



The Lit Review Podcast

English Transcript

Episode Number: 51

Guest/Topic: Maira Khwaja on *Rules for Radicals* by Saul Alinsky

Originally Recorded: October 30, 2020

Episode Release Date: November 9, 2020

Episode Length: 48:42

[Intro context: Monica and Page talk about the almost-confirmed results of the 2020 Presidential election, some local Chicago election wins and losses, and what they loved about their conversation with Maira Khwaja on Rules for Radicals.]

Monica Trinidad (00:01):

Well, here we are, post-election day. And many of us, certainly not me, are all obsessively refreshing Twitter right now for updates on polling numbers for the remaining states. Even though we know or should remember that the defeat of Trump in an elected position doesn't mean Trumpism aka white supremacy just magically dissipates when Biden takes office. Democracy is not saved. Biden is a rapist, Kamala is a cop. Yet organizers on the ground are smart. And we know that we have to create the conditions that we want to organize within. And so that's why we participate in the shit show. So there's that. How are you hanging in there, Page?

Page May (00:46):

Well said. I mean, elections are always an interesting time for me to pay attention to my own reactions and thought processes. Everyone's really anxious. I'm trying to not be online too much. But the one thing that I noticed in myself was I'm surprised at how surprised I am that Trump

almost won. I, when he first won, was in the like, "Obviously he's going to win camp." And then this round was like, "Clearly he's going to lose." I thought out of...

Page (01:21):

I participate in electoral campaigns in the sense that I organize campaigns that create urgency to get someone out of office. And I believe fiercely in our ability to vote people out. So I'm just struggling with how close it was. And I'm frustrated with myself for being so surprised, because I know where we live. And I think this episode is actually going to speak to that really well. That it's just the veil is off a little bit, but I've always known what's underneath. But Tracy Chapman made a beautiful appearance [on TV], and my younger self was screaming. My older self was screaming. That was amazing. And thank you, Tracy Chapman, if you're listening, I love you.

Monica (02:06):

Oh my God. If Tracy Chapman listens to The Lit Review, I would die. Her performance brought tears to my eyes. I, every time she sings that line, "Poor people gonna rise up and take what's theirs," I'm like, "Yes." I feel that in my soul. I'm just trying to conserve my energy as best as possible because I feel like I'm being pulled in all these different places mentally. And so I'm like, "Okay, focus on what you can control." But the retaliation and the backlash and all of that post-Biden win, I'm scared. And I'm just looking toward my mentors and close community for guidance in this moment, because everything just feels really hard. But all I know is that we just got to keep each other safe, keep keeping each other safe, especially in the streets, through continuing mutual aid, continuing to safety plan and building out all these networks of care, right?

Page (03:04):

Yeah. We're recording this on Friday night and it looks like Biden has pretty much officially won and is maybe going to give his speech soon. And now I am in the like, "Oh, I can't believe Joe Biden is our president. I hate it, oh." But I'm excited to protest him and to make new things possible. I think I'm in a place of thinking a lot about how our work needs to think about rural and city tensions. And I'm really concerned about what I think we're all bracing ourselves for

another increase of white supremacy's violence and retaliation, and that's where my anxiety has been about leading up to and after inauguration for so long and here we are.

Page (04:01):

And in Chicago it was also really sad when majority for Biden, but we lost the Fair Tax. And also Judge Toomin, a horrible racist judge who locks up children, was able to keep his seat and that's really heartbreaking. So it's a moment of loss. It's a moment of anxiety, but we do have to just keep fighting to keep each other safe and building those relationships because they matter.

Monica (04:36):

Yeah, no, absolutely. This past week a video went viral in Chicago of a woman who confronted Lori Lightfoot about supporting Toomin. And Lori Lightfoot got in this person's face like no social distancing. And basically said, "Toomin is a great judge, Toomin is great."

Page (05:00):

And then called CTU liars and CTU hadn't even done anything about this where it's just this weird flattening of the left as like. Also, she was not about to fight anybody. And I love that she was trying to act like she was. Like, "Excuse me, ma'am, no."

Monica (05:17):

Oh my God.

Page (05:19):

"No one believes anything you're saying or what you're doing."

