by Eric Fretz

In his time and since his death, Saul Alinsky (1909–1972) has cut a steady swath through American political culture. Given, though, that his name is invoked more frequently in partisan circles, his work and legacy is largely misunderstood. Alinsky was, and remains, a recognized provocateur against economic and political forces that upheld *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination: He took on powerful institutions like the University of Chicago, Mayor Daley's Chicago machine politics system, the Eastman-Kodak corporation, and anybody else who stood in the way of a fuller realization of democratic principles. At his core, Alinsky was an educator who taught economically-disadvantaged Americans to confront systematic racism and classism and, most importantly, develop a set of public skills that allowed them to get what they deserved, namely, fair and decent housing, equitable pay, and basic city services. And, as I explain in this article, Alinsky did all this with a large dose of humor, irreverence, and ridicule toward authority figures.

Alinsky’s Vision

Saul Alinsky was known for his aggressive verbal style, polarizing street politics, and Machiavelli-like political strategizing. Alinsky’s thought was rooted in his Jewish heritage as well as Western philosophical concepts from Aristotle, Locke, Jefferson, and a rollicking, P. T. Barnum-style of unconventional protest politics. Whether you were the mayor of a major metropolitan city, a college president or owner of a bank, if you were on the wrong side of Alinsky, you learned to duck and run rather than charge straight ahead. When Alinsky tricked Ed Kelly, the mayor of Chicago, to publicly denounce a group of priests who were in the pocket of City Hall, Kelly responded, “You don’t fight like a liberal,” to which Alinsky tartly replied, “No, I fight to win” (Geyer). He dedicated his most famous book, *Rules for Radicals* (1971), to Lucifer (I will have more to say about that later); his methods for fighting injustice were antagonistic, and he bragged about learning his tactics from Chicago gangsters. He believed means justified the ends, declaring in *Rules* that “To say that corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles,” and adding that “he who fears corruption fears life” (*Rules* 24). Never afraid to enter a fight, Alinsky believed that conflict *and* compromise were the assurances of a healthy democracy: “There is no nice way of getting things changed,” Alinsky flatly stated in a 1966 television interview (“I’d Organize Hell” 02:39–02:41). He publically humiliated his enemies; he encouraged his students and readers to do the same, and, while he was a devoted husband and father and his close friends described him as tender and kind, publicly, he could be obstreperous, arrogant, and mean-spirited. However, when asked by his long-time friend and colleague Monsignor Jack Egan why he did his work, Alinsky replied: “Oh, Jack, I hate to see people get pushed around” (Horwitt 270).

I have offered a university-level course on Saul Alinsky and the American community-organizing tradition on and off for the past fifteen years, and each semester I teach the
course I am struck by the students’ response to Alinsky. To my consistent surprise, they find Alinsky funny. As we are reading and discussing his work they laugh at his irreverence, his use of colloquial language, the stories he tells about community organizing, and his upbeat, positive message about the trajectory of American democracy. Alinsky, the students say every semester, inspires them. Given, then, my students’ response in the face of the general public’s misunderstanding of Alinsky I cannot help but wonder: What’s so funny about Saul Alinsky?

Alinsky’s Comic Vision

In the framework of this article, I explain Saul Alinsky’s comic vision as a playful, irreverent, and mischievous approach to politics and social change. In the face of powerful, oppressive forces, Alinsky’s comic vision looks for ways to trick, upend, and confuse the establishment. Rather than meet challenges, injustice, and convention head on in a full-frontal attack, Alinsky’s comic vision performs a kind of “political jujitsu,” operating by trickery, misdirection, and confusion of the enemy. It plays, in other words, outside of the lines of the game, and it seeks to make manifest a topsy-turvy world where up is down and down is up as it makes fun of the powerful to destroy hierarchies and promote social equality. Alinsky’s comic vision embraces contingencies as it seeks to make meaning and find understanding in the disorder, chaos, and the unpredictable nature of life. It seeks out, rather than attempts to obviate, confusion and ambiguity, and it finds creative energy and possibilities in the unexpected, rather than promoting belief systems as the cure-all for problems and challenges. Finally, Alinsky’s comic vision is rooted in community, pluralism, and integration of people and ideas. It pushes people and ideas together rather than sending them along separate and isolated experiences.

As a first-generation Jew growing up in the Jewish section of Chicago, Alinsky would have been exposed to ancient traditions of Jewish humor that went back as far as the Old Testament prophets who, like Alinsky, used humor and satire to expose corruption. “The prophets scoured the world they saw around them,” writes Jeffrey Dauber, “a world of lazy, hedonistic materialists, whom they portrayed as ridiculous and ultimately, disastrous” (53). By the 1930s, the children of Jewish immigrants who arrived to America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had synchronized the humor of their mothers and fathers into the general warp and woof of American humor, and ‘Jewish’ humor gradually morphed and became ‘American’ humor. Early and mid-twentieth-century Jewish humor from the Marx Brothers to Lenny Bruce played on tropes of anti-authoritarianism, irreverence towards authority figures, and the ability of the Little Guy to stick his finger in the eye of The Man. And, as I will explain, Alinsky was a part of that comic tradition (see Siegel).

