

Rules for Radicals

by Saul Alinsky

(Random House; 196 pp.; \$6.95)

Peter Henner

It would be easy to say that *Rules for Radicals* is simply Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals* re-issued after twenty years. But *Reveille* is the work of a young man. It contained a fiery call to action, examples of possible tactics and an implicit philosophy of community organizing which has become widely recognized as the "Alinsky ideology." That first book has been used as a manual although, Alinsky insists, that was contrary to his intention. Hence, in *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky avoids mentioning any specific application of his tactics. What is important, Alinsky contends, are rules and principles, guidelines for judgment, and it is these rules and principles he attempts to codify in his recent book.

Behind this attempt at codification are Alinsky's own twenty years of experience in organizing. But the process of codification involves Alinsky in a paradox. He is uneasy about the fact that an "Alinsky ideology" has developed, disturbed that whenever "would-be organizers were confronted with a puzzling situation they would retreat into some vestibule or alley and thumb through [*Reveille for Radicals*] to find the answer." In order to avoid this, in *Rules for Radicals* Alinsky avoids specific examples. But it is precisely his sense of the specific, his feeling for the unique qualities of each situation, which leads him to avoid specifics. His sense that generalization from cases is dangerous results in his abandoning everything but generalities. And the codification of his ideas into a semi-formal set of "rules" creates, in fact, exactly the sort of ideology which Alinsky dislikes and distrusts.

It is tempting to say that *Rules for Radicals* merely represents the maturing of Saul Alinsky. There is no longer the passionate note, the cry for action. There is, instead, the tone of an elder advising a movement

which already exists and which already respects Saul Alinsky—and neither condition was true twenty years ago. *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky says, is an attempt to provide "the experience and counsel that so many young people have questioned me about. . . ." Alinsky is no longer addressing equals, and he cannot be called arrogant for changing his tone. Alinsky has valuable experience to communicate to a new generation of radicals, especially because he lacks the pretentiousness of many of our ideologically inclined elders—especially the Communists of the thirties, whether now in or out of the Party. Unfortunately, however, Alinsky does not provide the counsel he promises, the wisdom of experience, the sense of concrete cases. He offers principles and abstractions—youth grown old rather than the distinct knowledge of age.

Alinsky does say things of value in political action today. He says that youth must work within the system, using system in a different sense from most of those who appeal to the phrase. He does not mean that radicals should confine their work to electoral politics and pressuring Congressmen. He means only that they should organize rather than just hope that terrorism will, mysteriously, save them the trouble. Alinsky believes that middle-class students should not talk about a generation gap—which tends to justify inaction—but should concentrate on organizational action in the middle-class world they know. Having organized in working-class communities all his life, Alinsky has an equally useful sympathy for white workers. He does not see rightward movement as an innate propensity of the working class, but as the result of lack of organization and concomitant feelings of weakness. Without organizations of their own, working-class Americans, Alinsky counsels,

will feel caught between the militancy of the poor and the "holier than thou" attitudes of the middle and upper-middle classes (or the "poorer than thou" attitudes of too many middle-class "radicals").

Like the early members of Students for a Democratic Society, Alinsky is part of a humanistic, issue-oriented, "non-ideological" tradition. Movements and organizations, for him, must be built around "reverence for others, for their freedom from injustice, poverty, ignorance, exploitation, discrimination, disease, war, hate and fear." Early S.D.S.'ers had often been inspired by, and often turned to, Alinsky's work, especially to his experience in community organizing. But to such people and others like them today, Alinsky provides no effective direction beyond the barren prescription for middle-class organizing. He does not discuss the tactical and ethical dilemmas of that task. He does not deal with the problem of maintaining a middle-class existence, of radicals finding middle-class jobs they can do without losing their own way, and since he never discussed on-the-job organizing, that possibility and problem is also ignored. By failing to deal with such questions, Alinsky fails to provide the kind of direction I hoped he might give—and the direction the movement badly needs.

double trouble



Two social security accounts are not better than one . . . as Mrs. Vivian Hall Felan found out when she applied for monthly social security retirement benefits. As a Ziegfeld Girl, "Vivian Hall" got her first social security card and number. Later, Mrs. Felan left the stage and got a new card and another number under her married name.

When she applied for retirement benefits, she didn't have enough social security credit . . . until both numbers were discovered and all her earnings were considered.

One social security number is all a person ever needs.