Monica (05:21):

I know, I know, I know. I'm relieved that Kim Foxx kept her seat, our state's attorney. And I shout out also specifically, I saw some on Twitter or some statistics from the 35th ward in Chicago, whose residents went really hard and overwhelmingly voted to keep Kim in office compared to the city and county numbers. And majority, yes on Fair Tax, majority said no to

Toomin. So I'm really thankful for the socialist alderman in Chicago. And just speaking to the power of local place-based organizing, which brings us to the book we're talking about today, which is *Rules for Radicals* by the late Chicago organizer, Saul Alinsky.

Monica (06:08):

Maira did a great job at breaking down the tactics and strategies of Alinsky-style organizing that many of us are mildly familiar with and that works as standalone tactics. But we also know that there's some complicated and problematic things that Alinsky's presenting here. The one thing that Maira said that stuck out to me during our conversation is that there's this legacy here of what we're trying to untangle ourselves from and that to do it effectively, we have to know that history. So that's what I'm feeling about this conversation. It was awesome. What did you think about it?

Page (06:42):

Yeah. I mean, I loved it. Maira's wonderful. And maybe it's a Chicago thing, but if you are an organizer here in Chicago, you've definitely heard about Alinsky, but you might not have read his book or been trained, but he has a very strong influence here and a lot of pushback and critique. What I loved about this episode is what I love about this podcast generally, which is that it's a chance to just talk to folks that are organizing, that are applying things that they're learning from books and seeing how they actually work in the world that we live in and in combination with all of our ideas. So it's a great episode. Listen up. Great overview and really, really helpful for thinking about organizing campaigns and organizations, I think especially, which is what we're going to need more of over these coming weeks and months and years.

[MUSICAL INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music begins from the hip hop song "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Monica: *You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.*

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

Mariame Kaba voiceover: "I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against..."

[Protest Chanting and drumming] "CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [Inaudible chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"

Page voiceover at protest rally: "We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"

Young person voiceover: "...I remember it, she was shot by my house -"

Mariame voiceover: "...In sharing our ideas, we're stronger..."

[Music Lyrics begin] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is the house, a generation filled in Audy homes..." [Music Fades]

[INTRO FADES OUT]

Monica (08:25):

We're so excited to be here with you today, Maira, to talk about the book *Rules for Radicals* by Saul Alinsky. Before we dive into what led you to read this book, can we just hear a little bit about who you are, what do you do in Chicago and why do you do it?

Maira Khwaja (08:42):

I am so happy to be here. Thank you, Page and Monica. I work primarily at the Invisible Institute. And at the Invisible Institute, I investigate police misconduct. I am an educator and I work with high school students specifically at Hyde Park Academy on 63rd and Stony, debriefing mundane routine police encounters and having conversations about constitutional and human rights violations in those small moments. So that's my primary job. Outside of the

Invisible Institute, I do a lot of political education work with my partner in work, Trina Reynolds-Tyler, who I think is also in the season. It's called TM Productions. And we basically make goofy videos or just resources, take people to vote, have conversations about why people don't vote, things like that. And that is really a good time all around. So, mutual aid work this year has been really a political focus for me. What else? I think that covers it, broadly speaking. I'm just a person in Chicago.

Page (09:59):

Beautiful. Yes. I'm so thrilled. And we were talking earlier before we started recording about all of us when we were describing how we are in terms of weather, have a lot of wind going on right now. And so I'm trying to stay focused and everything, because I'm just really pumped to talk about this book that I've heard mention maybe more than any other book in organizing spaces and have formed opinions about it, even though I have not read it. And so I'm just excited to actually hear a little bit more, and in intentional ways about the ideas in this book, because clearly they have had an impact. This book has talked about a lot and the person who wrote it has talked about a lot. Anyways, so I'm curious though, what led you to read it?

Maira (10:45):

So what led me to pick up this infamous book, *Rules for Radicals*, that I will disclaimer say, I have a lot of critiques of, but I think since this podcast is based in Chicago, I think it's a really important book to just be included in the discussion. Because I was at Powell's in Hyde Park, maybe in like 2014 or something like that. And I saw the book in the Chicago section. I always go to the Chicago history section. That's what I studied when I was a student at the U of C. I focused on the South Side, and I had recognized Saul Alinsky's name because at the time, I was doing research on the relationship between the Blackstone Rangers, later known as the Black P Stones and a church on 64th and Kimbark, and their relationship to both the Woodlawn Organization and the University of Chicago.