The comic vision Alinsky expressed in his community-organizing philosophy was both influenced by and a response to early- and mid-twentieth-century American comedic tropes. Speaking of Alinsky’s use of stories in his first book, Reveille for Radicals (1946), Sanford Horwitt connects Alinsky’s style to broader American comic forms: “Although Alinsky presented these anecdotes straight-faced,” Horwitt writes, “one is somehow reminded of the old comic vaudeville act in which a lone performer becomes an entire cast of characters with a little imagination, a multitude of costumes, and a backdrop of ever-changing scenery” (173).
Alinsky’s comedic style, especially in *Reveille*, owes something to the writing of Ring Lardner, whose column, “In the Wake of the News,” was first published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1913 and was widely syndicated during Lardner’s lifetime. Lardner’s characters—ordinary people like barbers, baseball players, clerks, and newspaper writers like himself—paved the way for one of the most enduring tropes of American humor writing: the character of the Little Man.

In response to the cultural anxieties of the interwar years and combined with the mid-twentieth-century fascination with the ‘average American,’ the Little Man character began to emerge in American stories, novels, and films (see Kaufman; Whitfield; Epstein; Wisse). Generally speaking, the Little Man trope from the early twentieth-century to the present is a white, middle-class, Protestant, suburb-dwelling, middle-management figure who, try as he might, cannot make sense of the world around him. He is flummoxed by technological innovations as well as generational and gender issues, and he feels powerless and confused by the world around him. James Thurber’s *Walter Mitty* is of course the quintessential Little Man, and the precursor to other Little-Man figures including Archie Bunker, Al Bundy, Homer Simpson, and Peter Griffin.

The Little-Man trope is what the philosopher, Simon Critchley, would call the “comedy of recognition” for the way it “seeks to reinforce consensus” rather than “criticize the established order” (12). Critchley concludes: “Such laughter is not laughter at power but the powerful laughing at the powerless” (12). Alinsky, whose community-organizing philosophy was built on a foundation of belief that ordinary Americans’ native wit and intellect allowed them to not only participate in but influence the democratic process, was having none of Lardner’s or Thurber’s “comedy of recognition,” and he developed a comic vision of American democracy that pitted the ordinary American over and against establishment figures, like elected officials, captains of industry, and even academics.

Alinsky wrote two best-selling books, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971), and both, to varying degrees, illuminate his comic vision of democracy.

The Topsy-Turvy World of *Reveille for Radicals*

Alinsky opens *Reveille* in a comic style with a sweeping, Whitmanesque vision of a multiethnic, multicultural America. In the first chapter, “What is a Radical?” Alinsky describes America as a place of rich cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity. “The people of America,” he writes in purple, overwrought prose, “live everywhere from Back Bay Boston to the Bottoms of Kansas City […]. From the marble swimming pools of magnificent Bel Air California to the muck of the Flats of Cleveland” (3). When Alinsky began writing *Reveille* in the summer of 1944, World War II was coming to its longed-for conclusion, and the opening chapter consequently takes an exultant tone expressive of a typical mid-twentieth-century optimism regarding America’s emerging place in the world. Alinsky scans the American scene and imagines all of this diversity and pluralism creating “a new bridge of mankind in between the past of narrow nationalistic chauvinism and the horizon of a new mankind—a people of the world” (3). He continues in this cheerful vein, rhetorically linking cultural differences together until a unified whole emerges that celebrates diversity and individuality without sacrificing national unity.
Midway through the first chapter Alinsky arrives at “the most fundamental question of what is America,” which is, “How do you feel about people” (Reveille 6). It is at this early juncture that Alinsky establishes the foundation of what will become the American community-organizing tradition as well as expresses the comic vision that makes up a significant part of that tradition. The so-called American radical is, for Alinsky, someone who “is filled with deep feeling for people” and knows “that people are the stuff that makes up the dream of democracy” (6). This could seem like romantic rubbish until you understand that in this rhetorical situation Alinsky has set up, he is taking the work of democracy away from the technocrats, the moneyed class, and the cultural and political establishment and placing it squarely in the hands of ordinary people, a classic move in comic writing.

