a means for acquiring resources and support."[25]

This viewpoint gradually gained ground. By the early 1980s, "resource mobilization had become a dominant background paradigm for sociologists studying social movements," writes political scientist Sidney Tarrow. Although other schools of thought have since come into favor, McAdam and Hilary Schaffer Boudet argue that the biases and emphases of resource mobilization still guide "the lion's share of work in the field."[26]



When Piven and Cloward published *Poor People's Movements* in 1977, its ideas about disruptive power—which were not rooted in formal organizations—represented a direct challenge to ascendant strains of academic theory. More than that, they also clashed with much of the actual organizing taking place in the country, whether spearheaded by Alinskyite

organizations, labor unions, or socialist cadre groups. As the authors wrote in an introduction to their 1979 paperback edition, the book's "critique of organizational efforts offended central tenets of left doctrine."[27]

Their position, however, was based on solid evidence. Piven and Cloward mounted their heterodox assault by means of four detailed case studies. These involved investigation into some of the more significant protest movements in twentieth-century America: the movement of unemployed workers early in the Great Depression, the industrial strikes that gave rise to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) later in the 1930s, the civil rights movement in the South in the 1950s and 1960s, and the activism of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s and 1970s. As Piven would later summarize their conclusions, the experience of these revolts "showed that poor people could achieve little through the routines of conventional electoral and interest group politics." Therefore, what remained as their key tool "was what we called disruption, the breakdowns that resulted when people defied the rules and institutional routines that ordinarily governed life."[28]

A structure-based organizer such as Saul Alinsky would not object to building power from outside of electoral politics. Nor would he disagree with the idea of using boisterous action to make a stink. After all, he was a great showman and tactician of disorderly troublemaking. But Alinsky would have sharply parted ways with Piven and Cloward on the need for organization to support change. *Poor People's Movements* irked both resource mobilization theorists and on-the-ground organizers by contending not only that formal structures failed to produce disruptive outbreaks but also that these structures actually detracted from mass protest when it did occur.

Piven and Cloward's case studies offered a take on past movements that was very different from standard accounts. Of the labor activism that exploded during the Great Depression, they wrote that, contrary to the most cherished beliefs of union organizers, "For the most part strikes, demonstrations, and sit-downs spread during the mid-1930s despite existing unions rather than because of them." Their studies showed that "with virtually no exceptions, the union leaders worked to limit strikes, not to escalate them."[29]

They saw a similar pattern in the civil rights movement. There, the authors wrote, “defiant blacks forced concessions as a result of the disruptive effects of mass civil disobedience”—not through formal organization.[30]

Piven and Cloward acknowledged that such conclusions failed “to conform to doctrinal prescriptions regarding constituencies, strategies, and demands.” Nevertheless, they were willing to pick a fight on this point, writing that “popular insurgency does not proceed by someone else’s rules or hopes; it has its own logic and direction.”[31]

Poor People’s Movements offered a variety of reasons why, when people were roused to indignation and moved to defy authority, “organizers not only failed to seize the opportunity presented by the rise of unrest, they typically acted in ways that blunted or curbed the disruptive force which lower-class people were sometimes able to mobilize.” Most centrally, the organizers in their case studies opted against escalating the mass protests “because they [were] preoccupied with trying to build and sustain embryonic formal organizations in the sure conviction that these organizations [would] enlarge and become powerful.”[32]

Across the four different movements that Piven and Cloward examined, organizers showed similar instincts—and these instincts betrayed them. The organizers viewed formal structures as essential, seeing them as necessary for marshaling collective resources, enabling strategic decision making, and ensuring institutional continuity. But what the organizers did not appreciate was that, although bureaucratic institutions may have benefits, they also bring constraints. Because organizations have to worry about self-preservation, they become averse to risk taking. Because they enjoy some access to formal avenues of power, they tend to overestimate what they can accomplish from inside the system. As a result, they forget the disruptive energy that propelled them to power to begin with, and so they often end up playing a counterproductive role. As Piven says of the labor movement, “Mass strikes lead to unions. But unions are not the big generators of mass strikes.”[33]

Poor People’s Movements also made an argument about the pace of change, challenging the idea that gains for the poor were won through

steady, incremental effort. Piven and Cloward stressed that, whatever course of action they take, organizers have a limited ability to shape history. Emphasizing the economic and political causes underlying social phenomena, they argued that popular uprising "flows from historically specific circumstances." The routines of daily life, the habits of obedience people develop, and the threat of reprisals against those who act out—all of these function to keep disruptive potentials in check most of the time.[34]