Maira (11:38):

So I was trying to understand these very local power dynamics in the Woodlawn area. And so I knew I learned about the Woodlawn Organization and Saul Alinsky. And so when I saw his book

on the shelf, I was like, "Oh, I got to read this." I keep seeing this man's name. Did not know anything about his reputation at the time. And it was really important for me because a lot of how I understood organizing at that time, I was not an organizer, was very much around demonstrations like marches and boycotts and just these classic examples of what it meant to plan in action. And I had not seen a really straightforward articulation of what it meant to seize power from an institution and redistribute it to people in a community and how organizing tactics, specifically the tactics, were really interesting to me, just these examples. He just basically writes out a lot of examples of his time.

Maira (12:45):

After going to the University of Chicago, he was born in Chicago in 1909. He organized the meat packers in the meat-packing industry where Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*. So he details some of those tactics, he details some of the tactics used in Woodlawn against the university. He details some things against CPS Board of Education. And so just to see these examples that I could recognize in Chicago and be like, "Oh, he knew how to hit them where it hurts." And he was advocating for people to still work within a system. And I was really interested in that idea of like, can you be an outside agitator and be a radical while still encouraging people to participate in a democratic system?

Maira (13:30):

Because something felt really off for me as a student at the U of C to be like, "No, don't vote," or something like that because it's like, who am I to tell people, "Forget this whole system and build something new"? Something felt really off about me from my positionality. So it was like a place where I could start to think about what it could mean for me to organize.

Monica (13:55):

Okay. Okay. So Alinsky was a Chicagoan, for those that are listening and don't know that. And he was organizing between the '30s and the '70s in Chicago. And our understanding is that this book is Alinsky talking less about how to seize power and more about how to run a successful movement for social change. And his goal was to create a guide for future organizing in poor low-income communities. So can you tell us a little bit more about what some of the lessons or these rules are in this book and your thoughts on them?

Maira (14:30):

So some of his lessons, he breaks this book up into almost like a series of lectures that he could be giving to an organizer. And it's really important to say that this book is addressed to an organizer going into a community that they're probably not from, which is one of the primary critiques and one of my primary problems with the book now, like seven years after having read the book. But it talks about communication and communication style. Communication being like, you have to be willing to have your mind changed, you cannot go in with political dogma or rigid political beliefs. You have to go into whatever conversation you're about to have, listening to somebody's experience and accepting that your political tactics should be relative to what people want and what work they can do. So this idea of political relativism is really big and never speaking to people in a dogmatic way.

Maira (15:41):

He also talks about this idea of means and ends, which is, you cannot outright say ever that some mean does not justify the end. So this idea of embracing, for example, nonviolence is relative to what the history of the place is. So he basically goes into detail about how Gandhi is praised often for nonviolence, but when you actually push further on what Gandhi supported and did not support, he actually does not rule out violence if the circumstances were different. And he basically emphasizes the point that this common question of do the means justify the ends, should actually be, do these particular means justify a particular end? So in some context it might make sense to embrace looting. In some context it might make sense, a lot more sense to not touch that. It depends on who you are trying to change and what the history is of violent repression and the history of organizing tactics in that location.

Maira (16:54):

He talks about ego a lot and he says that there is a difference between a political ego and egotism. And he actually... This is a really interesting thing that sits weirdly with me now, seven years later, especially in this 2020 moment of mass movement organizing. And it's interesting because he's not talking about mass movement organizing, he's talking about mass organizing. So creating an organization and bringing people into an organization, which is I think an important distinction from what we've seen this summer, which is like a broad campaign, for

example like Defund CPD, that anyone is welcome to adopt and take in without necessarily being in an organization paying dues.

Maira (17:38):

So in this book he talks about the role of community members and the role of the organizer in the community. And he says that actually the ego of the organizer is really important because it needs to be infectious. It needs to be an ego that other people feel like they can be drawn to and then inspired by. And this is something now I'm thinking about a lot, having reread this book this week, is how do we not idolize an organizer? And this book is really talking about... Is really speaking to this old dynamic of a singular organizer who comes in and organizes a community. So there's that.

Monica (18:23):

Yeah. And that makes me think about the lack of a gender analysis in the book as well. And I think that-

Maira (18:30):

Oh my gosh.

Monica (18:30):

Right? And I'm thinking about the very real harms that often go hand-in-hand with charismatic leadership, right? And that was never addressed in past organizing spaces. And we're just now starting to address accountability and transformative justice, restorative justice and things like that. So that really brings up a lot for me there.