Alinsky, as avid a reader of the popular press as he was of history, philosophy, and literature, peppers Reveille with devices from early twentieth-century comic writing, namely composite and archetypal figures that stand in for broadly-defined character types. Early in the first chapter, Alinsky introduces a type character he calls “Mr. But.” Mr. But is a symbol for a self-satisfied member of the establishment who declares himself free of ethnic and racial prejudice yet harbors bigoted and intolerant views of immigrants and people of color. It is an elaborate, perhaps labored, set up with a series of rhetorical questions that bait the reader along. “Do you like people?” he asks, slipping into the intimate second-person pronoun to draw the reader closer (Reveille 6). “Most people,” Alinsky writes, “claim that they like people with, of course, a ‘few exceptions.’ When the exceptions are added together it becomes clear that they include a vast majority of the people. […] and that most people like just a few people, their kind of people […]” (Reveille 6). Addressing the reader with a declarative sentence, Alinsky writes,

You are white, native-born and Protestant. Do you like people? You like your family, your friends, some of your business associates (not too many of them), and some of your neighbors. Do you like Catholics, Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, Mexicans, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and Chinese? Do you regard them with the warm feeling of fellow human beings or with a cold contempt symbolized in Papists, Micks, Wops, Kikes, Hunkies, Greasers, Niggers, Spics, and Chinks? If you are one of those people who think of people in these derogatory terms, then you don’t like people. (Reveille 7)

Boring deeper and deeper into the racial psyche of mainstream America, Alinsky writes, “[Perhaps “[y]ou are broad-minded and respect other people if they know their place,” and if so, Alinsky says almost with a sneer, you are a member of that “great American class of Mr. But.” Mr. But says things like: “Now nobody can say that I’m not friend of the Mexicans or that I am prejudiced, BUT—” or “Nobody can say that I’m anti-Semitic. Why some of my best friends are Jews, BUT—” (Reveille 7).

Mr. But, of course, is an ass, and he is an ass because he is more Jackson and Coolidge than Lincoln and Sandburg; he does not embrace the fundamental diversity and messiness of American society. For Alinsky, Mr. But’s tribalism and reactionary views put him in the center of mainstream America but outside of the larger warp and woof of American cultural and political democracy.

Storytelling was a central element of Alinsky’s method of community organizing, and telling a story that both entertained and instructed was part of the art of the community organizer. Alinsky exceled at this art, and Reveille, consequently, is chock full of stories, some of them
very entertaining, some of them not so much, but all of them cast in a manner that elevates the organizer and the common person's native wit and understanding over and against the short-sightedness of the establishment and the technocracy. Moreover, the stories—highly stylized and exaggerated affairs—come off as jokes against the establishment and were, as Frank Bardacke writes, “not merely enjoyable [...]. They were the essential vehicle through which he conveyed his political knowledge” (73).

Alinsky's comic vision pitted ordinary people against the rich and the powerful, and in his community-organizing model positive change in communities comes from the inside or from local, rather than external leaders. For Alinsky, community organizers were outsiders who were invited into unstable, disenfranchised communities, and whose job it was to find local leaders, teach them how to organize their own communities, and then get out of the way. Alinsky called his local community-organizing groups People's Organizations. “The building of a People's Organization,” he writes in Reveille, “can be done only by the people themselves. Native or indigenous leadership is of fundamental importance in the attempt to build a People's Organization, for without the support and co-operative efforts of native leaders any such venture is doomed to failure from the very beginning” (64). While the prose here is clinical, the idea, which takes power from the establishment and puts it into the hands of ordinary people, is comic.

In chapter three, “Native Leadership,” Alinsky dramatizes a conversation between a sociologist studying a “slum” community and an eleven-year-old newsboy. He coyly prefaces the dialogue in the passive voice: “A graphic illustration of natural leadership is to be found in the records of a criminological study made in a slum community” (Reveille 69). Where he found these “records” is never revealed (because they are fictionalized), although his time working with juvenile delinquents in Chicago would have inspired the dramatic dialogue between the sociologist and the boy. “What do you ever expect to amount to when you grow up,” the sociologist asks the boy. When the boy suspiciously responds, “What ya' mean?” a dramatic tension is created between the boy's colloquialism and the sociologist's formal language (70). The sociologist continues, almost baiting the boy with dreams he most likely will never achieve: do you want to be a “big businessman,” a banker, a lawyer? What about a college professor, the sociologist asks, prompting the boy to reveal Alinsky's own disdain for academics when he curtly responds, “Now look here, fella, what do you take me for?” The boy eventually reveals, much to the sociologist's chagrin that he wants to be like the local gangster, Big Butch, and “have people look up to me and really be a number one guy” (70). When pressed by the addled sociologist, the boy reveals that Big Butch takes care of his family and other members of the neighborhood “When you go to Butch you're a human being. When you go to the Welfare, you're a … a … Well, they got a word for it—you're called a case” (70).

As a graduate student in the sociology department at the University of Chicago, Alinsky worked with juvenile delinquents and members of organized crime groups, and he came to see delinquency and crime networks as manifestations of disenfranchised communities rather than the work of morally-flawed and hopelessly-corrupt individuals. It is no surprise, then, that gangsters, juvenile delinquents, and members of organized crime networks pop up in the stories Alinsky tells in Reveille. However, rather than the hard-hearted, violent
characters they were represented to be in popular media, Alinsky’s gangsters are impressionable members of the community who can be reasoned with and coaxed into becoming members of the community without going through moral reformation.

