

Partners in Forming the People: Jacques Maritain, Saul Alinsky, and the Project of Personalist Democracy

Nicholas Hayes-Mota

Abstract: At first glance, Jacques Maritain, the influential Catholic philosopher, and Saul Alinsky, the infamous “dean” of community organizing, could scarcely be more different, in temperament or reputation. Nevertheless, for nearly three decades, these two men were close friends and dedicated collaborators, drawn together by a passionate commitment to democracy. By reading them alongside each other, this article offers a new interpretation of both. After historically contextualizing the relationship between Maritain and Alinsky, it advances two major claims about their democratic thought. First, it shows that Maritain and Alinsky shared a commitment to a political project best described as “personalist democracy,” insofar as it founded democratic politics upon a specific ethical (and, for Maritain, theological) conception of the human person. Second, the article argues that both thinkers understood personalist democracy to be realizable, in practice, only through a particular kind of democratic organization. They saw the process of organizing as the indispensable means for forming the diffuse persons who comprise society into a coherent “people,” capable of acting for the common good and, in so doing, discovering their own dignity. The article concludes by offering reasons why the project of personalist democracy, as Maritain and Alinsky conceived it, may still have much to offer today.

INTRODUCTION: “THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE PROVOCATEUR”

At first glance, Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Saul Alinsky (1909–1972) present a striking study in contrasts. Maritain, the neo-Thomist philosopher, was a French Catholic intellectual of international renown, whose influence extended across Europe and the Americas. Known to friends as “gentle Jacques,” he was deeply pious, principled and, by his own admission, much more a man of

contemplation than an “agitator.”¹ Alinsky, on the other hand, was an agitator par excellence. A self-professed agnostic of Russian Jewish descent, the “dean” of community organizing in the US was pugnacious, irreverent, and impatient with philosophical niceties that got in the way of decisive action. Alinsky also took delight in infuriating moralists of all stripes. He accordingly began his most notorious book, *Rules for Radicals* (1971) with an acknowledgment of “the very first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment . . . Lucifer.”²

Nevertheless, for all their differences, Maritain and Alinsky maintained a decades-long and surprisingly intimate friendship. As the title of their collected correspondence reveals, “the philosopher and the provocateur” felt a profound personal, intellectual, political, and even spiritual affinity for each other.³ Late in life, Maritain would refer to Alinsky not only as a “great friend” but as one of only two “authentic revolutionaries” he knew.⁴ For many years, he used his considerable influence to promote Alinsky’s work, even arranging a meeting in Milan, in 1958, between the organizer and Archbishop Giovanni Montini, the future Pope Paul VI.⁵ For his part, Alinsky called Maritain “a man who has had more influence on me than anyone else I know and who is infinitely precious to me.”⁶ He credited Maritain as the catalyst for his first book, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946); he also regarded him as a “spiritual father,” to whom he confided in his darkest hours.⁷

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011 [1968]), 23.

² Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, [1971]xs 1989), ix. Contrary to legend, Alinsky did not actually dedicate the book to Lucifer, but rather “to Irene,” his wife. His reference to the fallen angel appears later, on a separate page after the dedication proper. There, following epigraphs from Rabbi Hillel and Thomas Paine, Alinsky adds a third of his own, in which he makes an “over-the-shoulder acknowledgement to the very first radical . . . Lucifer.” The epigraph exemplifies Alinsky’s tongue-in-cheek humor, as well as his penchant for provocation. He would be highly amused to know that some of his more humorless critics have since mistaken this passage for a literal profession of fidelity to Satan.

³ Doering published their collected letters under this title in 1994. See Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⁴ The other “authentic revolutionary” was Eduardo Frei, the leader of the Chilean Christian Democrats (Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 23). For background, see Bernard Doering, “Jacques Maritain and His Two Authentic Revolutionaries,” in *Thomistic Papers*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy, vol. 3 (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1987), 91–116.

⁵ P. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 114.

⁶ Letter XLIII (May 15, 1962), in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 92.

⁷ For Maritain’s role in moving Alinsky to write *Reveille*, see Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky—His Life and Legacy* (New York: Vintage, 1989),

Though the biographical dimensions of their relationship are highly interesting, in this article I wish to explore the specifically *political* affinity between Alinsky and Maritain. What was the political vision Alinsky and Maritain shared, allowing them to regard each other not only as kindred spirits but as fellow “revolutionaries”? More specifically, what was it about Alinsky’s approach to community organizing that led Maritain to proclaim it “a new way for *real* democracy, the only way in which man’s thirst for social communion can develop and be satisfied, through freedom and not through totalitarianism in our disintegrated times”?⁸ In response to these questions, I will advance two major claims. First, Maritain and Alinsky shared a commitment to a political project best described as “personalist democracy,” insofar as it founded democratic politics upon a specific ethical (and, for Maritain, theological) conception of the human person. Second, both thinkers understood personalist democracy to be realizable, in practice, only through a particular kind of democratic *organization*. They saw the process of organizing as the indispensable means for forming the diffuse persons who comprised society into a coherent “people” capable of acting for the common good and, in so doing, discovering their own dignity.

In advancing this argument, I build on the work of several scholars who have previously treated the Maritain-Alinsky relationship.⁹ This article contributes to existing literature by specifically foregrounding the personalist character of Alinsky and Maritain’s shared democratic vision and analyzing the way in which that vision, in turn, underwrote their shared commitment to organizing. An additional aim of this article is to suggest that these democratic thinkers are best interpreted in dialogue with each other. Reading Maritain in dialogue with Alinsky draws out the practical implications of his democratic

164–165. On Maritain as Alinsky’s “spiritual father,” see Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xxxii–xxxv; see 112 for Alinsky’s own reference to Maritain as such.

⁸ Letter VI (August 20, 1945), in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 11, emphasis in original.

⁹ Beyond the works by Doering already cited, key contributions include Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 147–175; Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 35–40; Bradford E. Hinze, “Vatican II and US Catholic Communities: Promoting Grassroots Democracy,” in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2015), 152–181. All of this literature contradicts the tendentious analysis of C. J. Wolfe, which reads *Rules for Radicals* completely out of context and, as a result, fundamentally distorts Alinsky’s views, as well as Maritain’s. See C. J. Wolfe, “Lessons from the Friendship of Jacques Maritain with Saul Alinsky,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 16 (2011): 229–240, doi.org/10.5840/cssr20111620.

philosophy, as well as its inherent radicalism, both of which might otherwise be missed. Reciprocally, reading Alinsky in dialogue with Maritain illuminates the ethical ideals deeply embedded, but not always explicit, within his organizing practice, countering the mistaken (though still quite prevalent) tendency to regard him as an amoral “Machiavellian.”¹⁰ On both counts, the article seeks to enrich the interpretation of each figure. Its overarching objective is to recover Alinsky and Maritain’s democratic vision for constructive redevelopment in our own time.

