

## Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal: The Significance of Jacques Maritain's Support for Saul Alinsky and His Methods

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**Abstract:** Jacques Maritain's ideas about democratic renewal remain as important and inspirational as ever. A less well-known element of Maritain's political thinking is his support for grassroots community organizing. This support, peppered throughout his writings, comes into stark relief when examining his longtime friendship and correspondence with Saul Alinsky, the dean of community organizing in the US. This article argues, first, that we must understand Maritain and Alinsky's friendship to properly appreciate the legacy of Maritain's political thought and, second, that understanding the complementarity of their approaches allows us to see that together these two friends present a powerful strategy for democratic renewal. After surveying their friendship, the article presents two insights from their work about community organizing as the pursuit of democratic justice and addresses an objection about Alinsky's methods. The article concludes with the case study of an interfaith community organization to show how it applies Alinsky's methods and embodies the political and ethical values Alinsky and Maritain supported in common.

Jacques Maritain's commitment to the cause of democracy received robust expression in the teachings of Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and the Second Vatican Council. After Maritain died in 1973, his ideas, though never forgotten, became less prominent and influential in Catholic social theory and action. Yet to read his political writings today, fifty years after his death, is to be reminded of his trenchant diagnoses of the ills besetting modern democracies. Many readers will be impressed that his ideas—about the content of the common good, the need for political heroism from both leaders and ordinary citizens, and the indispensable role of Christian action in the renewal of community—remain as important and inspirational as ever.

Maritain's ongoing relevance in this regard can be made clear by attending to a less well-known element of his political thinking: his support for grassroots community organizing. Maritain's masterworks

of political philosophy—*The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (French, 1942; English, 1943), *Christianity and Democracy* (French, 1943; English 1944), *The Person and the Common Good* (French and English, 1947), and *Man and the State* (English, 1951)—are pitched at a high level: he is addressing the worldwide clash of ideologies, the general principles upon which national and international governance should be based, and the reasons Christian philosophy supports pluralist democracy. While he addresses specific political problems and applications throughout his writings, his task was never to lay out the practical methods by which politicians, citizens, social activists, and churches were to enact social change. Maritain was a philosopher, and he left the applications to those with the expertise.

The person with such expertise in whom Maritain placed the greatest stock was his dear, longtime friend, Saul Alinsky. It might seem unlikely that the gentle, scholarly, French-born Catholic philosopher was friends with this confrontational, pragmatic, American secular Jewish activist. Nonetheless, the two men maintained a close relationship for thirty years through letters and occasional visits. They expressed admiration for each other's efforts for justice, championed each other's publications, and cited each other in their own books. In a newspaper review of Alinsky's 1946 book *Reveille for Radicals*, Maritain predicted that it would be "epoch-making," and wrote in a personal letter to Alinsky that he considered *Rules for Radicals* (1971) as "history-making."<sup>1</sup> Hence, one of the greatest Catholic political philosophers of the twentieth century had tremendous respect for Alinsky and his methods of community organizing. Similarly, Alinsky collaborated with Bernard James Sheil, a Catholic auxiliary bishop of Chicago, and others to establish the Industrial Areas Foundation in 1940. The Industrial Areas Foundation trained generations of faith-based community organizers—including Catholic activists such as Edward T. Chambers, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta—and spawned numerous networks of interfaith community organizations whose grassroots work for social justice continues to this day.

The argument that follows is twofold. First, we must understand the friendship of Maritain and Alinsky to properly appreciate the legacy of Maritain's political thought. Second, understanding the complementarity of their approaches—Maritain focused on theory, Alinsky on praxis—allows us to see that together these two friends

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*, ed. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 18, 110.

present a powerful strategy for democratic renewal in societies currently riven by political polarization. After surveying their friendship, this essay presents two insights from their work about community organizing as the pursuit of democratic justice and addresses an objection about Alinsky's methods. Finally, a case study illustrates how current interfaith community organizing manifests the insights of Maritain and Alinsky and shows promise for addressing the current crisis of participatory democracy.

The crisis is as follows: much social power is concentrated in the hands of political and economic elites, and those with power, including control of partisan mass and social media, effectively turn citizens against each other. Citizens become fragmented and angry, and fight over agendas shaped by culture warriors instead of making common cause over shared needs and interests.<sup>2</sup> Commonly termed "political polarization," this crisis is parasitic upon the imbalance of power between elites and ordinary citizens. Many countries around the world are experiencing political polarization and a related rise in populist nationalism, but the focus here will be on the US context. Elites left to their own devices have little interest in practicing a politics of the common good. Community organizations carry the promise of forcing them to do so. That activity—which in this essay I variously call "democratic renewal," "the pursuit of democratic justice," "democratic practices," or "democratic politics"—is what Maritain and Alinsky together show to be necessary and possible.

## TWO MEN AND THEIR FRIENDSHIP

Readers of this essay likely possess a basic familiarity with the outline of Maritain's life, but it will be helpful to summarize Alinsky's work before he met the French philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1909, Alinsky has been called the "dean of community organizing" in the United States.<sup>4</sup> He organized the disenfranchised, usually but not exclusively in urban neighborhoods, to vigorously shame and relentlessly annoy the elites until they agreed to give protesters a share of their power.

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<sup>2</sup> I am painting this summary with a very broad brush. Among recent books with sensible and accessible analyses of these matters, see Keith Payne, *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Think, Live, and Die* (New York: Penguin, 2018) and Peter T. Coleman, *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> The definitive biography of Maritain and his wife is Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Beggars for Heaven*, trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). For Alinsky, it is Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> This epithet for Alinsky is found in many sources, but its origin is unclear; one foundational source is Harry C. Boyte, *Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 39.