18 Consider the story in *Reveille* of Honest John Jones, a local, small-time gangster who owns gambling houses that are being frequented by teenagers from the neighborhood. Concerned about the welfare of the children, the members of the People’s Organization get together and, on the advice of the organizer, sit down and talk with Honest John. Rather than simply demand that Honest John prohibit children from entering his gambling houses, the members of the People’s Organization talk with John and discover that underneath the rough exterior is a man who craves respectability and, above all else, is fearful that other children in the neighborhood would tease and ostracize his own teenage children. “Well, we knew when those kids got to high school that the one thing Honest John was worried about was that for the first time in the lives of his kids other kids would say to them, ‘Your Pa is a gangster,’ ‘Your Pa is a racketeer’” (112). Appealing to his self-interest, the members of the People’s Organization invite Honest John into their fold, and, before long, Honest John “found himself sitting down in neighborhood restaurants with neighborhood ministers, labor leaders, important businessmen, priests and the kids of guys that were the respectable leaders” (112). Shortly after that, much to the chagrin of the “Welfare goody-goodies in town,” who “scream their heads off,” at the sight of crook communing with the neighborhood’s finer sorts, the People’s Organization appoints Honest John, the local gangster, to head their Delinquency Committee and the following day the signs are posted on every one of Honest John’s gambling houses: “EVERY PUNK UNDER THE AGE OF TWENTY-ONE HAD BETTER KEEP HIS PUSS OUT OF THIS PLACE OR HE WILL GET IT FLATTENED. (signed) HONEST JOHN. P.S.—AND I KNOW THE AGE OF EVERY ONE OF YOU PUNKS” (112).

19 It is a contrived, improbable, and clumsy story, but it is funny, too, for the way Honest John’s desire for respectability is turned against the holders of convention. Most importantly, though, the story of Honest John feeds into Alinsky’s larger comic vision. The members of the People’s Organization could have simply demanded that Honest John keep kids out of his gambling houses. They could have gone directly to the police or elected officials to solve the problem for them or they could have held protests outside of the offending gambling houses. They could have solved the problem, in other words, in a transactional, impersonal, and bureaucratic manner. Instead, the members of the People’s Organization headed into the conflict, met directly with Honest John Jones, figured out his self-interest and involved him in the People’s Organization in a way that he got what he was looking for (respectability) and the community got what it wanted—a ban on children in gambling houses. This is a critical and overlooked part of Alinsky’s organizing model. Ostracizing and creating a conflictual relationship with Honest John would have been a natural thing for the People’s Organization to do. Honest John, by dint of his decision to put the youth of the community at risk, deserved to be further alienated from the mainstream of the community. In Alinsky’s model, though, Honest John can keep his gambling houses, continue to run his illicit business, and also be a member of the community. In this story with a happy ending, everyone gets what they need. The comedy of the Honest John story emerges from the use of gangster rhetoric (the use of threats and terms like “pu$$”) as well as Alinsky’s refusal to turn the story toward the common trope of moral uplift where Honest John would undergo a
Both stories employ inversions, a common comic technique where the normal, expected world is reversed in order to achieve a desired effect. Inversions, then, illustrate the topsy-turvy, upside down world of Alinsky's comic vision. In these cases, the sociologist, a character type with a degree of respectability and credibility, is presented as arrogant and out of touch while the newspaper boy, comes off as forthcoming, honest, and aware of the complexities of his community. By the same token, calling a small-time gangster “Honest” could simply be ironic until the story literally presents Honest John as honest as his name, thereby inverting the typical portrayal of a gangster as unconcerned with the lives and livelihood of others.

This upside-down world of good-natured gangsters who desire to be a part of the tenor of their communities is something that Alinsky learned as a graduate student in sociology at the University of Chicago. In Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, Alinsky found academic supervisors who influenced his comic view of the world. Committed to collaborative, interdisciplinary, and experiential inquiry, Park and Burgess pushed Alinsky and his fellow graduate students out into the streets of Chicago to conduct participatory, relational work with the community. Talking with and getting to know members of Chicago's organized crime networks as well as local juvenile delinquents, Alinsky came to see the causes and effects of organized crime within neighborhoods as well as on the lives of people within those communities. Alinsky learned that organized crime was the consequence of isolated communities; that is, organized crime flourished in communities that had been economically and culturally left behind. He also learned that for all of the violence and despair that organized crime brought to communities, it also provided vulnerable people, like a newsboy, with a sense of community cohesion and dependability. Alinsky never forgot the lessons he learned working with gang members as a graduate student, and the upside-down world that he experienced as he witnessed the effects that organized crime had on ordinary people in disenfranchised communities contributed to the comic vision of community organizing that he would shortly begin putting together.