The argument unfolds in four parts. In the first section, I historically contextualize Maritain and Alinsky’s relationship. Situating the latter in the biography of each man, I describe how the two came to know, and admire, each other as friends and collaborators. Secondly, I show how Maritain and Alinsky converged on a common vision of personalist democracy, and analyze the core ethical ideas which defined that vision. Thirdly, I argue that both thinkers regarded “organization” as the critical, mediating process for translating the ideals of personalist democracy into institutional reality, focusing in particular on how Maritain and Alinsky understood organizing as a way of “forming the people.” Finally, in my conclusion, I offer some reasons why the project of personalist democracy, as they conceived it, may still have much to offer today. Indeed, in a moment where democracy around the world seems to be degenerating, it could scarcely be more relevant.¹¹

DRAWN TOGETHER BY DEMOCRACY: THE MEETING OF JACQUES MARITAIN AND SAUL ALINSKY

Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky were first introduced to each other in Chicago sometime between 1941 and 1944, most likely by a

¹⁰ Brian Stiltner’s article, elsewhere in this issue, offers an illuminating discussion and rebuttal of the “Machiavellian” reading of Alinsky, as does Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 196–200. For broader background on the demonization of Alinsky by the US Right, see Dylan Matthews, “Who Is Saul Alinsky, and Why Does the Right Hate Him So Much?,” *Vox*, www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing. Negative misconceptions about Alinsky are notably widespread in conservative Catholic circles, where one also sometimes hears the organizer denounced as a “communist”—an irony, given that Alinsky, like Maritain, advocated personalist democracy precisely as an alternative to communism. *A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing*, a video distributed by the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), is in part to blame for the spread of these misconceptions within the US church. Though the video purports to be “a documentary,” it is in fact little more than a propaganda piece offering a highly selective, misleading, and distorted account of Alinsky’s life and legacy.

¹¹ A comprehensive analysis of this troubling trend is offered in Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

mutual acquaintance.¹² Though the precise circumstances of their meeting remain unclear, it seems each man quickly identified a kindred spirit in the other: “In spite of the radical differences in their personalities and educational backgrounds,” Bernard Doering recounts, “Maritain was immediately attracted to this truculent genius of social reform, and the two men recognized their profound intellectual affinities.”¹³ They would remain close friends, confidants, and practical collaborators until Alinsky’s death in 1972, which preceded Maritain’s by only a year.

Historically speaking, as Doering notes, it is difficult to assess the degree to which Maritain and Alinsky actually influenced each other intellectually.¹⁴ By the time they met, both had already arrived at many of the fundamental ideas informing their respective conceptions of democracy. Maritain had begun to develop his democratic theory in the late 1920s when, having abandoned Action Française, the French Thomistic philosopher underwent a dramatic political conversion. Alarmed by the rise of European fascism, he shifted his attention from speculative to political philosophy, devoting much of the next decade to working out an alternative vision to guide Catholic and secular politics.¹⁵ In *Integral Humanism* (1936), his major political work of the 1930s, Maritain accordingly offered an account of “New Christendom,” a “concrete historical ideal” premised on principles such as “personalism,” “communalism,” “pluralism,” and the “autonomy of the temporal.”¹⁶ Though in that work he had relatively little to say about democracy, in the following years, informed by his first experience of democratic life within the United States, Maritain

¹² It remains unknown exactly when they were introduced, and by whom. Doering speculates that George Schuster, the former editor of *Commonweal*, made the connection; Sanford Horwitt, Alinsky’s biographer, regards it as equally possible that John Nef (a University of Chicago historian) or Chicago auxiliary bishop Bernard Sheil, did. See Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xviii, 4; Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 166.

¹³ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xviii.

¹⁴ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xx; Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 197.

¹⁵ On Maritain’s political conversion, and his passionate embrace of anti-fascism in the 1930s, see Bernard E. Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), chapter 1. For a broader contextualization of Maritain’s work during this period, see James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Making of the Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 34–40, 108–143.

¹⁶ This text is translated and reprinted as Jacques Maritain, “Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom,” in *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and a Letter on Independence*, ed. Otto Bird, trans. Otto Bird, Joseph Evans, and Richard O’Sullivan, vol. 11, *Collected Works of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 141–345. On Maritain’s ideal of a “New Christendom,” see especially 233–284.

increasingly began to describe his own project in terms of “personalist” or “integrally human democracy.” With the publication of *Christianity and Democracy* in 1943, he offered a full articulation of his democratic vision.¹⁷

While Maritain was developing a new democratic philosophy, Alinsky was pioneering a new approach to democratic organizing. As a graduate student in sociology at The University of Chicago, he had gained experience working in urban neighborhoods and doing community-based research; he had also absorbed his Chicago mentors’ commitment to philosophical pragmatism and the highly practical, and participatory, conception of democracy associated with it.¹⁸ After abandoning graduate school in 1930 to work at Chicago’s Institute for Juvenile Research, Alinsky eventually found his way, in 1938, to the Back of the Yards neighborhood, the city’s most notorious slum, where his initial assignment was to develop a program for combating juvenile delinquency.¹⁹ It was in Back of the Yards that Alinsky built his first community organization, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC). The BYNC became the prototype for all of the subsequent “people’s organizations” Alinsky developed across his career, and furnished many of the stories he recounted in his first book, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946). Alinsky’s achievement in Back of the Yards was also what first brought him into contact with Maritain, upon whom it made quite an impression. For both reasons, it is worth reviewing Alinsky’s original organizing project in some detail.

When Alinsky arrived in Back of the Yards, the neighborhood was already nationally infamous for its terrible living conditions. The real-life basis for Upton Sinclair’s muckraking classic, *The Jungle* (1906), Back of the Yards was so called because it was adjacent to Chicago’s industrial stockyards and meatpacking facilities; more precisely, it was where people who worked in those facilities lived.²⁰ The neighborhood was overwhelmingly composed of Catholic immigrants

¹⁷ This text is translated and reprinted in *Christianity and Democracy* and *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 1–62. Prior to his encounter with democracy in the US, Maritain was wary of the idea of “democracy,” owing to its association, in the French context, with the aggressively secularist legacy of the French Revolution. In the US, however, he came to appreciate alternative ways of understanding and practicing the democratic ideal, some of which aligned closely with his own project of “New Christendom.” For his own contrast of French and American democracy, see Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. Mortimer J. Adler (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018 [1940]), 91–118.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the “Chicago school’s” influence on Alinsky’s approach to community organizing, see Lawrence J. Engel, “Saul D. Alinsky and the Chicago School,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2002): 50–66, www.jstor.org/stable/25670402.

¹⁹ On this period in Alinsky’s life, see Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 10–76.