The fundamental goal of all community organizing is to develop enduring *power* in the community to make its own changes. As explained by veteran organizer Michael Gecan:

It's all just talk—this use of the word “power,” just like so many other rhetorical claims—unless it is reinforced by the habit and practice of organizing. That's why, when we are called by the neighborhood or religious leaders of a city, we tell them that we won't come to solve a housing problem or an education problem or a low-wage problem. No, we say we'll try to help them solve a more fundamental problem—a power problem. No matter how terrible the conditions may be and no matter how intense the current crisis, we will spend a year or two or three with them *not* addressing these immediate and important issues and concerns. We'll use that time to build the organization and to develop a firm base of power, so that the group will someday have the punch and impact needed to instigate and preserve lasting change.<sup>5</sup>

“Many Jewish sons of immigrants picked up radical politics with their mother's milk; not so with Alinsky,” writes one commentator.<sup>6</sup> Alinsky picked up his interest in urban problems much later, when taking sociology courses at The University of Chicago. He did research on juvenile delinquency and organized crime under the direction of sociologists pioneering ethnographic methods. Alinsky said of his time studying crime, “I learned, among other things, the terrific importance of personal relationships.”<sup>7</sup> The sociologist Clifford Shaw hired Alinsky to help put together the Chicago Area Project, which “unlike traditional settlement house efforts . . . placed trained professionals like Alinsky in support, not leadership, roles.”<sup>8</sup> Alinsky worked in the now-famous Back of the Yards Neighborhood, near meat-packing plants. Because the Chicago Area Project avoided labor organizing and other politically contentious matters, Alinsky grew disenchanted. In response, in 1940 he cofounded the Industrial Areas Foundation to continue working in the Back of the Yards Neighborhood with his own methods.<sup>9</sup>

For Alinsky, community organizing meant connecting with and building up indigenous neighborhood institutions; that, in turn, required working with ethnic Catholics and parishes, as more than

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Gecan, *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 9.

<sup>6</sup> John Clark, “Reveille for Alinsky,” *Commonweal*, June 4, 1990, 360–361.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, “Reveille for Alinsky,” 360.

<sup>9</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 30.

ninety percent of the neighborhood residents were Catholic.<sup>10</sup> Scholars widely agree that “critical to the success of Alinsky’s first organization and all subsequent organizations was the foundational participation of the Catholic Church.”<sup>11</sup> Although older priests in the neighborhood tended to be less supportive, younger priests were more enthusiastic. Several Chicago bishops lent strong support to the Industrial Areas Foundation over the years. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Monsignor George Higgins, and others who founded the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in 1969 were influenced by their collaborations with Alinsky and their familiarity with his methods, and they openly credited him.<sup>12</sup>

The legacy of Alinsky, who died in 1972, is not easily summed up or quantified, but both supporters and critics alike have paid tribute to his organizational genius. Perhaps one of the most telling tributes is that Alinsky’s name continues to strike fear and loathing in the hearts of activists on the far right, even as some of them use his methods of face-to-face meetings and creative publicity-seeking. Alinsky published two books describing these methods, which serve as bookends for his life’s work.<sup>13</sup> *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1946, catapulted him to national attention. The book focuses on his philosophy of radicalism and its democratic roots. He tells stories about community organizing and lays out ambitious plans for the creation of People’s Organizations, intended to connect all the civic, religious, and business institutions within a community. *Rules for Radicals* came out in 1971. Focusing less on an underlying philosophy, this later book conveys the strategies for which Alinsky is famous or infamous, such as “ridicule is man’s most potent weapon” and “pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.”<sup>14</sup> Critics focus more on *Rules* because the later-written book provides juicier sound bites. Yet to a fair-minded reader, the books are highly consistent in presenting Alinsky’s philosophy and methods. One can

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence J. Engel, “The Influence of Saul Alinsky on the Campaign for Human Development,” *Theological Studies* 59, no. 4 (1998): 637, n. 11, doi.org/10.1177/004056399805900403.

<sup>11</sup> Engel, “The Influence of Saul Alinsky,” 637.

<sup>12</sup> Engel, “The Influence of Saul Alinsky,” 641–643.

<sup>13</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946); paperback ed. with new afterword (New York: Vintage, 1969) and *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971; paperback reissue, New York: Vintage, 1989). Alinsky’s other published book was a biography of the longtime president of the United Mine Workers union, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 128, 130.

often look to the earlier book to clarify what Alinsky most likely intended by his provocative statements in the later book.

Exiled in the United States during World War II, Jacques Maritain met Alinsky sometime in the early 1940s, “probably through George N. Schuster, former editor of *Commonweal* and later chair of the board of trustees of the Industrial Areas Foundation.”<sup>15</sup> From the start, “the two men recognized their profound intellectual affinities. Whenever they met, they spent long hours exploring the democratic dream of people working out their own destiny,” writes Bernard Doering, the Maritain scholar who collected the correspondence between the two in a 1994 book appropriately titled, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*. Even though they managed to see each other in person only occasionally, their friendship was very significant to both of them. When Maritain was visiting the United States for the last time in 1966, in declining health, he insisted on visiting three friends, no matter what effort it took: John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black Like Me*, Thomas Merton, and Saul Alinsky. He was able to visit all three.<sup>16</sup>

In their correspondence, running from 1945 to 1971, Maritain and Alinsky show tender affection as well as support for each other through the challenges each encountered in their personal and professional lives. A particularly poignant moment is when Saul’s first wife Helene died on September 2, 1947, in a drowning accident while saving her daughter and another child caught in an undertow on Lake Michigan. Less than two weeks later, Alinsky wrote to Maritain, “It is unbearable for me to discuss what has happened. . . . Helene and I were madly in love with each other for every minute of our 18 years together. . . . [How I will continue on] is one of those things that time will tell, and right now time is a terrible thing. There is nothing more to say. I send you and Raïssa what love there is left inside me.”<sup>17</sup> Maritain wrote back:

My beloved Saul, our hearts are full of your distress and agony, and what is our love capable of, unless suffering with you? Everything human is powerless in the face of such a tragedy, there is no help on earth. We pray for you.

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<sup>15</sup> Doering, “Introduction,” in *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Doering, “Introduction,” in *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, xxx; see also Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain*, 434–436.