His experiences on the streets of Chicago, then, influenced the comic vision of the community organizing worldview he would develop over the course of the next three decades. As Luke Bretherton explains, “For Alinsky, organized crime represented a form of community organizing […]. The stories he tells of how he first gained entry into the circles of both the Capone gang and the teenage gangs he studied illustrate the importance of building trust and relationships when working with the gangs” (26). We know this now because sociologists have been studying gangs for decades and, through experience and research, have demonstrated that gang culture flourishes in economically disenfranchised communities because it offers economic and relational opportunities that are systematically denied to members of those communities through institutional racism and discrimination. In the 1930s, though, while gangsters and delinquents were represented in film and popular novels, few people were thinking of them as anything except morally-compromised crooks and criminals.

The Comic Vision of Rules for Radicals

Alinsky takes the inversion of gangsters to another level when he, infamously now,
alinsky acknowledges the sovereign of all gangsters, Lucifer, in the acknowledgements of Rules for Radicals: “Lest we forget,” Alinsky writes, “at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgement to the very first radical [...] the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom—Lucifer.” Much ballyhooing has been made over this single page of Alinsky’s most famous book, and while this is not the place to go into the rabbit hole of online Anti-Alinskyism, a quick Google search of the keywords Saul, Alinsky, and Lucifer will reveal on the order of 17 pages of URLs that Alinsky’s mention of Lucifer at the beginning of Rules is mostly regarded as a way to explain how out of step Alinsky was with mainstream American culture, and, by extension, how little capacity Democratic party candidates who were associated with Alinsky (Obama, Clinton) have to govern the nation.

Alinsky presented three quotes on the epigraph page of Rules. The first, “Where there are no men, be thou a man,” is attributed to Rabbi Hillel, the first-century Jewish sage and scholar and the second, a defiant declaration from Thomas Paine: “Let them call me rebel and welcome, I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul [...].” Alinsky would have been familiar with Hillel and his teachings from growing up in an Orthodox home. Beginning the book, then, with a quote from Hillel is a way for Alinsky to acknowledge his own Jewish heritage. With its generalized encouragement to stand up and be counted and to do the right thing, the Hillel quote is an appropriate way to begin Rules. Moreover, it is a sentiment that Alinsky’s Christian readers would have heard in sermons, devotionals and prayers in their own parishes and congregations. Readers would have been equally familiar with the quote from Tom Paine, America’s original rebel and provocateur who was, for Alinsky, the ideal American, a kind of anti-establishment gangster of the Enlightenment. Alinsky could have chosen any number of passages from Paine to include in the epigraph of Rules. But the Paine quote, with its mention of “the fury of devils,” leads Alinsky into the final, self-authored quote acknowledging the Devil’s organizing prowess.

Aside from the acknowledgment to Lucifer, there is nothing controversial about the sentiments expressed on the epigraph page which simply suggests this: be a good human (Hillel), stand up for what you believe (Paine), and, in the war between the establishment and the hoi polloi, side with the underdog. In that regard, the epigraph page of Rules does exactly what it is supposed to do: Introduce the major themes and ideas of the text through the voices and ideas of other, credible, sources.

Alinsky, of course, was not the first writer to present the Devil in a comic light, a tradition that goes back at least as far as the cunning and likable Devil who readers sympathized with in John Milton’s Paradise Lost. Yet, as a secular Jew who was raised in an Orthodox home, Alinsky would have had a different view of the Devil than his Christian readers. While the Devil plays a role in Jewish thought, he is not the unabashed force of evil that he stands for in much of Christianity. In Jewish thought, Satan can be seen as real or metaphorical, and he plays more of a role of a confounder of human action than an adversary to God. The Jewish mystic, Maimonides, for instance, saw the Devil as a force that turned humans away from God. Satan, by dint of his resourcefulness and will, acquired his own kingdom, and he used it to addle and distract humans from God. And while the Satan in Judaism is crafty, malevolent,
and treacherous, he and his kingdom are, ultimately, a part of God's plan and he is going to lose the Final Battle.

But that should not stop us from wondering: What was Alinsky up to after all, when he mentioned Lucifer in the opening page of *Rules*? In the prologue to *Rules*, just a few pages after the acknowledgement of Lucifer, Alinsky writes, "If I were organizing in an orthodox Jewish community, I would not walk in there eating a ham sandwich, unless I wanted to be rejected so I could have an excuse to cop out" (xix). If you want to affect any kind of change, Alinsky writes later in *Rules*, "you can't go outside of people's actual experience" (88). Still, in meeting people where they were, Alinsky was never afraid to offend. In *Rules* he tells an anecdote of eating dinner with Mexican American leaders in a California barrio when in the middle of the meal he dramatically put down his knife and fork and asked “My God! Do you eat this stuff because you like it or because you have to? I think it's as lousy as the Jewish kosher crap I had to eat as a kid!” After a moment of “shocked silence,” Alinsky writes, “everybody roared,” and “[b]arriers began to come down as they all began talking and laughing” (70).