Periods when the poor do become defiant are exceptional, but they also have a defining impact. Piven and Cloward saw history as punctuated by disruptive outbreaks. Instead of change occurring gradually, they believed, it came in bursts—through "Big Bang" moments, as Piven calls them in her 2006 book, *Challenging Authority*. Such a period can erupt quickly but then fade just as rapidly. While its reverberations within the political system have lasting significance, "insurgency is always short-lived," Piven and Cloward explain. "Once it subsides and the people leave the streets, most of the organizations which it temporarily threw up . . . simply fade away."[35]



The divide between "structure" and "mass protest," or between long-term organization and disruptive uprisings, is by no means a matter of two individuals. Alinsky and Piven provide a useful glimpse into this divide. But, in truth, it runs deep through social movement history, appearing with surprising regularity between different groups of grassroots activists in diverse countries and time periods.

With regard to organizing in the 1950s and 1960s, sociologist Charles Payne has argued that the US civil rights movement consisted of two distinct strains of activity: one, which he calls the "community *mobilizing* tradition," was a lineage "focused on large-scale, relatively short-term public events" such as the famous campaigns in Birmingham and Selma. This strain relied on the energy of mass protest. Payne contrasts this approach with the "community *organizing* tradition," a structure-based lineage associated with the gradual base building and local leadership development carried out by the likes of legendary civil rights organizer Ella Baker.[36]

Sometimes the tension between these strains could erupt into heated disagreements. As Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader Stokley Carmichael would later write, “Organization vs. mobilization was always a serious problem, because every day-to-day tactical decision was affected by the strategic approach. Every one.”[37]

The divide produced notable arguments between the students in SNCC and King’s staff in the SCLC. By 1963, SNCC organizers, influenced by Baker, were making long-term commitments to building community organizations in sometimes remote outposts in the Deep South. These included places such as Lowndes County, Alabama, and small towns throughout Mississippi, which would famously become staging grounds for the voter registration drives of 1964’s Freedom Summer. The SNCC activists were critical of the SCLC, arguing that King’s group—by moving from city to city, producing media frenzies, and leaving locals to clean up the mess they left behind—did not do enough to cultivate lasting indigenous leadership. As Carmichael put it: “Here comes SCLC talking about mobilizing another two-week campaign, using our base and the magic of Dr. King’s name. They are going to bring in the cameras, the media, prominent people, politicians . . . turn the place upside down, and split.”[38]

The critique was accurate in highlighting how the SCLC’s mass mobilizations were generally short-lived and produced messy fallout for local organizations. However, as Project C showed, these public confrontations were also extraordinarily powerful, drawing national attention to the issue of racial prejudice, creating some of the movement’s most memorable images, and forcefully pushing forward federal legislation.

Stepping back, it is apparent that structure-based organizing and mass protest each have important strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, although Alinsky and Piven took clear sides in the debate between the two traditions, both had moments in which they recognized the value of the other lineage.

For its part, structure-based organizing is right to contend that mass mobilizations are often fleeting and that different types of organization are needed to institutionalize the progress made through periodic outbreaks of disruption. Critics of Piven and Cloward underscored this argument. Although *Poor People’s Movements* was quickly recognized as a milestone

in its field, the book also provoked some strongly negative reactions. One review dubbed it an "anti-organizational philippic"; another denounced the volume as a call for "blind militancy," hardly better than the abnormal psychology it aimed to replace.[39]

Because *Poor People's Movements* was a book full of polemical contentions, it is not surprising that it evoked strong reactions. However, Piven's life as a politically engaged citizen has suggested a more subtle appreciation of the benefits long-term organizations can offer. For many decades, Piven has had warm relations with Alinskyite groups. In 1984, Cloward and Piven wrote the foreword to a manual in this tradition; they praised *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing* by veteran activist Lee Staples as "an exemplary exposition of the knowledge and skills that grow out of community organizing." More recently, Piven celebrated ACORN as "the largest and most effective representative of poor and minority people in this country," lamenting that the Right's successful attacks against the organization produced an immense loss. Similarly, although *Poor People's Movements*, like much of the writing produced by the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, was critical of the ossifying character of big labor, it acknowledged the importance of unions in defending against the erosion of progress achieved during moments of peak mobilization. Throughout her career, Piven has been a consistent supporter of labor's more scrappy and militant organizing factions.[40]

Piven and Cloward were themselves involved in significant organizational advocacy. In the 1980s, the two formed an organization called Human SERVE, or Human Service Employees Registration and Voters Education, to promote voter registration in low-income communities. Their work was instrumental in securing passage of the Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the "Motor Voter Act," which allows people to register to vote in welfare agencies and when getting driver's licenses. When President Clinton signed the bill into law, Piven spoke at the White House ceremony.