²⁰ Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 56–57.

of diverse ethnicities and languages: in addition to the Polish majority, it was home to Irish, Lithuanian, Slovak, German, and Mexican Catholics, all of whom gathered in separate national parishes and social institutions. Within each group, the native—and generally quite conservative—Catholic priests enjoyed a primacy of moral and communal authority, which they not infrequently used to reinforce inter-ethnic tensions.²¹ In his initial analysis of Back of the Yards, Alinsky gleaned that both its ethnic divisions and powerful priests had proved fatal obstacles to all prior efforts to unionize the meatpackers, with the result that neighborhood conditions had seen little improvement for decades. To many priests, and the laity who deferred to them, any attempt to organize labor or promote cross-ethnic solidarity smacked of communism, which was decidedly beyond the pale.²²

Compelled by the prospect of finally organizing a union in Back of the Yards, and concerned by the rise of fascism (domestically and worldwide), Alinsky sought to succeed where others had failed.²³ He recognized that to do so, however, he would need to find some way of uniting most, if not all, of the neighborhood's Catholic parishes behind the cause, and overcome their deep suspicion of organized labor and each other. Alinsky accordingly began to comb the neighborhood for "native leaders" who had roots in its institutions yet also an interest in collaborating to organize a union. Gradually consolidating those he found into a core team, he worked out a new strategy with them. Rather than trying to directly recruit neighborhood members into a union, Alinsky's group would instead invite the neighborhood's parishes and other social institutions to form a "neighborhood council": a federation of key neighborhood institutions whose purpose would be to identify, agree upon, and then take action to address the most pressing problems facing Back of the Yards.²⁴ This council would give neighborhood residents the opportunity to democratically decide for themselves what those problems were, and determine which solutions should be adopted in response to them. Whether labor unionization was the best solution or not would be left up to their choice.

²¹ Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 61.

²² Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 60.

²³ During the 1930s, Alinsky's passionate hatred of fascism and general sympathy with the democratic Left led him to identify with the "Popular Front," which brought non-communist liberals, democrats, and socialists into collaboration with communists against fascism. Like many within the Popular Front, however, Alinsky himself was never a communist and, in fact, quite repulsed by what he saw as the "totalitarian" character of Soviet Communism. See Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 37–41.

²⁴ Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*, 16.

Having settled on this strategy, Alinsky's team began holding meetings with other leaders from across the neighborhood. Starting from a place of listening, they would first ask those they met with to share what they saw as the primary problems afflicting their own community. Only after an individual leader had done so would Alinsky or his collaborators invite him to consider joining the proposed neighborhood council, by highlighting how it might serve the concrete "self-interest" of the leader and his community members.²⁵

The strategy was a success. On July 14, 1939, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council held its founding meeting, with representatives from over 100 of the neighborhood's major institutions, including many churches, in attendance. At that meeting, after collective deliberation, the representatives democratically agreed upon a "people's program" to guide the BYNC's future work; the program included formal endorsement of the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) new effort to unionize meatpacking workers, whose avowedly communist lead organizer was himself present at the assembly. Shortly thereafter, with the robust support of the neighborhood's Catholic churches, the residents won their first union contract from the meatpackers.²⁶ And that was only the beginning of the BYNC's wins. Within the first months of its founding, in accord with its self-formulated program, the fledgling organization opened a baby clinic, established a credit union, brought new jobs to the neighborhood, and secured funds from the state and federal government to start a hot lunch program for schoolchildren.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, given the major role played by the Catholic church in the neighborhood, Alinsky's organizing in Back of the Yards brought him into contact with a number of prominent Catholics. One of these was Chicago's popular and nationally renowned auxiliary bishop, Bernard Sheil, who became a pivotal supporter of Alinsky's efforts.²⁸ Another was John O'Grady, the legendary director of

²⁵ The experience left a lasting impression on Alinsky, who continued to stress the importance of connecting to community members' "self-interest" throughout his career. "If they [the neighborhood leaders] had been originally asked to join on grounds of pure idealism they would unquestionably have rejected the invitation," the organizer reflected. "Similarly, if the approach had been made on the basis of co-operative work, they would have denounced it as radical" (Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* [New York: Vintage, 1989], 98).

²⁶ On the BYNC's founding meeting, and the subsequent union victory, see Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 71–76.

²⁷ Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*, 21; see Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 156–158.

²⁸ In addition to his pastoral role in Chicago, Sheil also oversaw the national Catholic Youth Organization. In 1940, he became one of the founding board members for Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation. On Sheil, see Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 69–70, 74–75, 84–87.

Catholic Charities, and Alinsky's chief collaborator throughout the 1950s.²⁹ A third was Jacques Maritain. The illustrious philosopher was likely introduced to Alinsky during a visit to The University of Chicago, one of several academic institutions with which he was affiliated during his wartime exile, and subsequent sojourn, in the United States.³⁰

That Alinsky and Maritain felt profound affinity for each other is apparent from Alinsky's first letter to the latter which, though undated, seems to have been written shortly after they met. In the letter, the ordinarily irreverent Alinsky was uncharacteristically reverential, and self-conscious for being so. Confessing his admiration for Maritain as one of those very "rare persons—actual real Christians," he proceeded to ask him for a personal photograph to set on his desk; the philosopher's image, Alinsky hoped, would counteract his temptation toward "straight cynicism and materialism" and remind him there were other ways to look at the world.³¹ "This is most difficult to write," the hardboiled organizer continued, "because I have an aversion towards sentimentality and a horror of idols, hero worshipers, etc. But what I am trying to say is that a picture of you with some personal statement on it would be one of my most cherished possessions." In his postscript, Alinsky added that having a photo of Maritain would also "serve as a constant reminder to finish the book"—with "the book" in question being *Reveille for Radicals*.

Maritain's first extant letter to Alinsky, meanwhile, is dated August 20, 1945. The philosopher wrote it shortly after reading Alinsky's manuscript, which he received rapturously. "As I cabled to you," Maritain enthused, "this book is epoch-making. It reveals a new way for *real* democracy, the only way in which man's thirst for social communion can develop and be satisfied, through freedom and not through totalitarianism in our disintegrated times. You seem at first glance over optimistic [*sic*], in reality your method starting with self-interest and egotistic concerns in order to transform them shows how sound is your knowledge of human nature."³² Maritain even went so far as to proclaim that his friend was "a Thomist, dear Saul, a practical Thomist!"

Subsequently, in his review of *Reveille* for the *New York Post*, Maritain described the book in nearly identical terms, while

²⁹ Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*, 74.

³⁰ Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*, 30.

³¹ Letter I, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 3.

³² Letter VI, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 11. Both Maritain and Alinsky, following the conventions of their time, frequently used "man" to refer to all human persons. I retain their original language in quoting them, but adopt more inclusive language in my paraphrasing.

elaborating his meaning more fully. “I think that this book will be epoch-making,” he began.