<sup>17</sup> Alinsky to Maritain, 15 September 1947, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 32–33.

Saul, she died in love and by love. She saved the children. She accomplished at once what we are gropingly trying to learn: to die for those we love . . .

You cannot be consoled, every fiber of happiness in you has been struck by lightning. Dear Saul, the gift of yourself to others, the work to which you have been assigned, requires you now more than ever . . .

Saul, pardon my poor infirm words. I and Raïssa we love you, we embrace you.<sup>18</sup>

The collected correspondence of Maritain and Alinsky is a lovely testament to friendship across the miles and years, across differences in faith and personality, anchored by shared moral commitments, intellectual fervor, and deep respect for each other and other human beings as unique persons. Why the friendship between Maritain and Alinsky mattered to each—and should matter to those interested in social justice and democratic renewal—is well expressed by Patrisse Cullors, the cofounder of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, in her handbook for making social change: “Interpersonal relationships are important because they are how we build our communities, and healthy connections to other human beings build strong societies.”<sup>19</sup> This quote is a contemporary expression of Aristotle’s ancient insight that “friendship would seem to hold cities together.”<sup>20</sup> Or, as Maritain might have put it, friendship is both the form of the common good and the path to it.

### FIRST INSIGHT: HUMANE REGARD

As one digs into the two men’s publications and correspondence, two insights about community organizing as the pursuit of democratic justice come to light. The first is that community organizers strive to practice *humane regard*, reminding us that all social activism for justice and democratic politics should be grounded in this core value. In *Making Space for Justice*, political philosopher Michele Moody-Adams argues that “what we learn from progressive social movements could be transformative for political theory as well as for political practice.” She offers this insight:

A central element of the moral knowledge generated by social movements is that justice is never simply a matter of “respect for persons”

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<sup>18</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 4 October 1947, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 34–35.

<sup>19</sup> Patrisse Cullors, *An Abolitionist’s Handbook: 12 Steps to Changing Yourself and the World* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2021), 233.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.1, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), 119.

but also demands compassionate concern for others' vulnerability to suffering. The combination of respect and compassionate concern is what I call humane regard, and injustice consists in a society's failure to extend humane regard to all those to whom it is due.<sup>21</sup>

Moody-Adams's argument, developed throughout her book, is that social movements are lived forms of moral inquiry that deepen our insights about the requirements of justice and the shape of democratic cooperation. The praxis of movements extends and enriches the overly rational accounts of justice produced by John Rawls and other political philosophers.

Against right-wing portraits of Alinsky as a Marxist, atheistic thug who stoked class warfare,<sup>22</sup> a fair-minded reading of the organizer's words and deeds show him to be a practitioner of humane regard. Alinsky was seized with a passion to protect the people he called "the Have-Nots" as well as the "Have-a-Little, Want Mores."<sup>23</sup> Despite this use of group-based terminology, he expresses respect for *each* person and *all* groups in their particularity. The beginning of *Reveille for Radicals* illustrates this well. Alinsky opens, "The people of America live everywhere from Back Bay Boston to the Bottoms of Kansas City. From swank Highland Park, Illinois, to slum Harlem, New York."<sup>24</sup> He continues for a few pages, surveying the cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of Americans, as well as the fact that there have always been conservatives, liberals, and radicals. The clash of these identities and ideologies creates the story of American democracy.

Then Alinsky suddenly asks the reader: "How do you feel about people? Do you like people?" He bores into how Americans often answer these questions in their hearts:

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,

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<sup>21</sup> Michele Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice: Social Movements, Collective Imagination, and Political Hope* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 1, 7.

<sup>22</sup> For an overview and explanation of this vitriol, see Dylan Matthews, "Who is Saul Alinsky, and Why Does the Right Hate Him So Much?," *Vox*, July 19, 2016, [www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing](http://www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing). Interestingly, in less polarized times, conservative theologian Richard John Neuhaus said that in both of his books, "Alinsky attempted to channel radical impulses toward the fulfillment of an essentially Madisonian view of American democracy" ("Briefly Noted," *First Things*, April 1990, 58).

<sup>23</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, chap. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 3.



Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, Mexicans, Negroes, and Chinese? Do you regard them with the warm feeling of fellow human beings or with a cold contempt symbolized in Papists, Micks, . . . [other ethnic slurs follow]? If you are one of those who think of people in these derogatory terms, then you don't like people.

You may object to this and say that you do not fall into this classification. You don't call people by such names. You are broad-minded and respect other peoples if they *know their place*—and that place is not close to your own affections. You feel that you are really very tolerant. The chances are that you are an excellent representative of the great American class of MR. BUT.<sup>25</sup>

Alinsky explains that “Mr. But” is the kind of person you meet in respectable society who says things like, “Now nobody can say that I'm not a friend of the Mexicans or that I am prejudiced, BUT—. Nobody can say that I am anti-Semitic. Why, some of my best friends are Jews, BUT—. . . Anybody knows that I would be the first to fight against this injustice, BUT—.”<sup>26</sup>

This is a remarkable passage for a popular book written at the end of World War II. More remarkable, to my mind, is that Alinsky continues his litany, calling out the ways Irish Catholics, Jews, African-Americans, Mexicans, and Polish people are prone to make the same justifications. His point is that being a member of an oppressed group does not let you off the hook. The higher calling, the personal virtue, is to love other people in the sense of respecting them and trying to get along with them—to love in deed and not just in word. Yet, being realistic about human nature and not much of a moralizer, Alinsky is asking, at minimum, that people stop being hypocrites.

This, then, is Alinsky's moral core: respect for other individuals, which he associates with the verbs “love” and “like.” In Christian teaching, this moral core is known as the love command. For Maritain, love underlies every authentic human action for justice and exerts a moral power that orients social activism to its proper end, the common good. Maritain saw this authentic power working in and through Alinsky, even at his most confrontational. He wrote in a letter to his friend: “All your fighting effort as an organizer is quickened *in reality* by *love for the human being, and for God*, though you refuse to admit it.”<sup>27</sup> In another letter, Maritain wrote:

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<sup>25</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 7–8.