Nevertheless, by acknowledging Lucifer the way he does at the beginning of *Rules*, I think it is safe to say that Alinsky was going way outside of the experience of a majority of his readers. So, why then would Alinsky begin *Rules* with this kind of provocation to his Christian readers? Why would a mid-twentieth century Jew provoke his widely Judeo-Christian readers with an encomium to the Prince of Darkness before the text even officially begins? What good could that possibly do except raise eyebrows or, worse, alienate the reader to such a degree that she simply slams shut the book in disgust and horror? The Jesus of the New Testament was radical in his opposition to the corruption of the Pharisees—why not acknowledge Him, rather than the Devil, in the epigraph? Moreover, what does it say about a writer who quotes himself in the epigraph of his own book? Is it naiveté? Narcissism? Foolishness? Absurdity? Or, was it just a joke? Does Alinsky begin the work for which he is most famous, and for which he staked his legacy and his public reputation with a joke—perhaps a tasteless and overly provocative joke—but a joke nonetheless?

Alinsky spent the better part of his career working with Catholic bishops and priests. He knew, in other words, that his readers were not going to think about the theological fine points of the Christian and Jewish conceptions of Satan. He knew he was provoking his readers, but I think ultimately what Alinsky was doing here was very much in line with his comic vision; that is, he was playing a joke on his readers, and it is a joke, consistent with Alinsky's larger comic vision, that puts a finger in the eye of the establishment by associating the Devil with the Have Nots and, implicitly, the Haves with the kingdom of Heaven.

The Lucifer acknowledged in *Rules* is not the Prince of Darkness who does battle with God. He is, rather, a version of the American radical Alinsky describes at the beginning of *Reveille for Radicals*:

> The American radical will fight privilege and power, whether it be inherited or acquired by any small group, whether it be political or financial or organized creed. He curses a caste system, aware that it exists despite all patriotic denials. He will fight conservatives, whether they are business or labor leaders. He will fight any concentration of power hostile to a broad, popular democracy. (17)
Throughout his career, Alinsky frequently employed eschatological language in the context of his anti-establishment views. Reflecting on the possibility of an afterlife in a KPIX television special on his organizing work Alinsky stated:

Take the business on the hereafter. Maybe there is maybe there isn’t. I haven’t seen the evidence one way or the other […]. But if there is, I supposed given a choice I think I would pick hell. The reason I’d pick hell is because that’s where all the Have Nots are. You know the currency of the realm shifts —over there it’s money and over here it’s virtue. […] And I’ve spent my whole life with the Have Nots and once I got into hell I’d start organizing, just like I do here and then I’d be in heaven personally because this is the thing that gives me the greatest happiness in life. And look out heaven, here we come. (“I’d Organize Hell” 16:30–17:19)

Alinsky's language and his references to the Devil and going to hell are part of a larger comic tradition in American thought that pits the moral, right-seeking individual against the corrupt society. Alinsky’s comments nod to the Devil, and his pronouncements that he’d rather go to hell because that’s where the Have Nots are resonate, for example, with that other great American comic rebel, Huckleberry Finn. Midway through Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck finds himself in a moral and existential crisis over the fate of Jim, his friend and escaped slave. As the orphaned boy and escaped slave float down the Mississippi River, Huck becomes increasingly aware that he is harboring Jim from the authorities, and in so doing, he is transgressing the laws of the land. Given, though, that Jim has protected Huck and treated him as a father treats a son, in Huck's mind, the laws that marked slaves as 3/5 of a person and that associated slaves with the beasts of the field slowly begins to unravel and Huck begins to question the nation’s justifications for keeping slaves in chains.

Nevertheless, unable to get outside of the cultural belief that slaves are sub-human, Huck, who is wracked with guilt over harboring Jim, writes a note to Miss Watson, Jim's owner, that alerts her to Jim's whereabouts. Upon completing the letter, though, Huck begins to think of Jim's kindness and decency and the sacrifices Jim has made for the sake of Huck, and he begins to see Jim as a human, not a piece of chattel. In the moral climax of the novel then, Huck holds the letter in his hand and says:

I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knewed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right then, I’ll go to hell”—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. (272)

Huck’s decision to side with the Devil over the angels is not the same as Alinsky’s talk about preferring hell over heaven except in the sense that both Huck and Alinsky, to varying degrees, recognized the corruption of the society they lived in and associated the establishment with heaven and the rebels with its opposite, hell. Ultimately, Huck’s decision to transgress the nineteenth-century slave laws doesn't amount to much—at the end of the novel he turns his back on everything and, in a nihilistic fashion, lights out for the territory. Alinsky, on the other hand, turned back into his times, offering a set of concepts and ideas that he believed held the key to a renewed and vibrant democracy.