It was born not of theory only, but of experience, concrete human knowledge and love for the people. In my opinion the achievements of The Back of the Yards Movement open a new road to real democracy, and show us the only way in which that deep need for communion which today stirs up men threatened by technocratic civilization, can be satisfied in freedom and through freedom, in and through genuine respect for the human person, in and through actual and living trust in the people. No totalitarianism can worm its way into a democracy built on such basic communal activities and the principles involved. At the same time, we see the manner in which one of our great problems—how real leaders can emerge from and be chosen by real people—is to be solved.³³

Later in the review, Maritain announced his intention to have *Reveille* translated and published in France. “I am convinced,” he wrote, “that the same effort, adapted to different historical conditions, should be undertaken in European democracies.”³⁴

Evidently Maritain saw in Alinsky’s organizing a remarkable, even unique, embodiment of the “personalist democracy” he had envisioned theoretically. But what was personalist democracy? And how, concretely, was it reflected in the comparatively humble achievements of the BYNC? Let me now turn to considering these questions directly.

PERSONS IN COMMUNITY: THE VISION OF PERSONALIST DEMOCRACY

By the time Alinsky published *Reveille for Radicals* in 1946, he and Maritain had converged on a common political vision, which I think is best named by Maritain’s term “personalist democracy.” Not much interested in philosophical theorizing, Alinsky never explicitly used that term, typically speaking simply of “democracy.” Nevertheless, in substance, the vision of personalist democracy Maritain elaborated theoretically corresponded closely to the democratic ideals informing Alinsky’s organizing practice—as Maritain himself recognized.³⁵ Both the philosopher and organizer

³³ The review is reprinted in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 18–20.

³⁴ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 19.

³⁵ As already noted (see n. 14), it is difficult to assess the degree to which Maritain actually influenced Alinsky’s understanding of democracy. Given the limited sources available, the best one can do is speculate, and speculation has led scholars to conflicting conclusions. On the one hand Sanford Horwitt submits that “in his relationship with Maritain . . . one has the impression that it was Maritain who believed he had learned something important from Alinsky, but not the reverse.” On the other hand, Luke Bretherton claims it was through his connection with “the

would remain committed to the project of personalist democracy for the rest of their lives.

As Maritain and Alinsky conceived it, “democracy” was not primarily a form of government or set of institutional procedures, but an *ethical* ideal, which underwrote an entire philosophy and way of life. In *Christianity and Democracy*, Maritain accordingly defined “integrally human democracy” as a “general philosophy of human and political life and a state of mind,” going on to specify that “respect for human dignity and the rights of the person” were its “essential bases.”³⁶ Analogously, in *Reveille*, Alinsky breathlessly characterized democracy as “a way of life . . . a process—a vibrant, living sweep of hope and progress . . . the search for truth, justice, and the dignity of man.”³⁷ Both thinkers thus understood democracy as a “telic” concept, to employ a recent term from Charles Taylor; that is, democracy was a “matter of purposes and ideals, not merely conditions or causal relations.”³⁸ It was an ethical end, more or less perfectly actualized in history, as well as the dynamic process of striving toward that end.

Further, for these figures, the “dignity of the person” was the fundamental principle that defined “democracy” as ideal, philosophy, and project. Maritain, the Thomistic philosopher, understood human dignity in explicitly theistic terms. By virtue of her creation in the *imago dei*, he argued in *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* (1942), each person constituted a free and unique subject, who enjoyed “direct relationship with the Absolute” and was called to communion with it; as such, she possessed absolute value in her own right.³⁹ Consequently, a truly democratic society would be one that respected the dignity of each person. This meant, first, never violating or instrumentalizing the dignity of persons for the sake of other, lesser goods (state power, national glory, or the accumulation of wealth), and second, actively promoting the dignity of all of society’s members.

emerging expression of Christian Democracy and Roman Catholic social teaching, most notably through his relationships with Bishop Sheil and Jacques Maritain, that Alinsky found a political vision to complement and help him articulate his own” (Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 197; Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 37). In my view, Bretherton’s case is more persuasive. Alinsky sounds much more “personalist” in *Reveille* (and subsequent works) than in his earlier writings, suggesting that his dialogue with Catholics like Sheil and Maritain may well have given him a new language, and perhaps a new framework, to articulate his own democratic values.

³⁶ Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 19.

³⁷ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 47.

³⁸ Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy*, 19.

³⁹ This text is translated and reprinted as Jacques Maritain, “The Rights of Man and the Natural Law,” in *Christianity and Democracy* and *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 63–141. Quoted text at 67.

Such, indeed, was the very *raison d'être* of human social life itself.⁴⁰ Alinsky, the agnostic organizer, offered no comparably developed account of human dignity. Yet he did insist, to the end of his life, that human dignity was the foundational “sacred” value of democracy, and the organizer’s “constant guiding star”; democracy itself was “not an end but the best means” toward promoting human dignity. Furthermore, like his friend Maritain, Alinsky saw the dignity of the person as a value derived historically from the living traditions of “Judeo-Christianity,” still sustained by them in the modern age.⁴¹

Because Maritain and Alinsky premised their democratic vision on the dignity of the person, they viewed the defense and promotion of human rights, comprehensively understood, as essential to the democratic project. As Maritain conceived them, human rights articulated the “things which are owed to man because of the very fact that he is man”—that is, a person, endowed with dignity.⁴² On Maritain’s expansive account, such rights encompassed not only the civil and political liberties central to the classical liberal tradition (freedom of speech, religion, and association, for example), but also the social and economic rights—rights to work, decent living conditions, healthcare, and so on—more typically stressed by socialist traditions, as well as cultural rights to education and participation in the vital traditions of one’s own people.⁴³ Though Alinsky did not theorize about human rights, he shared Maritain’s belief in their paramount importance, and likewise insisted that persons had not only political rights, but economic and social rights too. “The radical places human rights far above property rights,” he wrote, and “want[s] to see the established political rights or political freedom of the common man be augmented by economic freedom.”⁴⁴

Although Maritain and Alinsky considered human rights to be necessary foundations for a democratic society, they did not believe they were sufficient. On their account, in addition to possessing freedom and dignity, human persons were also essentially *social* and *political* creatures, who could only achieve self-realization through *participation* in community with others. Again, Maritain presented a theological rationale for this claim, famously arguing in *The Person and the Common Good* (1946) that “personality tends by nature to

⁴⁰ See Maritain, “The Rights of Man and the Natural Law,” 66–67, for further elaboration of these points.

⁴¹ See Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, xiv, 175; Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 122.

⁴² Maritain, “The Rights of Man and the Natural Law,” 107.

⁴³ For Maritain’s exposition of these rights, see “The Rights of Man and the Natural Law,” 112–136. He offers a summary list on 136–138.