<sup>27</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 14 September 1964, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 106.

You—being a Jew (whom I consider a Christian at heart, a better Christian perhaps than I am) committed to the quest of justice on earth—are giving priority to the first of love’s requirements, and offering your life for the temporal salvation and emancipation of mankind. . . . You act and fight also . . . for the recovery by man of his inner, moral dignity—that is to say, finally, even if you do not have such a purpose in your mind, for his spiritual redemption.<sup>28</sup>

Maritain was nearing the end of his life when Karl Rahner developed the concept of “anonymous Christian”;<sup>29</sup> while Maritain may not have known the term, that is essentially what he is calling Alinsky in these letters. Alinsky did not demur; he always kindly accepted Maritain’s expressions of prayers and blessings.

Maritain similarly affirms that Christians and the church have a moral responsibility “to exist with the people,” as he put it in the title of a 1953 essay. “*To exist with* is an ethical category. It does not mean loving someone in the mere sense of wishing him well; it means loving someone in the sense of becoming one with him, of bearing his burdens, of living a common moral life with him, of feeling with him and suffering with him.”<sup>30</sup> The people are “the mass of non-privileged ones . . . that moral community which is centered on manual labor . . . [with] a certain way of understanding and living out suffering, poverty, hardship, and especially work itself . . . a certain way of being ‘always the same ones who get killed.’”<sup>31</sup> Because the people, the poor, were those whom Christ loved, and because they are the “mass” in which the vital life of a new civilization takes root, the church and its members are bound to them.

Alinsky’s community organizing and Maritain’s ecclesiology center on the virtue and praxis of humane regard. For Alinsky, organizing achieves nothing permanent if activists and the citizens they inspire do not genuinely love all other people. For Maritain, the church is not the church if its members do not genuinely love all other people. Both men were impatient with the hypocrisy of Christians who do not exist with and serve the people. In *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky cautions organizers that it may be difficult for them to appeal to the

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<sup>28</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 5 November 1962, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> One of Rahner’s earliest articles about his concept was “Anonymous Christianity,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Longman & Todd, 1969), 390–398.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Maritain, “To Exist with the People,” in *The Range of Reason* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1953), 121.

<sup>31</sup> Maritain, “To Exist with the People,” 122. It is not clear what Maritain is quoting here; he may just be citing a popular phrase.

moral beliefs of Christians they organize, for “here is a Christian civilization where most people have gone to church and have mouthed various Christian doctrines, and yet this is really not part of their experience because they haven’t lived it. Their church experience has been purely a ritualistic decoration.”<sup>32</sup> Maritain understood and approved Alinsky’s criticisms of religious hypocrisy and inaction; in fact, in *Rules*, Alinsky used a quote from Maritain’s *Man and the State*: “The fear of soiling ourselves by entering the context of history is not virtue, but a way of escaping virtue.”<sup>33</sup> As Maritain wrote elsewhere, “The faith must be an actual faith, practical and living. To believe in God must mean to live in such a manner that life could not possibly be lived if God did not exist. Then the earthly hope in the Gospel can become the quickening force of temporal history.”<sup>34</sup>

## SECOND INSIGHT: SUBSIDIARITY AND SOLIDARITY THROUGH COMPROMISE AND CONFLICT

A second insight that arises from the praxis of community organizing is that two polarities can be held together: local action by civic groups is complemented by systematic policy action by the government, and the conflict generated by grassroots activism paves the way toward negotiated agreements in which each side compromises. To start with the first polarity, critics have tried to tar Alinsky with the label of statism. At minimum, the criticism goes, his views violate Catholic teachings on subsidiarity and overemphasize government solutions; at worst, Alinsky is a subtle or not-so-subtle communist. However, Alinsky’s philosophy is thoroughly democratic. *Reveille for Radicals* discusses democracy and democratic ideals explicitly on about one-third of its pages. Two representative quotes are these:

The Radical is deeply interested in social planning but just as deeply suspicious of and antagonistic to any idea of plans which work from the top down. Democracy to him is working from the bottom up.<sup>35</sup>

Democracy is that system of government and that economic and social organization in which the worth of the individual human being and the multiple loyalties of that individual are the most fully recognized and provided for . . . loyalties to their churches, their labor unions,

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<sup>32</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 25–26; see Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 63.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Meaning of Contemporary Atheism,” in *The Range of Reason*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 17.

their fraternal organizations, their social groups, their nationality groups, their athletic groups, their political parties, and many others. Democracy provides for the fulfillment of the hopes and loyalties of our people to all of the various institutions and groups of which they are a part.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, in both *Reveille* and *Rules*, there are very few mentions of communism, socialism, and thinkers associated with these ideologies; such mentions are usually just descriptive, and sometimes they are critical. Alinsky once said in an interview, “I’ve never joined any organization—not even the ones I’ve organized myself. I prize my own independence too much. And philosophically, I could never accept any rigid dogma or ideology, whether it’s Christianity or Marxism.”<sup>37</sup>

There is plenty of evidence in Alinsky’s writings and actions to show that even milder concerns about his supposed statism are misplaced. The just-quoted statements about democracy working from the bottom upward and providing for the fulfillment of people’s group loyalties are consonant with Catholicism’s principle of subsidiarity and its respect for mediating institutions. Like Catholic social theorists, Alinsky balances appeals to subsidiarity with appeals to solidarity; for instance: “The Radical . . . is that person to whom the common good is the greatest personal value. He is that person who genuinely and completely believes in mankind. The Radical is so completely identified with mankind that he personally shares the pain, the injustices, and the sufferings of all his fellow men.”<sup>38</sup> Based on this philosophy, Alinsky spends a remarkable amount of space in *Reveille* criticizing labor organizations and leaders of his day for such flaws as practicing racial segregation, becoming inward-looking special interest groups, and failing to challenge the structures of state capitalism.