Although the contributions of structure are different from those of mass protest, Piven holds out the possibility for different groups of participants to specialize in different types of dissident activity. "Organizations are not

movements," she says. "But organizations can institutionalize and legalize the gains won through disruptive mobilization."[41]



The structure-based organizers of the Alinskyite tradition had a point: mass protest movements frequently fail to create means of preserving progress over the long term. But *Poor People's Movements* had criticisms of their tradition that were equally valid.

Piven has been astute in identifying a kind of shortsightedness that is common among many longtime organizers. When moments of widespread defiance arise—outbreaks such as the vast immigrant rights protests of 2006 or the emergence of Occupy encampments—those from the worlds of conventional labor organizing, Alinskyite groups, and mainstream political campaigning are often mystified, and sometimes they are downright hostile. Because mass mobilizations fall outside their established models for bringing about change, they commonly respond with suspicion. Thus, at the very moment when social movements are most visible on the public stage, these organizers offer little constructive input to help mass actions grow larger or to garner greater public sympathy.

Over the decades, a variety of organizers in the Alinskyite lineage have challenged such inflexibility in their tradition's guiding tenets. As one recent example, George Goehl, the executive director of National People's Action, has encouraged the groups in his network to embrace bigger-picture vision and to form ties with emergent movements. It is possible that Alinsky himself would have supported this move. Looking back at the origins of many foundational principles associated with community organizing, it becomes clear that he might have pressed for reconsideration of certain commandments that have grown hallowed since the 1960s.[42]

In other words, if Alinsky were alive today, he might well be breaking his own rules.

It turns out that many of the precepts of community organizing come less from Alinsky himself and more from his successors' subsequent codification of his ideas. After Alinsky's death, IAF leaders Ed Chambers, Richard Harmon, and Ernesto Cortes sat down to assess the factors that

contributed to the failure of some earlier organizing drives and to refine their methodology for building community groups. In their assessment, they honored Alinsky's innovations but also offered criticisms. Although the founding father had planted seeds for organizations throughout the country, only a handful survived for longer than three years. As IAF organizer Michael Gecan writes in his book *Going Public*, "Alinsky was extraordinarily effective as a tactician, writer, speaker, and gadfly. He was the first theorist and exponent of citizen organizing in urban communities." But, "While Alinsky had many gifts and strengths . . . he did not create organizations that endured."[43]

This challenge would be left to his protégés, in particular Ed Chambers, who took over as head of the IAF in 1972. "That was Chambers's critical contribution to the world of citizens organizing and to America as a whole," Gecan writes. "He had a talent for teaching people how to organize power that lasted." Chambers systemized the Alinsky model in several key ways. He formalized processes for recruiting and grooming organizers. He improved working conditions among staffers to reduce burnout. He relied less on large foundations for funding. And he strengthened ties to faith-based groups. Other networks of community organizations further developed the model: they brought local groups into national coalitions. And they created their own training programs to refine and spread the rules of grassroots power building.

In many respects, these were necessary changes. Yet they may have come at the cost of some of Alinsky's original creativity. In their focus on building for the long term and creating strong organizational structures, subsequent community organizing leaders have grown less sensitive than their tradition's founder to the potential of exceptional moments of mass protest.

In his organizing practice, Alinsky was far less rigid than the "rules" attributed to him might suggest. Nicholas von Hoffman, in a memoir of his time with Alinsky, describes his former mentor as "one of the least dogmatic and most flexible of men. Alinsky believed that liberty was to be redefined and re-won by every generation according to its circumstances and the demands of the time." For his part, Alinsky liked to tell a story, possibly apocryphal, of sitting in on a university exam designed for students

of community organization. “Three of the questions were on the philosophy and motivations of Saul Alinsky,” he claimed. “I answered two of them incorrectly!”[44]

Alinsky’s flexibility, at least during a few vital moments, extended into his take on mass mobilization. During one such moment in his career, he saw the need to integrate the energy of a movement uprising into the work of one of his community organizations.

In May 1961, von Hoffman was organizing under Alinsky’s direction in Chicago’s Woodlawn neighborhood when he was contacted by a young activist named Terry Sullivan. A devout Catholic and aspiring journalist originally from Denver, the twenty-three-year-old Sullivan had previously volunteered with the community group that von Hoffman was trying to build. Since then, Sullivan had joined a handful of other young whites in traveling to the South to participate in an innovative and potentially dangerous civil rights campaign being sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—an effort known as the “Freedom Rides.”[45]

In 1961, the Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of interstate transit systems had been ignored throughout much of the South—much like long-standing federal measures guaranteeing black Southerners the right to vote. Seating on buses run by commercial operators such as Trailways and Greyhound remained separated by race, as did bus station waiting rooms and restaurants.[46] The idea behind the Freedom Rides was to challenge this illegal discrimination. The first group of riders consisted of six white passengers and seven African Americans, led by CORE director James Farmer. After months of planning, these activists departed on two buses from Washington, DC, on May 4, 1961.

