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Recommended citation

Frantz, Trent (2015). A Book Review of *Rules for Radicals*. The Advanced Generalist: Social Work Research Journal, 1 (3/4), p 70-76.

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Rules for Radicals Book Review

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Received
December 2014

Accepted
May 5, 2015

Published
June 1, 2015

Citation: Frantz, Trent (2015). Rules for Radicals Book Review. *The Advanced Generalist: Social Work Research Journal*, 1 (3/4), p 70-76.

Abstract

Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* is a monumental and foundational text for social leaders who desire to affect change within organizations, communities, and society (Alinsky, 1971). In this text, the author outlines thirteen rules that he believes are essential to organizing an effective social movement. I will address the rules which I find to be most and least applicable to social work professional ideals. Additionally, I will discuss what I consider to be the important aspects of the book which can be applied to social work practice. Finally, I will discuss how the book theme applies to our current social and political environment in the United States.

Keywords: Social justice, social work, leadership

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First, I agree that the rule “never go outside the expertise of your people” rings true from a social work perspective; additionally, I feel that this rule can be applied to social work practice in both a micro or macro context. The worker should not make claims that he or she is not familiar with, nor appear to be an expert in areas that he/she clearly is not. This notion extends naturally when organizing and working with communities. When discussing modes of social action, you should draw from the expertise of those involved and seek out new expertise when needed. This approach is based on the strengths perspective which wholly aligns with ethically responsible social work practice.

“A good tactic is one that people enjoy” can also be applied as a useful rule for effective social work practice. I believe this wholly aligns with the social work ethical responsibility of self-determination, which places clients’ interests as primary. For example, if we as social workers feel strongly that our group should move in one direction, but we also sense that the group is pulling us in another direction, we should allow the group to make decisions that they feel are best for themselves. However, as responsible social work practitioners, we have the responsibility, to the best of our ability, to inform them of the possible consequences of their decisions.

Another rule that I find applicable to the social work field is “a tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.” I believe this rule speaks to the dynamic aspect of the profession and the adaptability of the professional in general. The worker must be agile and able to adapt to an ever changing client system and environment. The worker must also be able to change intervention methods if the current approach is not working or if the client system does not respond favorably to a given approach. It is for this reason

that the worker needs to be well versed in many ways of facilitating social change and community intervention. From a larger perspective, social change must be addressed from different perspectives and with differing tactics to maximize effectiveness. Old, tired ways of community work may be easy to implement, but these methods have a way of stifling your base and allowing mundanity to set in; as a result effectiveness will suffer.

On the other hand, a rule that I largely disagree with is “ridicule is man’s most potent weapon”. I feel that this rule carries the potential to conflict with social work values regarding dignity and worth of the individual. Of course, ridicule can be applied to both individuals and ideas. If ridicule is applied strictly to ideas, then it may be an acceptable tactic. In either context, I feel that there is most likely a better way to address the problem than ridicule. I believe critical discourse and analysis, although not providing as much shock value, to be a more professional and congruent approach with social work values. As an evidence-based profession, we should strive to back up our positions and assertions with research and facts whenever possible, and leave the ridicule at bay.

The most important theme from the book I found to be was Alinsky’s emphasis on the empowerment of the poor. This is a core social work value which incorporates our commitment to dignity and worth of all people, as well as the goal of attaining social justice (Workers, 2008). I feel this book emphasized that the power for change ultimately rests within the individual, and that the job of the leader is to activate this sense of power and strength within the individual. This to me corresponds to the social work principles of strengths-based advocacy and empowerment; that is we are to encourage and assist our clients or client system to enact change within their own lives

and communities.

Much of Alinsky's final chapter, "The Way Ahead", predicts what we are experiencing in our present day political climate. I feel Alinsky's prediction that if the middle class does not ally with the have-nots, then they will veer to the right, has in large part taken place. In general, I feel that the middle class serves as a buffer in society. That is, it connects the haves and the have-nots, and provides a medium by which these polarized ends of the spectrum can communicate with each other. That is, the have-nots share some commonalities with the middle class, and the middle class share some commonalities with the haves. It is through the middle class that the have-nots can see the haves without feeling directly threatened, and the haves similarly can peer into the middle class and see the have nots without feeling afraid.