The center of gravity in community organizing is the grassroots. The work of organizing is building group solidarity through interpersonal relationships. The entire goal is to facilitate ordinary people’s ability to forge grassroots solutions to their problems. Community organizing is a viable way of implementing the “see, judge, act” pastoral process as recommended by Catholic social thinkers. For Alinsky, as for Catholic social thought, the full promise of political and economic democracy will involve structural changes

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<sup>36</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 85–86.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Norden, “Saul Alinsky: *Playboy* Interview (1972),” *Scraps from the Loft*, May 1, 2018, [scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/saul-alinsky-playboy-interview-1972/](http://scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/saul-alinsky-playboy-interview-1972/).

<sup>38</sup> Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 15.

and social planning, but through initiatives that emerge from the bottom up. The bottom-up approach makes personal character and interpersonal relationships important for its success. A sense of responsibility to others and the ability to compromise are not mere tools for the success of a political program; they are the qualities we should want to characterize our social relationships. “A society devoid of compromise is totalitarian,” Alinsky writes. “If I had to define a free and open society in one word, the word would be ‘compromise.’”<sup>39</sup>

According to Luke Bretherton, in his ethnographic-ethical study of faith-based community organizations in the United Kingdom, Alinsky-style organizing supplements this civil conception of politics with a more conflictual conception. What kind of conflict? Not violence, for sure. Alinsky-style conflictual politics employs such methods as naming and shaming the entity that needs to change—such as a business or city council—through dramatic public actions and other forms of protest. The goal is to annoy, frustrate, cut into the profits of, and generate negative publicity about those in power, to make them implement the changes those with less power are seeking. In this way, those organizing and demonstrating are developing *relational power*. Relational power changes the dynamic from one where the wealthy have “power over” the poor, to one where citizens have “power with” each other and “to get things done collectively.”<sup>40</sup>

This mix of conflict and compromise remains healthily democratic because it is ultimately directed toward the common good. Bretherton labels this understanding of political life as *consociational* or *confederal*. A consociational polity “is made up of a plurality of interdependent, self-organizing associations.”<sup>41</sup> The common good of a consociational polity does not require angelic consensus and an absence of conflict. Maritain often points out that democracy is imperfect, since it is an association of imperfect human beings: “Democracy can be awkward, messy, clumsy, defective, open to the risk of betraying itself by yielding to instincts of cowardice, or of oppressive violence. . . . Yet democracy is the only way through which the progressive energies in human history do pass.”<sup>42</sup> In *Reflections on America*, Maritain singled out the American system of democracy as “in my opinion the best conceived and the most efficient (at least in

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<sup>39</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 168.

<sup>42</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 60.

the long run) among all existing democratic regimes,” in part because it was not made for perfect beings.<sup>43</sup>

Maritain understood that, when guided by a commitment to the common good, willingness to engage in conflict is a necessary and valuable path to democratic justice. That is why he praises Alinsky’s organizing work in these same pages of *Reflections on America*; he does so not simply because Alinsky’s methods secure benefits for the working classes and poor neighborhoods, but because Alinsky patiently worked to build up genuine community among people.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere Maritain expressed how much he admired “the spirit of self-effacement and combative generosity which is required from those who start these people’s organizations. . . . The manner in which, starting from selfish interests, they 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.”<sup>45</sup> Fighting for justice from a position of self-interest and group-preference as an interim step on the journey to the common good is appropriate, perhaps necessary, for Christians as well. In a statement suggestive of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the “creative tension” generated by nonviolent civil disobedience, Maritain wrote, all the way back in 1939, “The work the Christian has to do is to keep up and to increase in the world the internal tension and movement of slow and painful deliverance, a tension and movement due to the invisible powers of truth and justice, of goodness and love, acting on the mass which is opposed to them.”<sup>46</sup>

#### ADDRESSING AN OBJECTION: THE PROBLEM OF MEANS

Although Maritain and Alinsky each accepted that grassroots action for justice is by turns conflictual and conciliatory, the friends

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 170.

<sup>44</sup> Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 165.

<sup>45</sup> This quote is from a review of *Reveille for Radicals* Maritain published in the *New York Post* and sent to Alinsky in an October 9, 1945, letter. The review is reprinted in full in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 18–20.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Maritain, “Confession of Faith,” in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 370. King wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.” King used this phrase here and there in his speeches and writings; one other direct discussion was when he was interviewed by *Playboy* magazine. For the “Letter” and the interview quotations, see James W. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 291, 514.

had very different ways of talking about that. Maritain was calm, rational, and systematic, while Alinsky was fiery, contrarian, and mercurial. The portrait of Alinsky as a class warrior certainly owes much to his provocative words. Conservative polemicists have taken those words out of context but, still, Alinsky gave them something to work with. Nowhere is this truer than on the topic of means and ends. Not only the polemicists, but also those with cooler heads, including Maritain himself, have concerns with how Alinsky addressed the relationship of means and ends. That Alinsky recommends an amoral or excessively consequentialist approach is an objection that must be addressed.

Alinsky's harshest critics all cite heavily from chapter 2 of *Rules for Radicals*. For instance, David Horowitz, the arch-conservative author, writes, "The most important chapter of Alinsky's manual is called '[Of] Means and Ends,' and is designed to address Alinsky's biggest problem: How to explain to radicals who think of themselves as creating a world of perfect justice and harmony, that the means they must use to get there are Machiavellian—deceitful, conniving, and ruthless?"<sup>47</sup> In my view, that is a wholly inaccurate description of Alinsky's intentions, even though this second chapter of *Rules* does sow confusion. It is the one part of the book that bothered Maritain, although he praised the book as a whole. In a long letter gratefully acknowledging his receipt of an inscribed copy as a gift, Maritain spends several pages pushing back on Alinsky's discussion of means and ends which, he says, makes him "jumpy."<sup>48</sup>

In the chapter in question, Alinsky frames the issue by stating, "That perennial question, 'Does the end justify the means?' is meaningless as it stands; the real and only question regarding the ethics of means and ends is, and always has been, 'Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means?'"<sup>49</sup> The chapter as a whole names and illustrates eleven "rules" for the ethics of means and ends. The chapter is maddening because it is never clear when Alinsky is speaking normatively and when he is speaking descriptively. Often he is describing the way human social nature works, such as in his second rule, "The judgment of the ethics of means is dependent upon the political position of those sitting in judgment."<sup>50</sup> The point here is that those in power will claim moral superiority for what they do,

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<sup>47</sup> David Horowitz, *Barack Obama's Rules for Revolution: The Alinsky Model* (Sherman Oaks, CA: David Horowitz Freedom Center, 2009), 44.