⁴⁴ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 16, 26. In the former passage, Alinsky enumerates a number of specific rights, including rights to a “high standard of food, housing, and health,” to “universal free public education,” and “local control”; he also acknowledges that the last of these rights may come into conflict with the others.

communion.”⁴⁵ The God in whose image human persons are made, Maritain held, was a Triune God, a communion of divine Persons who were only “themselves” through their perfected relations of mutual knowledge and love with the other Persons. Insofar as human persons were analogues—albeit radically imperfect ones—of the divine Persons, we could likewise only become ourselves, and attain our own fulfillment, through participation in relationships of communion with other persons, both human and divine.⁴⁶ Alinsky, of course, did not share Maritain’s Trinitarian theology. But he very much shared his friend’s richly social conception of the human person. “The complete man,” Alinsky wrote in *Reveille*, “is one who is making a definite contribution to the general social welfare,” “is a vital part of that community of interests, values, and purposes that makes life and people meaningful,” and who, consequently, “can say to himself, ‘What I do is important and has its place.’”⁴⁷

This constitutively social conception of the person had definite implications for democracy, which both Alinsky and Maritain developed. First, it led both to stress the importance of human association, as well as the diversity of its forms. A personalist democracy, Maritain wrote, requires a *pluralist* body politic, because it “assumes that the development of the human person normally requires a plurality of autonomous communities which have their own rights, liberties, and authority.”⁴⁸ Along similar lines, Alinsky conceived “democracy” as “a way of government in which we recognize that all normal individuals have a whole series of loyalties—loyalties to their churches, their labor unions, their fraternal organizations, their social groups, their nationality groups, their athletic groups, their political parties, and many others.”⁴⁹ Life in a democratic society was accordingly incompatible with a “single, unqualified, primary loyalty to the state,” which was not democracy, but “totalitarianism.”⁵⁰ Both thinkers, in other words, considered a variety of associations beyond the state necessary for human persons to develop themselves, such that a democratic society entailed not only the protection of personal rights, but of associational rights as well. Beyond this, it required the promotion of a flourishing, pluralistic associational life, which provided persons with the institutional

⁴⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1946), 47.

⁴⁶ Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 56–62.

⁴⁷ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 17.

⁴⁸ Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* and *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, 78.

⁴⁹ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 85–86.

⁵⁰ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 86.

vehicles needed to sustain relationships with each other and meaningfully contribute to the common good.⁵¹

Second, the social conception of the person led both Maritain and Alinsky to conceive “the common good” itself along similar lines. More specifically, they saw the common good and human person as interdependent realities. The common good could only be achieved in a society that fully respected and promoted the dignity and rights of persons, which is to say a democratic one. Reciprocally, however, individual persons only fulfilled themselves through freely contributing to society and promoting its common good, such that the common good itself was only actualized insofar as all the members of society actively pursued and participated in it.

Thus, Maritain could define the “common good” as “the communion in good living” of the human persons who shared in it.⁵² “Man finds himself by subordinating himself to the group,” he summarized, “and the group attains its goal only by serving man and by realizing that man has secrets which escape the group and a vocation which the group does not encompass.”⁵³ Alinsky nowhere attempted to define the common good, or elaborate upon its components. Yet he did explicitly characterize it as “the greatest personal value” of the radical, identifying democracy with “the ongoing pursuit of the common good by *all* of the people.”⁵⁴

Third, and consequently, both Maritain and Alinsky considered *participation* just as essential to personalist democracy as human rights; indeed, the two could not be divorced from each other. This meant that the democratic ideal could only be made a reality through the free, ongoing, participatory action of “*the people*” themselves. “The people,” as Maritain defined them in *Man and the State* (1951), comprised “the multitude of human persons who, united under just laws, by mutual friendship, and for the common good of their human existence, constitute a political society or body politic.”⁵⁵ As such, he continued, they represented “the very substance, the living and free substance, of the body politic”; the state existed for the sake of the people, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, Maritain emphasized, it followed from the dignity of the person, and the primacy of the people, that “the program of the people should not be offered from above to the people, and then accepted by them; it should

⁵¹ Maritain elaborates this point more systematically in *Man and the State* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 1–27.

⁵² Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 50–51.

⁵³ Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 66.

⁵⁴ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 15; Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, xxv, emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 26. In the course of defining “the people,” Maritain also deemed it the “highest and noblest” of political philosophy’s basic concepts.

be the work of the people.” To substantiate the point, he cited *Reveille for Radicals*.⁵⁶

The reference was apt, for if Alinsky’s book had a single, overarching thrust, it was that “the people themselves” were the true protagonists of democracy. The “*real democratic program*,” Alinsky recurrently insisted,

is a democratically minded people—a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and interest, become informed, educated, and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men, and the future. The people themselves are the future. The people themselves will solve each problem that will arise out of a changing world. They will if they, the people, have the opportunity and power to make and enforce the decision instead of seeing that power vested in just a few. No clique, or caste, power group, or benevolent administration can have the people’s interest at heart as much as the people themselves.⁵⁷

Such was the essence of what Alinsky called “democratic faith.”

At the same time, both Alinsky and Maritain were painfully aware that democracy as it actually existed scarcely approximated their ideal of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” “In our modern urban civilization,” Alinsky lamented, “multitudes of our people have been condemned to urban anonymity. . . . They find themselves isolated from the life of their community and their nation, driven by social forces beyond their control into little individual worlds in which their own individual objectives have become paramount to the collective good.” As a result, he went on, “social objectives, social welfare, the good of the nation, the democratic way of life—all these have become nebulous, meaningless, sterile phrases.”⁵⁸ Maritain agreed, adding that the contemporary problems Alinsky identified were compounded by human nature’s perpetual tendency toward inertia. “People as a rule prefer to sleep,” he wrote. “Awakenings are always bitter. Insofar as their daily interests are involved, what people would like is business as usual: everyday misery and humiliation as usual. People would like not to know that they are *the people*.”⁵⁹

The philosopher and organizer further agreed that to understand the serious challenges facing democracy in their day it was not enough to focus on structural problems alone. “If . . . we confine our entire

⁵⁶ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 68.

⁵⁷ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 55, emphasis in original. Maritain cites the whole of chapter 4, “The Program” (53–63), from which this passage comes.

⁵⁸ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 43–44.

⁵⁹ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 142.

attention to the problem of structure,” Alinsky contended, “we will revert to the ancient fallacy of assuming that laws make men rather than that men make laws.”⁶⁰ Though structural problems—perverse inequalities of power and wealth, institutionally entrenched racism, social atomization, and an unaccountable state and corporate elite, to name but a few—were both very real and grave, they remained unredressed in significant part because the people had not democratically organized themselves to combat them. A lack of collective agency and responsibility on the part of the people was perhaps the most fundamental problem afflicting contemporary democracies.