As a three part system revolving around a strong and robust middle class, society maintains a sense of interconnectedness, equilibrium, and balance. However, one thing that Alinsky did not address directly, and perhaps did not even envision, is the erosion of the middle class altogether. I feel that this is very much the case today; not that the middle class has disappeared entirely, but that it is at risk of doing so within a very short period of time. Therefore, in order for Alinsky's way forward to become a reality, the middle class must be rebuilt from the ground up. Obviously, this would require significant policy changes and radical grassroots efforts in areas such as financial sector and healthcare policy, voting rights legislation, minimum wage laws, and international trade agreements, to name a few. Indeed, this would most likely require a significant culture shift in our society.

I feel that this erosion of the middle class has come about due to several reasons, which will not be discussed here in detail due to the limited scope of this paper. Most

recently, the housing crisis of 2009 and the rapid dissolution of unions has led to decreased discretionary income and worker security. At the same time, I sense that Alinsky would find the current political climate very challenging to function within, as the church (which is a vehicle that he relied upon heavily) carries much less power than it did in his day and does not play as great of a role in society, and because union organizing is a controversial subject today which carries less influence than ever. One way that Alinsky might have been able to ally the have-nots and the middle class could revolve around minimum wage issues. This would no doubt need to be addressed at a local level first, as many cities and states have done most recently. Common issues such as these could help to galvanize the middle class and the have-nots and allow them to organize around such issues that they have in common.

In spite of all this, I feel that the dwindling middle class is ripe for revolution. Due to democracy being under attack due to recent attacks on voting rights, worker's rights being eroded daily, wage stagnation, and increasing income disparity, I feel that today's middle class is searching for a new and better way forward. The comfortable middle class family that Alinsky was privy to, where the father could afford to work while the mother stayed at home with the children, is all but a fantasy.

I believe that the conservative mainstream media has done an excellent job at steering the remaining middle class to the right. They have consistently tried to drive a wedge between the middle and lower classes, attempting to classify the latter as "others" with their own unique and foreign problems. More so, the lower class has been demonized by the media as a group of individuals who are looked upon lazy and dependant upon the system, and whose desire is to bring the rest of society down to their level of dependence. As a result, the mass media has successfully convinced large

swaths of the middle class to side with issues that they should intuitively be against; issues such as de-unionization and healthcare expansion being prominent examples. The media has also effectively used Alinsky's tactic of "picking a target, freezing it, and polarizing it" in such previous examples, again recruiting unlikely middle class allies for their overseer's cause. Indeed, this strategy has been used against President Obama to great effect. However, this tactic may well have a counter-productive effect in this situation. As the middle class unwittingly moves to the right, they take for granted all of the progress that has been made in the past which has allowed them to live the comfortable life. Little by little, as worker rights fall away and as wages and benefits stagnate, the middle class will move more closely to align with the have-nots, whether they wish to recognize it or not. As I mentioned previously, this has happened for many previously middle class families; one only needs to look at the remains of Detroit to find a living example (if you can describe Detroit in its current state as "living"). Nevertheless, as the middle class becomes more discontent and slowly morphs into the have-nots, there will exist a great divide between the haves and the have-nots; a divide without the strong buffering middle class to regulate the tensions between them. It is in situations like this that a revolution is ripe, and all the power and money that the rich possess will be at risk. Such a situation could result in a 98% have-not majority, which if properly organized and motivated, could be a threatening and dominating force against the haves.

Alinsky's dream of reaching out to the middle class is coming true, but not in the way he envisioned it. The middle class are becoming the have-nots, day by day, and it is only a matter of time until a modern day Alinsky picks up a copy of *Rules for Radicals* and mobilizes the disgruntled majority to take back their government and democracy

from the plutocracy which is currently holding it hostage; leaving us with a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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About the Author

Trent Frantz was born and resides in Wichita, KS. He received his Bachelor's in Social Work from Wichita State University and is currently working on his Master's in Social Work at WSU. His particular interests lie in the areas of policy, advocacy, and consciousness raising with respect to environmental justice and ecological issues.