<sup>48</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 19 September 1971, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 26.

regardless. At other times, Alinsky is prudentially stating how the means have to be rhetorically framed to be effective, as in his tenth rule, “You do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral garments.”<sup>51</sup> At yet other times he is speaking normatively, as when he says, in conjunction with the fifth rule, “To me ethics is doing what is best for the most.”<sup>52</sup> These are my interpretations of when Alinsky is speaking descriptively, prudentially, and normatively, as he does not signal his interpretations or when he might be shifting the discourse.

Maritain reads the chapter similarly. In his letter, he reminds Alinsky that there are two different truths involved in this matter. The first is a philosophical truth that some means, such as torture or killing the innocent, cannot be justified by any end. The second is a truth of human experience that “moral justifications . . . are, in an immense number of cases, but a mask used to hide . . . often the vilest motivations.” Maritain continues, “The second truth you see with such keenness, and you emphasize it so strongly that it seems sometimes to be the only one compatible with a realistic approach.”<sup>53</sup> Maritain believes his old friend is not truly saying that, in principle, any and all means could be justified, but rather calling out hypocrisy with his characteristic frankness. According to one interpreter, Jacques is essentially saying here, “You know better than that, Saul.”<sup>54</sup>

Some years before, in *Man and the State*, Maritain had devoted the entire second chapter to “the problem of means” which, he said, “is a basic, *the* basic problem in political philosophy.”<sup>55</sup> He lays out in careful detail the distinction he wrote about to Alinsky, which allowed him to feel comfortable with the book. In fact, Maritain articulates several distinctions and identifies different situations in which the problem of means appears, each with its own nuances. One situation is that of pressure groups. Maritain discusses their tactics of pressure and agitation in the context of how people in a free society assert their control over the state. Pressure methods exist alongside methods such as voting and political speech. Pressure tactics are “normal” but “questionable” as a means of *standard* popular control; rather, they are “the flesh-and-blood means of political warfare” used “in certain

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<sup>51</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 36.

<sup>52</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 19 September 1971, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 111–112.

<sup>54</sup> C. J. Wolfe, “Lessons from the Friendship of Jacques Maritain with Saul Alinsky,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 16 (2011): 238, doi.org/10.5840/cssr20111620.

<sup>55</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 54.



critical moments.”<sup>56</sup> A bit later, Maritain praises “the means of spiritual warfare” such as those practiced by Gandhi. Anticipating how Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement would take up these means, Maritain says they are the way Christians “transform society by making it actually Christian, actually inspired by the Gospel.”<sup>57</sup>

Maritain was supportive of King’s nonviolent methods of civil disobedience and recommended them in a letter to Alinsky as congenial to his own methods.<sup>58</sup> Alinsky was somewhat cool to King’s methods, finding them not feisty enough, at least for the contexts in which he was working; he was likely also somewhat jealous of King’s popularity.<sup>59</sup> Alinsky never advocated violence; he simply was willing to use methods of shaming and ridicule against business leaders and politicians if milder methods were not availing. It is important to note as well that Alinsky devotes a whole chapter of *Rules* to communication as a two-way process of talking and listening and never getting ahead of where the people are, and he says that the door always has to be open for compromise with the opponent.<sup>60</sup> This latter stance is expressed in one of the mantras of community organizing: “No permanent enemies, no permanent friends, just permanent interests.” Community organizers should be focused on the interests of the people in order to improve their lives and should be flexible in making new alliances with those willing to help the people achieve their goals.

### MARITAIN’S AND ALINSKY’S INSIGHTS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING TODAY

This final section gives an example of a community organization to show how it practices Alinsky’s methods and embodies the political and ethical values Alinsky and Maritain supported in common. Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut (CONNECT) is one of three major interfaith community organizations in Connecticut, based in the south-central region of the state. In keeping with the Catholic focus of this journal and Maritain’s philosophy, I will highlight how

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<sup>56</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Maritain to Alinsky, 14 September 1964, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 105–107.

<sup>59</sup> Such was the opinion of Alinsky’s associate Ralph Helstein, who met periodically with King and often tried to get Alinsky to partner with him. See Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, 470–471.

<sup>60</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 59, 81–97.

CONNECT's history and current activities are intertwined with the history and activities of the local Catholic Church.<sup>61</sup>

Founded in 2011, CONNECT grew out of an earlier network, Elm City Congregations Organized, dating back to the 1990s. Peter Rosazza, now emeritus auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Hartford, was a central figure in the birth of Elm City Congregations Organized and has strongly supported CONNECT over the years. CONNECT was an IAF organization<sup>62</sup> having received funding from the local and national Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Among its current thirty-nine member institutions—mostly congregations comprising Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Friends, and Unitarian communities—are four Catholic parishes and the Office of the Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Hartford.<sup>63</sup> Five of the nineteen members of the combined executive and strategy team are Catholic.<sup>64</sup>