For this reason, Alinsky and Maritain charged, proposals for democratic reform that did not prioritize the agency of the people themselves were fundamentally flawed, on both moral and practical grounds. “The world is deluged with panaceas, formulas, proposed laws, machineries, ways out, and myriads of solutions” to democracy’s problems, Alinsky observed in *Reveille*. “It is significant and tragic that almost every one of these proposed plans and alleged solutions deals with the structure of society, but none concerns the substance itself—the people.” Yet “in the last analysis of our democratic faith,” Alinsky submitted, “the answer to all of the issues facing us will be found in the masses of people themselves, *and nowhere else*.”⁶¹ In the course of criticizing overly state-centric solutions, Maritain drove home the same point. It was necessary, he wrote, “that the people have the will, and the means, to assert their own control over the State.”⁶²

What, exactly, did this mean in practice? How were the people to be roused from their sleep, and moved to assume responsibility for enacting the ideals of personalist democracy—and their own common good? For both Maritain and Alinsky, the answer may be encapsulated in a single word: “organization.”

FORMING THE PEOPLE: THE ORGANIZATION OF PERSONALIST DEMOCRACY

If Maritain and Alinsky are considered in isolation from each other, it is easy to overlook the significance of organization to the vision of personalist democracy they both shared. Maritain, the philosopher, is best known for his rich accounts of the ideals and principles that ought to guide human political life, as well as his visionary flights of imagination; he is not usually regarded as a thinker with much to say about something so mundane and practical as “organization.” By

⁶⁰ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 41.

⁶¹ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 40, emphasis in original.

⁶² Maritain, *Man and the State*, 27.

contrast, Alinsky was a theorist and practitioner of organization par excellence, whose books (*Reveille* and *Rules for Radicals*) have gained canonical status as “how-to” guides for subsequent generations of community organizers. Yet for this very reason, what is often missed in Alinsky’s organizing approach is the larger, ultimately moral vision of democracy that informed every aspect of his practice. When Maritain and Alinsky are read in dialogue with each other, however, organization emerges as the focal point at which the theory and practice of personalist democracy converged. To both, it was the privileged process for translating their democratic ideals into reality.

Prior to meeting Alinsky, Maritain grasped the significance of organization theoretically, yet had only a vague idea of what it might look like in practice. In *Integral Humanism*, he perceived the need to somehow mobilize “the people” around what he called the “common task” of building a New Christendom. Recognizing that it was the institutionalized party organizations of fascism and communism that made them such woefully powerful political movements, Maritain advocated that lay Christians respond in kind, by forming what he called “organized political fraternities.”⁶³ These fraternities, as Maritain envisioned them, would be like secular analogues of the Catholic religious orders, insofar as they would draw together Christians who shared a deep commitment to practicing the virtues and pursuing a disciplined and distinctive way of life together. Unlike the religious orders, however, the political fraternities would be formally independent of the church hierarchy, while also retaining their independence from the state and its parliamentary parties. Meanwhile, they would differ emphatically from their communist and fascist counterparts not only in the principles they upheld, but also in their internal organization and methods, which would be “founded on freedom” and “pluralism.” Nevertheless, in *Integral Humanism*, Maritain offered scarcely any concrete details, to say nothing of actual examples, of how such political fraternities would work, or how they might bring about the transformation of society.⁶⁴

When Maritain encountered Alinsky and the BYNC, he found a real approximation of the political organizations which, to that point, he had largely only imagined.⁶⁵ This was why he could write so enthusiastically, in the *New York Post*, that the “Back of the Yards Movement” opened “a new road to real democracy.” Meanwhile, it was Maritain’s repeated prompting, and perhaps his inspiration, that moved Alinsky to articulate, in *Reveille*, not only the practical

⁶³ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 260.

⁶⁴ For Maritain’s fuller exposition of his idea of Christian political fraternities, see *Integral Humanism*, 259–261, 322–326.

⁶⁵ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xxvii.

methods for building organizations like the BYNC, but the larger democratic vision and philosophy undergirding them. As Alinsky himself stressed, his practical methods were not extricable from the democratic ends they were meant to serve. “They can be utilized,” the organizer wrote, “only to a limited extent by those whose main interest is manipulation either for the sake of manipulation or for undemocratic objectives. In the last analysis the use of these tactics for evil or selfish purposes will defeat the tactician’s own objectives.”⁶⁶

Analogously, the “people’s organization”—the distinctive institutional form Alinsky may justly be said to have invented—was specifically designed to serve the larger democratic ends he and Maritain shared.⁶⁷ In *Reveille*, using the BYNC as a prototype, Alinsky offered a detailed account of the nature and purposes of people’s organizations. Like the BYNC, they were to be neighborhood-based “organizations of organizations,” drawing together all the institutions central to the life of the people in that neighborhood: churches, fraternal organizations, labor groups, block clubs, and so on.⁶⁸ As Alinsky initially described them, such people’s organizations had two principal functions. First, they existed to provide an institutional structure for democratic deliberation and collaboration, enabling diverse individuals and communities within a neighborhood to identify common interests and, on the basis of those interests, agree upon a “people’s program.” Second, through the very solidarity they created within the community, people’s organizations functioned to “generate power,” which could then be “controlled and applied for the attainment of the program.”⁶⁹

For Alinsky, “organization” was thus not only a process for bringing people together around common interests, but also, simultaneously, a way of building and exercising the collective power needed to achieve those interests.⁷⁰ In one form or another, organization was what the powerful few within society—the moneyed interests, politicians, and leaders of elite institutions—nearly always had, and what most ordinary, non-elite people nearly always lacked. Yet by the same token, Alinsky believed, through forming people’s organizations, pooling what resources they had, and deploying those

⁶⁶ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 130.

⁶⁷ Organizer and Alinsky scholar Mike Miller stresses Alinsky’s invention of the democratic people’s organization—a “new social form”—as counting among his most important contributions. See Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller, eds., *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), 312.

⁶⁸ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 86.

⁶⁹ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 54.

⁷⁰ For Alinsky, “power” was simply the “ability to act,” the capacity to achieve one’s ends. As such, there was nothing inherently bad or oppressive about it; what mattered was who had it, and to what ends they used it (*Rules for Radicals*, 50).

resources in strategic ways, individuals and communities who lacked power on their own could develop significant collective power, and even defeat more conventionally powerful opponents in political conflict.⁷¹ Indeed, today Alinsky is perhaps most famous, or notorious, for the highly creative and confrontational “conflict tactics” he developed for use by people’s organizations, which he elaborated at length in both *Reveille* and (especially) *Rules*.⁷²

Although people’s organizations certainly were “power organizations,” they were also much more than that. Ultimately, the purpose of people’s organizations, and the organizing process as a whole, was to *form the people*, in a moral as well as a political sense. They did so, first, by bringing people together across differences of culture, race, class, religion, and ideology that might otherwise divide them, and giving them practical experience of collaborating with others different from themselves for the sake of a common goal. “Once people get to know each other as human beings,” Alinsky wrote in a 1946 paper, “rather than as impersonal symbols representing diverse philosophies and organizations, then a new set of relationships composed of a genuine understanding and real sympathy will arise.”⁷³ He knew of what he spoke: in Back of the Yards, Alinsky had actually seen this happen.