In an interview he gave in 1966, Alinsky declared, “I do the unforgivable. You can attack the establishment and get away with it. They may get teed off at you. You can insult them and
still survive. But I laugh at them and this is one thing they will not tolerate and this is going to be an interesting situation because I'm going to keep laughing at them until I have breath to laugh” (“I'd Organize Hell” 08:05–08:32). Alinsky's comic vision and the laughter it evidenced was a particular kind of American laughter: Huck-like in its refusal to abide by systematic racism and classism as well as a Melvillian “No in Thunder”-cry directed at the Haves and designed to inspire ordinary people to action. Alinsky's laughter was barbed—more in the vein of the Marx Brothers, who never missed a chance to mock and humiliate the defenders of convention, than Jack Benny, whose self-deprecation was consensus-oriented, politically tame, and designed to distract audiences from the unfairness and inequality of American society. In this regard, Alinsky's comic vision refused complicity with the America that had departed from the promises of democracy articulated in the nation’s sacred texts.

35 Asked in the 1950s why he never became a communist, Alinsky responded, “I could never become a Communist, even in the '30s. They had no sense of humor. I hate dogma. I've never been sure I'm right, but I'm also sure nobody else has this thing called truth” (Astor 70). Alinsky begins Rules for Radicals with an acknowledgment and justification of his pragmatic, non-ideological approach. “This is not an ideological book,” he writes, “except insofar as argument for change, rather than for the status quo, can be called an ideology.” Dogma, Alinsky declares, is “the enemy of human freedom,” and it must be watched for and apprehended,” because “[t]he human spirit glows from that small inner light of doubts whether we are right,” while the purveyors of dogma and Truth “darken the world outside with cruelty, pain and injustice” (4). Alinsky rejected the idea of an intellectual vanguard in favor of a dogma-free political philosophy that valued the work and insights of ordinary people. Alinsky brooked no dogma of any kind—he was equally critical of ideological reasoning on the left as he was of unfettered capitalism and technocratic liberalism.

36 While Alinsky uses humorous stories in Reveille to poke fun at the ruling class as well as explain and illustrate his evolving ideas about community organizing, in Rules, he directly addresses the central role of humor in his political philosophy. When he began writing Rules, Alinsky felt that he had something to say to the young activists of the late 1960s who were protesting, among other things, the American war in Vietnam. While he deplored the war as much as the student protestors, he also believed that their means would never realize their desired ends. He believed the young activists were talking past the very people they were trying to convince to stop the war and reminded them that political and social change is grounded in the ability of the activists to communicate effectively by meeting people where they are and doing it with a sense of humor. “The responsible organizer,” Alinsky writes, knows that “it is the establishment that has betrayed the flag while the flag, itself, remains the glorious symbol of America's hopes and aspirations” (Rules xvii). And humor, Alinsky reminds his young reader, “is essential, for through humor much is accepted that would have been rejected if presented seriously,” philosophically adding, “This is a sad and lonely generation. It laughs too little, and this too, is tragic” (xvii).

37 Midway through Rules, Alinsky writes a chapter, “The Education of an Organizer,” that perhaps most directly lays out his comic vision of community organizing. Ideal organizers, Alinsky writes, are curious, irreverent, and imaginative. Additionally, they have a sense of humor, which Alinsky refers to as a “blurred vision of the world,” and an “organized
personality.” Finally, they are “well integrated political schizoids” who are comfortable with “political relativity” (79). All of these qualities, of course, are comic—Alinsky’s ideal organizer sees and interacts with the world in a loose, spontaneous manner, showing little regard for hierarchies of power or thought and seeking out contingencies and possibilities rather than trying to explain experience and phenomena through the lens of dogma, theory, and ideology. When he describes the organizer’s sense of humor he relies on a Webster’s dictionary definition to remind his readers that humor is not just about making people laugh—it is, rather, a state of mind that embraces flux, inconsistency and absurdity, and he comes back to one of his central tropes of linking a resistance of dogma to the ability to laugh and consequently finding meaning in the face of chaos. “The organizer,” Alinsky explains, “searching with a free and open mind void of certainty, hating dogma, finds laughter not just a way to maintain his sanity but also a key to understanding life” (75). It is at this point in his exposition of the political philosophy of community organizing that Alinsky directly addresses his comic vision, adding that “[l]ife is a tragedy; and the converse of tragedy is comedy. One can change a few lines in Greek tragedy and it becomes comedy, and vice versa” (75).