Like other Alinsky-style organizations, CONNECT builds power through “organized people and organized money,” to cite one of its mantras; the latter part of the phrase refers to institutional dues. CONNECT also strengthens its power through building relationships within and among congregations, training emerging congregational leaders, collaborating with allied organizations, and developing relationships of mutual accountability with elected officials. CONNECT organizers develop solidarity by engaging people in face-to-face conversations to learn about what social concerns these people face—what problems “keep them up at night,” a phrase the organizers often use. CONNECT congregational leaders conduct house campaigns at the start of a roughly two-year organizing cycle, to gather and filter these concerns into larger, cross-congregational forums at which public policy objectives or other concrete goals are formulated. To ensure that their policy aims are effective and achievable, CONNECT has two standing task forces—one on health and mental health issues and one on criminal justice reform—to research problems and solutions. CONNECT then holds large assemblies of several hundred members to which elected officials are invited; during election

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<sup>61</sup> CONNECT member organizations are largely located in New Haven county and Fairfield county. The Archdiocese of Hartford covers New Haven, Hartford, and Litchfield counties, and the Diocese of Bridgeport covers Fairfield county. Thus, CONNECT straddles two dioceses, but its relationship to the Archdiocese of Hartford is stronger and more direct.

<sup>62</sup> Until just recently; now it is independent.

<sup>63</sup> CONNECT, “Who We Are,” [weconnect.org/about/](http://weconnect.org/about/).

<sup>64</sup> CONNECT, *Celebrating 10 Years of Impact*, November 2021, 7, [weconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CONNECT-10year-FINAL-Digital.pdf](http://weconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CONNECT-10year-FINAL-Digital.pdf).

seasons, they hold candidate forums. In either case, on every specific issue, a CONECT member will present powerful personal testimony to the politicians, state the specific policy goal of the organization, and ask politicians to clearly state “yes or no” as to their support for the policy, with a limited amount of time to explain their answer.

Through this method, CONECT has won policy changes that benefit all citizens, including their member churches, lifting poor and marginalized citizens to participate more fully in society. Their two most recent policy victories, in 2021, were (1) the passage of a state bill to provide for the standardized collection of Race, Ethnicity, and Language (REaL) data on healthcare, to identify and address racial inequities across healthcare in Connecticut; and (2) the passage of “Clean Slate” legislation, which issues the automatic erasure of criminal records for certain convictions after a set period of time for individuals who remain free of the criminal justice system upon release from custody. This commonsense reform in the justice system allows citizens who have successfully returned to society to have improved opportunities for employment and housing. The governor signed this bill into law on June 10, 2021, making Connecticut only the fourth state in the nation to adopt a Clean Slate law. Over the past decade, CONECT has also played a key role in supporting the national “Do Not Stand Idly By” campaign for reducing gun violence; holding down health insurance rate increases; achieving measures to help immigrants safely integrate into local communities; promoting environmental protection; and passing legislation to protect minority and autistic students from excessive restraints.<sup>65</sup>

CONECT has shown itself to be motivated by humane regard, and it practices a strategy of grassroots solidarity to achieve public policy wins for the good of all people in the civic community. To recall, humane regard means unifying compassionate concern for others’ vulnerability with larger, more abstract appeals for justice. CONECT builds its issues-agenda out of the lived experience of its members in their communities; throughout its work to win change, the organization highlights the personal stories beneath the issues. For instance, at a CONECT forum with candidates for statewide office in October, 2018, Kristin Song, the mother of Ethan Song, who died by a discharge from an unsecured handgun at a friend’s house, told the story of her terrible loss and then put the candidates on record as to whether they supported the passage of Ethan’s Law. This law, requiring citizens to safely secure guns in their homes, was signed into

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<sup>65</sup> See CONECT, *Celebrating 10 Years*, for more on these and other achievements.

effect by the governor in June 2019.<sup>66</sup> As another example, the opportunity to listen to people affected by the lingering effects of misdemeanors strongly motivated CONECT members to work for passing the Clean Slate law.

Through grassroots organizing, CONECT identifies issues that affect the lives of ordinary people in the pews and the community. It advances issues having broad-based support its diverse members can endorse even if they disagree on other issues that tend to be divisive in culture wars. CONECT is thereby facilitating politics as a civic and civil activity, an expression of politics that is consociational and constructive. On the opposite side of the spectrum from this form of politics is what political scientist Eitan Hersh calls “political hobbyism.”<sup>67</sup> Political hobbyism means following political news, websites, and podcasts and then complaining about issues to family and friends and in online forums. Hersh conducted a survey that found that one-third of Americans say they spend at least two hours a day involved in “politics,” but for four-fifths of this group, this involvement consists solely of political hobby activities. Such activity is not real politics, argues Hersh—hobbyism does not serve others concretely, build coalitions, win votes, or convince other people to join a cause. All it does is make people angry in ways that are unhealthy for themselves and their local communities.

These examples demonstrate that CONECT’s community organizing reflects the two insights of the Maritain-Alinsky alliance—humane regard and consociational politics. Its work also displays an ethical use of means. Like other Alinsky-style organizations, CONECT is transparent about its policy goals; it works with whoever is in office, regardless of party; it advocates for issues, not candidates; and it employs confrontational methods only when dialogue and collaboration are blocked by those in power. CONECT’s two most confrontational activities have been challenging a local police department on its use of racial profiling and demonstrating against a restaurant that had been the site of repeated gun violence, eventually leading to the closure of the establishment when its liquor license was not renewed.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Joseph De Avila, “Ethan’s Law in Connecticut Tightens Gun-Storage Requirements,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2019, [www.wsj.com/articles/ethans-law-in-connecticut-tightens-gun-storage-requirements-11560460960](http://www.wsj.com/articles/ethans-law-in-connecticut-tightens-gun-storage-requirements-11560460960).