Second, Alinsky believed, through the process of acting together for a common good, and successfully achieving tangible goals they set for themselves, the members of the people’s organization would experience their own agency in a new and transformative way. They would come to recognize that their individual “good” as persons did not exist in isolation from that of others, but subsisted in a common good, shared with those others. As these two shifts took place, the people participating in the organizing process would discover their own goodness and dignity as persons, and more fully actualize them. “Not only must the dignity of the individual be restored but in that process man must begin to see the good in other men,” Alinsky

⁷¹ “The building of a People’s Organization,” Alinsky summarized, “is the building of a new power group” (*Reveille for Radicals*, 132).

⁷² Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 132–154; Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 125–183. Alinsky’s penchant for describing political conflict in bombastic, military terms—for example, as a “war” in which “there are no rules of fair play” (*Reveille*, 133)—has led many readers to misunderstand the character of his conflict tactics, which were actually quite principled in practice. For one, while Alinsky-style conflict tactics could be highly confrontational, they were always nonviolent and within the formal bounds of the law. For another, the purpose of such tactics was not to harm or destroy an opponent, but to compel them to the bargaining table, with the ultimate aim of achieving compromise. To the organizer, Alinsky insisted, “compromise is a key and beautiful word” (*Rules for Radicals*, 59).

⁷³ Quoted in Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 106.

insisted. “*He cannot see the good in others unless he has some of it himself.*”⁷⁴ It was this aspect of Alinsky’s organizing that most moved Maritain, who arguably articulated the ethical significance of Alinsky’s work better than Alinsky himself. “The manner in which, starting from selfish interests, [Alinsky’s methods] succeed in giving rise to the sense of solidarity and finally to an unselfish devotion to the common task, conveys an invaluable teaching to us,” he wrote in his review of *Reveille*. It revealed that “in the very bosom of the humblest, most material needs of a community of men, an internal moral awakening is linked with the awakening to the elementary requirements of true political life.”⁷⁵

In the same review, Maritain also highlighted a third way in which people’s organizations “formed” those who participated in them. Such organizations, he observed, not only awakened the moral consciousness of persons to the common good they shared with their immediate neighbors but could also expand their moral horizon to more encompassing common goods. It was accordingly one of Alinsky’s great achievements to explain how “a small community, thus organized from within as a living whole, becomes definitely aware of its power of initiative and its common good, [and] naturally develops into concrete awareness of the common good of the nation and the common good of the international community.”⁷⁶

As Alinsky himself elaborated in *Reveille*, beyond their immediate local organizing, each people’s organization had an additional role to play in providing “popular education” to its members, to help them learn of “the functional relationship between the community, the city, the state, the nation, and the world as a whole.”⁷⁷ But this popular education had to be practical in bent, he emphasized: the people in the organization had to discover these “functional relationships” for themselves, through the process of investigating how the immediate problems they sought to solve at the local level were symptoms of the various anti-democratic social structures that organized society. Only in this way could ordinary, non-elite people come to understand how those social structures—which would otherwise remain distant or meaningless abstractions—shaped their own reality, while gaining the sense of agency and motivation to change them. This, too, Alinsky had seen happen in the BYNC. Through their participation in the organization, and their own conduct of social analysis, its members became “intensely interested in subjects which had hitherto never been

⁷⁴ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 92, emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 20.

⁷⁶ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 19.

⁷⁷ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 169.

thought of, let alone regarded as having any relationship to the people's lives and experiences."⁷⁸

Correlatively, Alinsky insisted that to be truly effective as vehicles of social change, people's organizations had to work together to take on the many larger problems that could not be addressed at the local level. He accordingly called for a national movement of people's organizations, claiming that "the development of other People's Organizations throughout the nation" ought to be a principal objective of every individual organization.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, any such large-scale movement would have to remain institutionally anchored at the local level, where the most formative experiences of personal agency, solidarity, and participation were possible. As Maritain wrote in *Man and the State*, for "the program" of democracy to truly come from the people, "the interest and initiative of the people in civic matters" had to "begin with an awakening of common consciousness in the smallest local communities, and remain constantly at work there."⁸⁰

In sum, for Alinsky and Maritain, people's organizations were not merely deliberative bodies or power groups: they were the institutional incarnations of personalist democracy. People's organizations were the democratic vehicles through which solidarity could be built across difference, communities could pursue their common good, and persons could realize their dignity as human beings. Likewise, the organizing process such organizations made possible was what formed that motley body of persons into *the people*, a continually reconstituted collective subject capable of freely assuming responsibility and taking action for the common good. By becoming "the people," human persons could progressively discover the truth of personalist democracy for themselves. Its high ideals would no longer be the "meaningless, sterile" abstractions Alinsky feared they so often were. Through the process of organization, they would take on flesh and blood, and become real, in the persons and institutions who embodied them.

⁷⁸ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 169.

⁷⁹ Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 62. Far from being a naïve partisan of the local, as he is sometimes portrayed, Alinsky contended it was a basic "fallacy" of community organization to believe all, or even most, problems afflicting local communities could be solved at the local level. A second basic fallacy was considering individual social problems in isolation from others: for example, by trying to combat crime without addressing the poverty, social breakdown, and political powerlessness that often drive it. Alinsky discusses both of these fallacies in *Reveille for Radicals*, 56–63.

⁸⁰ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 67–68.

CONCLUSION: REKINDLING THE DEMOCRATIC FAITH TODAY

What became of Maritain and Alinsky's dream of personalist democracy? In their own lifetimes, the two visionaries had but limited success in realizing it. Though Maritain's ideas proved widely influential across the Atlantic world, inspiring movements for "Christian Democracy" throughout Europe and Latin America, Maritain himself regarded most of the political Christian Democratic parties with disappointment. With the notable exception of Eduardo Frei's Christian Democrats in Chile, he found many of them neither especially "Christian" nor particularly democratic, at least when measured against his own, decidedly more radical vision of democracy.⁸¹ By contrast, to the end, Maritain continued to see Alinsky as the truest exemplar of the democratic project to which they were both committed. Yet though Alinsky built several remarkable people's organizations over the course of his life, his efforts to launch a larger movement out of them never really got off the ground in the US, to say nothing of Europe.⁸² Still more discouragingly for Alinsky, the BYNC—for years his flagship organization—turned segregationist in the 1950s, partly as a consequence of its own success at bringing its immigrant constituents into the "white" middle class. In a painful irony, by the 1960s, Alinsky's organizing with African Americans in Chicago led him to oppose the very organization he and Maritain had seen as a beacon of hope in the 1940s.⁸³

Nevertheless, for all these disappointments, neither Alinsky nor Maritain lost "the democratic faith," as Alinsky always called it. The organizer ended his last book, *Rules for Radicals*, with a chastened yet unwavering profession of that faith. "When Americans can no longer see the stars," he wrote, "the times are tragic. We must believe that it is the darkness before the dawn of a beautiful new world; we will see it when we believe it."⁸⁴ Not long after, in his last extant letter to Alinsky, Maritain proclaimed *Rules* "a great book, admirably free, absolutely fearless, *radically revolutionary*." Rightly seeing through the book's performative cynicism and overblown "realist" rhetoric, which has led many since to fundamentally misunderstand Alinsky, Maritain celebrated his friend for what he was: "an incurable idealist"

⁸¹ Chappel, *Catholic Modern*, 180–181.