On the tenth day of the ride, May 14, the Freedom Riders crossed state lines into Alabama. In coordination with local police, one hundred Ku Klux Klan members attacked the first bus just outside the city of Anniston. Accusing the Freedom Riders of “race-mixing” and “Communistic plots,” Klansmen slashed the bus’s tires and firebombed its back end while holding the front door shut. Just when they thought the bus was going to explode, the vigilantes holding the door ran off, allowing the riders to spill out, gasping for air. As the activists called for water and protection, Klansmen instead attacked. Highway patrolmen on the scene allowed the melee to

proceed for several minutes before intervening, standing by as locals with baseball bats clubbed riders who were crawling on the ground, still gagging on the smoke in their lungs. Finally, one patrolman ended the assault by firing a pistol into the air and telling the mob casually, “You’ve had your fun, now go home.” One of the few bystanders who came to assist the riders, a twelve-year-old white Anniston resident, later described it as “like a scene from hell.” Years later, she would say, “It was the worst suffering I’d ever heard.”[47]

With the first bus rendered a charred shell outside of Anniston, the second bus continued to Birmingham. There, it was attacked by the Klan and local white vigilantes, egged on by police commissioner Bull Connor. Anticipating the riders’ arrival, the local Klan called on members from across the state to convene and greet the bus. Connor had communicated that they would have a fifteen-minute “grace period” to confront the Freedom Riders, during which authorities would look the other way. A mob of hundreds, armed with iron pipes, was ready to take advantage of this offer. As civil rights activists entered the city’s bus terminal, the vigilantes pounced. CBS News reporter Howard K. Smith witnessed the violence: “They knocked one man, a white man, down at my feet and they beat him and kicked him until his face was a bloody red pulp.” Charles Person, one of the riders most seriously injured, required fifty-three stitches on his head after being beaten with a lead pipe, and his injuries resulted in a permanent knot at the base of his skull.[48]

Descriptions of the attacks and images of the burned bus quickly made national and even international news. Organizers issued calls for fresh volunteers, black and white, from across the country to continue the rides, and they received a strong response. Over the next three weeks, waves of new buses crossed the Deep South. Amid the escalating drama, Sullivan made a long-distance, collect call from New Orleans to Chicago, reaching von Hoffman at the Woodlawn community organization. Sullivan indicated that several Freedom Riders were interested in making a public appearance in the North, and he requested that von Hoffman’s group host an event.

Von Hoffman was initially hesitant. He was doubtful that the event would advance local organizing and mindful of previous civil rights rallies in Chicago that drew only a handful of picketers. Yet he arranged for a talk

to be held in a large gymnasium in Saint Cyril's Church. As Alinsky biographer Sanford Horwitt writes, "On a Friday night, two hours before the program was to start, the gym was empty and von Hoffman was nervous—his initial fears seemed about to be confirmed. An hour later, an elderly couple arrived, and then, to von Hoffman's total amazement, so many people turned up that there was no room left in the gym, in the foyer, or on the stairs."[49]

Von Hoffman arranged for loudspeakers to broadcast the talk to the hundreds of people in the streets outside the venue. Later, he left the event reeling. Far more people had come than his group could have possibly mobilized through its organizational structures, and the topic had generated a profound energy in the community. He woke up Alinsky with a middle-of-the-night phone call and explained what happened. Von Hoffman said, "I think that we should toss out everything we are doing organizationally and work on the premise that this is the moment of the whirlwind, that we are no longer organizing but guiding a social movement."[50]

To his surprise, Alinsky responded by saying, "You're right. Get on it tomorrow."

The Woodlawn organization subsequently held its own version of the Freedom Rides—a bus caravan to register black voters. The event, Horwitt recounts, produced "the largest single voter-registration ever at City Hall," startling the city's powerbrokers. It generated much greater publicity than Woodlawn's typical actions, and it set the stage for further civil rights activism by the group.[51]

Alinsky understood something important when he embraced "the moment of the whirlwind." He saw that using mass mobilization to produce spikes in social unrest is a process that follows a different set of rules than conventional organizing. Many of its principles—embracing demands with wide symbolic resonance, channeling energy and participation from a broad public rather than a carefully cultivated membership, and being willing to present issues in moral and visionary terms—are the opposite of the principles that drive local community organizing. And yet Alinsky was willing to experiment with their possibilities.