<sup>67</sup> Eitan Hersh, *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

<sup>68</sup> See CONECT, *Celebrating 10 Years*, 10, 15; Mary O’Leary, “The Rev. James Manship of St. Rose of Lima in New Haven Reassigned to Meriden Parish,” *New Haven Register*, May 14, 2017,

All CONECT's issue-based activities require some impingement on the interests of others. Often these impacts are quite minor and spread out, requiring the redirection of some public spending, the collection of data at the governmental level, or the practice of greater responsibility by citizens, as in the case of Ethan's Law. Such impingements are justified by the value of policy change for the common good. In the police profiling and unsafe restaurant cases, the violations of justice by certain actors were clear, and facts supported the need for accountability. CONECT used nonviolent methods to draw public attention to the injustices and mount public support for remediating problems through democratic avenues.

## CONCLUSION

Charles Curran argued in a 1985 essay that Alinsky's community organizing method is a praxis for social justice originally distinctive to the United States and that it merited theoretical attention of theologians and ethicists similar to the attention they gave to the praxis of Latin American liberation theology. "Unfortunately," Curran claimed, "the theological and the ethical communities in Roman Catholicism have not reflected on this phenomenon."<sup>69</sup> Curran's article was attempting to give a platform for Alinsky's methods at a time when Maritain's endorsements were being forgotten and when Alinsky and community-organizing were not yet enjoying much scholarly attention in any discipline.

The paucity of reflection remained the case for roughly two decades, but fortunately, the new millennium has seen sociologists of religion and Christian ethicists paying more and more attention to community organizing. Many of those who write about community organizing are or have been active in the practice themselves. Sociologists, such as Richard L. Wood, have conducted ethnographic studies of faith-based community organizations and their practices of citizenship.<sup>70</sup> The work of Bretherton, straddling ethnography and theological ethics, has been noted above. In 2010, Jeffrey Stout published *Blessed Are the Organized*, which had a galvanizing effect

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[www.nhregister.com/connecticut/article/The-Rev-James-Manship-of-St-Rose-of-Lima-in-New-11313803.php](http://www.nhregister.com/connecticut/article/The-Rev-James-Manship-of-St-Rose-of-Lima-in-New-11313803.php).

<sup>69</sup> Charles E. Curran, "Saul D. Alinsky, Catholic Social Practice, and Catholic Theory," in *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 147.

<sup>70</sup> Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) and, with Brad R. Fulton, *A Shared Future: Faith-Based Organizing for Racial Equity and Ethical Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

on the religious study of community organizing.<sup>71</sup> Trained by ethicists such as Luke Bretherton, Gary Dorrien, and Stephen Pope, a younger generation of Christian ethicists are now devoting their research to community organizations.<sup>72</sup> In Catholic ethics, this generation includes Nicholas Hayes-Mota, whose complementary article on the Maritain-Alinsky alliance appears in this issue. Hayes-Mota has also argued that methods of relational accountability, used in broad-based community organizing, should be applied to the crisis of trust in the Catholic Church in the wake of the child sex abuse scandal.<sup>73</sup>

The only difference between Curran's wish in the mid-1980s and the recent burgeoning scholarly interest in community organizing is that there is not a large, explicitly Catholic subgenre in this literature. But that situation is fine, even preferable. Community organizing in the Alinsky style is interfaith, broad-based (involving many ethnic, racial, and social groups), and cross-institutional. The healthiest scholarly approach, then, is for thinkers from many religious traditions to articulate why their own tradition has a stake and role to play in pluralist democratic practices, and to encourage their coreligionists to become committed to collaborating with others in civic efforts. Such is the approach Maritain recommended when explaining why people intellectually divided by their fundamental beliefs nonetheless could and should support international human rights documents and UN peacebuilding efforts.<sup>74</sup>

Maritain and Alinsky reached outward from their own perspectives and learned from each other. From their dialogue we can take lessons. Alinsky's outlook can be appreciated as congenial to Catholic social thought, while providing challenges and corrections to its residual status-quo-ism. On the other side, Maritain's common good philosophy provides a guiding star to keep Alinsky-style organizing focused beyond the group's interests and directed to its stated higher civic goals. What Maritain saw in his friend's outlook was not class

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<sup>71</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> One of them is Aaron Stauffer; see "The Relational Meeting as a Political and Religious Practice," *Political Theology* 23, nos. 1–2 (2022): 167–173, doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1899704, and "Radical Democracy and Sacred Values: John Dewey's Ethical Democracy, Sheldon Wolin's Fugitive Democracy and Politics of Tending, and Cornel West's Revolutionary Christianity," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (2021): 72–92, doi.org/10.5406/21564795.42.2.02.

<sup>73</sup> Nicholas Hayes-Mota, "An Accountable Church? Broad-Based Community Organizing and Ecclesial Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2023): 111–128, doi.org/10.5840/jsce202342183.

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Maritain, "The Possibilities for Co-operation in a Divided World," in *The Range of Reason*, 172–184.

warfare or militant secularism, but a quest for justice animated by love of neighbor and, implicitly, love of God. Maritain offers an apologia for Alinsky, which should challenge some American Catholics' too-easy dismissal of Alinsky and his legacy as expressed in contemporary activist movements.

Moreover, all those who care about the fate of democracy have something to learn. In *Blessed Are the Organized*, Stout concludes that "the imbalance of power between ruling elites and ordinary citizens is the principal cause of democracy's current ills. . . . It can be set straight only if broad-based organizing is scaled up significantly, only if it extends its reach much more widely throughout American society than it has to date."<sup>75</sup> Edward Chambers, Alinsky's Catholic protégé who built enduring community organizations around the US, concludes his *Roots for Radicals* in a similar vein: "The traditional political parties will not work for the twenty-first century. . . . This century's refounders must create new instruments for public life based not on technology or science but on communal habits of the heart. New radical, nonpartisan, international assemblies must be created and fostered as countervailing institutions."<sup>76</sup> Will such scaling up happen? Of that, neither Stout nor Chambers is sure. But we can confidently conclude, with Maritain, that the messy practice of grassroots democracy "is the only way through which the progressive energies in human history do pass."<sup>77</sup> **M**

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<sup>75</sup> Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 286.

<sup>76</sup> Edward T. Chambers and Michael A. Cohen, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 137.

<sup>77</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 60.