For Alinsky, humor and comedy serve the organizer to the extent that a comic vision prevents the organizer from getting egotistically drawn into the emotional and political drama of the times. “A sense of humor,” Alinsky writes, allows the organizer “to maintain his perspective and see himself for what he really is: a bit of dust that burns for a fleeting second” (Rules 75). This Zen-cum-democratic radicalism manifests a natural disregard for dogma. Alinsky chaffed at theory, dogma, and ideology because his thinking likened community organizing more to playing in a classic jazz quartet than to playing classical music in an orchestra. Like a good jazz musician, Alinsky encouraged the organizer to listen deeply and attentively and then respond to the people and the contexts of the communities where they worked. Walking into communities with a script or playing from a written score was certain doom for Alinsky’s organizers because it mitigated the imagination and creativity that was required of organizers working in communities and, more importantly, it had the effect of stifling the creativity of the individuals within the community.

Conclusion: Rescuing Alinsky from Partisan Politics

Until 2008, Saul Alinsky was a virtually forgotten American public figure. However, through Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential run, Alinsky and the American community organizing tradition was revitalized in the American imagination. Because Alinsky’s work and legacy are generally interpreted in the light of partisan politics, his influence on American politics and social activism is largely misunderstood, and in that misunderstanding, Alinsky is frequently impugned from the left, right, and center of American politics. While politicians have used Alinsky as a foil against their own ideological interests, scholars tend to see Alinsky in a narrow academic light, approaching him primarily as the architect of an American tradition of community organizing and explaining his work as a wellspring of tactics and strategies to understand democratic social change (see, for example, Warren; Miller and Schutz; Wood).

Alinsky has more to offer than ideological palaver and narrowly-focused, scholarly examinations, and my goal in this article was to place Alinsky and his writing in his own
historical context in order to view his work in a wider tradition of American thought and action. As I have tried to demonstrate, Saul Alinsky was a writer and a thinker who put together a philosophy and methods of community organizing that invited ordinary people into the democratic process. It was not pretty or nice, but it worked then, and it still works today.15

Alinsky’s comic vision works primarily because he employs humor in ways that it has been used for centuries; namely, to cut down the powerful and elevate the ordinary and the powerless. While political activists and politicians have deftly used humor in their public life, few employed a comic vision the way Alinsky did. This is not surprising. Social and political movements are serious affairs with human life and flourishing at stake (see Sorensen). While the American Civil Rights Movement, for instance, had some humorous moments (provided mostly by the brilliant comedian, Dick Gregory), there was not much to laugh at as the nation publicly and violently confronted its racist past. And while protest activities like the Yippies’ resistance to the Vietnam War and the large-scale movements against the nation’s refusal to address the AIDS crisis (for instance, ACT UP) employed humor, the humor and laughter were largely adjunct to the serious missions at hand.

What we learn, in particular, from Alinsky is the role that comedy and humor can play in political change. Louis D. Rubin describes the “great American joke” as that cultural expression that “arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact” (12). The gap, then, between the ideals of American life (freedom, equality, and justice) and its realities (poverty, racism, sexism) is a space where humor and comedy flourish. In this regard, Saul Alinsky’s comic vision reveals something about humor, more particularly, political humor, in America. American humorists from Mark Twain to Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers and Matt Groening, have employed a comic vision as a way to address the lacunae between the America we hope for and the America that we live in. Pointing out the inconsistencies of American democracy is easy. Making those inconsistencies funny is more challenging. Alinsky distinguished himself for the way he identified American inconsistencies and then, with humor as pragmatism, worked toward the resolution of those contradictions.

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Notes

[1] I am thinking of political jujitsu as it is defined by Gene Sharp in *Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*, ch. 12.

[2] See Warren Susman’s introduction to *Culture and Commitment* for a cultural history of the early-mid-twentieth century with a special focus on cultural anxiety. For discussions of the Little-Man trope see Yates.

[3] In this regard, Alinsky was working against strong cultural and political beliefs that citizen participation in the political process ended at the polling booth. See Carol Pateman’s classic study on mid-twentieth century political participation, *Participation and Democratic Theory*. 
Here I am associating the comic with a populist sensibility but that is not to say that populism is always comic.

Alinsky's disdain for the establishment did not stop at the nefarious effects of economic greed and corruption from corporations and private business. He was equally critical of federal programs that, he believed, held poor people in subservient and dependent positions to government services. In the mid-1960s, Alinsky provoked Sargent Shriver, architect of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty programs—to sputter, “That man—that man—that man—called me a pornographer” (qtd. in Horwitt 481) when Alinsky called the anti-poverty programs “a prize piece of political pornography” (“War on Poverty”).

It was not until the 1967 release of the ground-breaking film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, with its sexy and likable lead characters, that the gangster is portrayed as anything but morally wayward.

In 1940, Alinsky established the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a network of community-organizing groups across the nation that were loosely managed by Alinsky and that, by 1969, served as a training ground for ordinary people to learn how to organize communities based on the organizing model that Alinsky had been developing since 1939. With over 65 national and international affiliates, the IAF is still going strong today and continues to serve as a kind of democratic boot camp for thousands of ordinary people interested in making positive social and racial change in their communities.

Works Cited


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