One reason structure-based organizers are typically wary of movement mobilizations is that the workings of disruptive power are often murky. Can outbreaks of mass defiance really be intentionally triggered and magnified? Advocates like Piven give little sense of how. And this silence contributes to the notion that mass mobilizations owe more to the zeitgeist of an era than to calculated human effort.

Poor People's Movements is visionary in recognizing the explosive potential of bottom-up defiance. At times, it seems almost prophetic in anticipating the course of the uprisings like Occupy and the Arab Spring. But whereas, on one hand, the book appears to encourage such mass mobilization, it stubbornly refuses, on the other, to serve as a guidebook for future action. In fact, because it asserts that activists' best-laid plans more often than not are doomed to failure, it threatens to rob people of their agency altogether. If, as Piven and Cloward argue, "protest wells up in response to momentous changes in the institutional order" and "is not created by organizers or leaders," what are those seeking social change to do with themselves?

In its conclusion, *Poor People's Movements* offered a qualified call to arms: "One can never predict with certainty when the 'heavings and rumblings of the social foundations' will force up large-scale defiance," Piven and Cloward wrote. "But if organizers and leaders want to help those movements emerge, they must always proceed as if protest were possible. They may fail. The time may not be right. But then, they may sometimes succeed."[52]

This was a reasonably hopeful note upon which to end. Still, activists can be forgiven if they find *Poor People's Movement*'s advice to be frustratingly vague. In a later essay, Piven and Cloward noted: "Saul Alinsky said organizers must rub raw the sores of discontent, but that does not tell us which sores, or whose sores, or how to inflame them, or what to suggest people should do when they are ready to move into action." This is well put. And yet, most often, Piven and Cloward's writings were even further removed from any direct guidance of social movements. Because of this, it has been left to others to provide more practical insights into how to orchestrate disruptive protest.[53]

Fortunately, the world of social movement thinking is now experiencing a renaissance on this front, with traditions of strategic nonviolence occupying a critical space in the discussion. Civil resistance recognizes both *conditions* and *skills* as relevant in shaping mass mobilization. Its practitioners would not disagree with Piven when she writes that there are "major ways protest movements are shaped by institutional conditions," and that the effectiveness of organizers is often "circumscribed by forces they [do] not control."[54] However, this reality only makes it more important that activists refine their *skills* for addressing the aspects of mobilization that they can influence. These skills include the ability to recognize when the terrain for protest is fertile, the talent for staging creative and provocative acts of civil disobedience, the capacity for intelligently escalating once a mobilization is under way, and the foresight to make sure that short-term cycles of disruption contribute to furthering longer-term goals.

The legacy of *Poor People's Movements* is that, in providing a counterbalance to traditional ideas about organizing, it opens the door for more inventive analysis of movement strategies. The recognition of structure and mass protest as two distinct forms of action allows for dialogue between different schools of thought—and it ultimately creates the potential for a synthesis.

Many new activists are drawn into politics through the energy of a mass mobilization but are disappointed when their movement experiences an abrupt decline. For them, the challenge of how to combine explosive short-term uprisings with long-term organizing that can make movements more sustainable is an exciting one. Coming from the opposite perspective, veteran community organizers who have recently experienced the tremendous momentum that disruptive outbreaks can generate—even if much of it is fleeting—have been willing to reexamine maxims such as "build organizations, not movements." These two groups share a mutual interest bridging the gap between "resource mobilization" and "disruptive power." They recognize that a study of mass protest does not rule out appreciation of what can be accomplished through building institutional structures, just as a focus on disruption does not require that activists wait around until the next "Big Bang" moment in world history arrives before endeavoring to take action.

The emergence of civil resistance is compelling because it presents the possibility of integration—between structure and mass protest, between fast and slow. As an organizing model, strategic nonviolence looks carefully at the question of what activists can do to practically make use of disruptive power. Furthermore, by grappling with questions of institutionalization, it opens a dialogue between activists in the lineage of Alinsky and those more in line with Piven, suggesting ways in which their respective traditions can work in tandem.

Already, campaigns of civil resistance have provided some illuminating models. Without ever having heard of Alinsky or Piven, a group of student revolutionaries in Serbia struggled in the 1990s with their own questions of structure and mass protest. The marriage between the two that they forged would represent a major breakthrough: a form of momentum-driven mobilization that could sustain the energy of uprising over multiple years—and that could prove powerful enough to topple a tyrant.

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