⁸² On some of the reasons why, see, e.g., Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*, 51–60, 117–119, 254.

⁸³ Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 45–47. As Warren goes on to recount, however, later generations of Alinsky's students would learn from the cautionary tale of the BYNC, and eventually have much more success building truly cross-racial organizations.

⁸⁴ Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 196.

and “heroic witness of Judaeo-Christian tradition and true democracy.”⁸⁵ The description could just as well have applied to Maritain himself. “You know that I am with you with all my heart and soul,” he confided to Alinsky at the letter’s end.⁸⁶

Was Maritain and Alinsky’s “democratic faith” misplaced? The disappointments they experienced in their own lifetime, and the sorry state of democracies around the world today, certainly give the skeptic reasons to think it might have been. Yet I would argue that one of the most important lessons these figures from the past have to teach us in the present is that commitment to the democratic project is precisely what Alinsky said it was: a faith. Though reality and reason alike may challenge it, whether we abandon the democratic faith is ultimately a choice, an act of morally responsible agency. It is a testimony to the strength of Maritain and Alinsky’s faith in democracy that they never did abandon it, even when they had ample reason to do so. In fact, they first found their faith in the 1930s, at precisely the moment when many were abandoning it—for fascism, communism, nostalgia, or despair. In that respect, our own moment may not be so distinct from theirs, even though the historical conditions under which we live are in other ways, of course, notably different. When faith in democracy is flagging, it is perhaps most important of all to remember that democracy lives by faith.

Not only by faith, however. If we are to have faith in democracy, we must also have some orienting conception of the object of our faith. In this respect, too, Maritain and Alinsky may yet have much to teach us. They recognized that democracy was not simply a form of government or a set of procedures, but a moral vision, way of life, and project. As such, it must be founded upon certain ideas or principles. To morally anchor the project of democracy, both Maritain and Alinsky looked to a certain understanding of the person, according to which she is a free being, possessed of dignity, yet also called to realize herself through participatory relationships of communion. From that simple starting point, they arrived at conclusions Alinsky was right to call “radical,” and Maritain “revolutionary.”

At a time when various thinkers, religious and secular, are reminding us that democracy is a “telic” concept, and calling for a recovery of its moral foundations, the vision of “personalist democracy” offers one promising starting point from which to

⁸⁵ Letter LXXIV (September 19, 1971), in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 111.

⁸⁶ Letter LXXIV (September 19, 1971), in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 112.

proceed.⁸⁷ For those of the Catholic faith, of course, it happens to align quite closely with the doctrinal principles of Catholic social teaching, which is no coincidence, given Maritain's historical influence upon the latter.⁸⁸ Yet both Maritain and Alinsky understood personalist democracy primarily as a *humanistic* project, culturally and historically anchored in Judaism and Christianity (today one might add Islam, the third Abrahamic faith, as well), yet compelling to persons of diverse religious professions and none. Just how compelling the democratic project actually is, however, can only be determined through ongoing dialogue, and actual democratic practice—a conclusion with which both thinkers would emphatically agree.

Indeed, it was a further, fundamental insight of Alinsky and Maritain that democracy could only be incarnated through organization. "The people," in theory, are the protagonists of democracy, yet in practice this is all too rarely the case. This is because, to fulfill their true vocation of pursuing the common good, the diffuse, often conflicting, and invariably imperfect human persons who comprise "the people" must be properly formed, and skillfully organized.⁸⁹ Though democracy may live by faith and be guided by ideals, it is made real only through institutions, and the relationships, practices, and moral formation those institutions make possible. And while Maritain and Alinsky themselves met only limited success in building the institutions they envisioned, the organizers who inherited their legacy have learned much since, creating highly diverse local organizations and national or even trans-national networks whose scale and power far transcend anything Alinsky himself created.⁹⁰ Today, when many of democracy's traditional institutions are in

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy*. A complementary argument is made by James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁸⁸ Though many midcentury Catholic theologians and bishops drew inspiration from Maritain's ideas, he was especially influential upon Pope Paul VI, who presided over the second half of Vatican II and promulgated *Populorum Progressio* (1967). See Allan Figueroa Deck, "Commentary on *Populorum Progressio*," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, Lisa S. Cahill, Charles E. Curran, David Hollenbach, and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 298–299.

⁸⁹ Though I cannot elaborate it here, it is worth noting that there is a striking similarity between the democratic vision of Alinsky and Maritain and the Argentine *teología del pueblo* embraced by Pope Francis, which likewise prioritizes "organizing the people." On the latter, see Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

⁹⁰ On the development of "the Alinsky tradition" after Alinsky see, e.g., Schutz and Miller, *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*; Richard L. Wood and Brad R. Fulton, *A Shared Future: Faith-Based Organizing for Ethical Democracy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

serious crisis, the moment is ripe, and the need urgent, for building new “people’s organizations” and reimagining old ones. To this task, the philosophers and organizers of democracy each have something vital to contribute. They will contribute best, however, if they dialogue with each other.

This speaks to the final respect in which Maritain and Alinsky may still have something to teach us today. Their friendship itself, sustained over decades, was an embodiment of the very democratic solidarity across difference in which both so fervently believed. The devout, French Catholic philosopher, enamored of ideas, and the irreverent Jewish-American organizer, insistent upon action, were profoundly different people. Yet in their shared democratic faith, they found not only a basis for friendship, but a wellspring of grace. The life and work of each was much the richer for it. By learning from their example, our own may be as well. 

Nicholas Hayes-Mota, PhD, is Assistant Director of the Clough Center for the Study of Constitutional Democracy at Boston College, as well as the Center’s inaugural Postdoctoral Research Fellow. He earned his doctorate in Theological Ethics from Boston College. In Fall 2024, he will join the faculty at Santa Clara University as Assistant Professor of Social Ethics.