Maira (18:57):

Yes. So in this whole book, and I want to disclaim to Page's point about like, "This is talked about all the time, but I haven't read it." I don't think you need to read this book.

Monica (19:05):

Just listen to this episode and you're fine.

Maira Khwaja (19:07):

I think if you're interested in it, if you're interested in organizing history, it's really interesting to see the tactics listed out. So if you're going to pick it up, I think the chapter to look at is the tactics chapter, page like 127 through like 170, which is basically about this idea of, you need to use tactics that the people involved are going to enjoy. He talks about how you need something that a community will actually want to do together because otherwise, they cannot sustain. He uses a very like...

Maira (19:46):

The organizer is always a he in this book. So full disclaimer, that if this language is going to be like, "Oh, I don't want to read an old white man basically prescribing a lot of the organizing relationships that we now in 2020 are trying to untangle and unlearn and create accountability for like..." This is the legacy of what we're trying to untangle ourselves from. I think to effectively do that, we have to know the history though.

Maira (20:15):

So I would love to read a couple of the tactics just because if you're not going to read it, you should just know what he says. And also a disclaimer that he talks about things very much in the language of the enemy and this idea of like, rather than getting into Marxists, bourgeoisie, proletariat, he's like, "haves and have-nots", and then "have-a-littles and don't want to lose it." And I think that is really helpful because like you... Disclude, is that a word? You don't include a lot of people when you say bourgeoisie and proletariat, a lot of people will tune you out. So I do appreciate that this is not a hyper-academic text.

Maira (21:03):

So "power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have." I remember reading that and being like, "True." The second rule is, "never go outside the experience of your people, when an action or tactic is outside of the experience of the people, the result is confusion, fear and retreat. It also means a collapse of communication, as we have noted." And I thought that

was really helpful when I was 20 years old and still today. “Wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy because you want to cause them confusion, fear and retreat.”

Maira (21:40):

The fourth rule is, “make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.” The fifth rule is, “ridicule is man's most potent weapon.” The sixth rule is, “a good tactic is one that your people enjoy.” And the seventh rule is, “a tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.” So thinking about this idea of what is reasonable or what is strategic to boycott? You don't want to ask people to boycott bread and milk and essentials, but boycotting grapes potentially could be considered a luxury item that liberals, he says, or upper middle class people in solidarity, won't mind giving up. So he keeps going and going, but... Oh, the one other tactic I'll mention is the ninth rule is, “the threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself, the threat of your tactic.”

Maira (22:39):

So he describes this O'Hare sit-in that he worked on planning. The people he was organizing with didn't have money, but there were a lot of bodies. And so he was like, "How can we creatively show up to O'Hare and clog the bathrooms? We're all going to go in and we pay a quarter to go to the bathroom. It's one of the busiest airports in the country. We're just going to take up all the bathrooms and jam the entire place." And when they caught wind of that, O'Hare agreed to some of the demands. I don't remember the entire example, but basically, as soon as word of a tactic gets out, that can be just as effective as the thing itself.

Maira (23:17):

Something that he says often is he gives examples of organizing for housing rights and he gives examples around employment. And I think that's mostly because of his experience. But he does talk about, when he says like, "What are the resources that the have-nots have?" Which first of all, even that language of like, "I see what you were trying to do there," is like, make this as simplistic as possible, but you're talking about have-nots with regards to money, not about other things. But he says like, "When you do assess the resources of the have-nots where you are, a lot of bodies and no money. And so it's like what we have really learned this year. But I think just generally in our work is an actual resource assessment of what a community has and is able to

give each other, especially as we're all together learning so much about mutual aid this year, is that everybody actually does have things, skills to contribute and roles to play outside of this idea of a massive bodies.

Maira (24:22):

And so if I were to say like, what is my big critique of this book now? Or rather, how have we evolved in the organizing space since Alinsky was once heralded as the top organizer or whatever? We are a lot better at actually seeing people as uniquely contributing to an ecosystem rather than considering masses of people as just literally bodies to shuffle around, to stage. I mean, something very theatrical about the way he talks about organizing tactics. He talks about taking thousands of people into City Hall. He talks about people who have slumlords showing up into the white North Side neighborhood where that slumlord lives and being outside of the neighbor's home and being like, "Did you know your neighbor is a slumlord?"

Page (25:09):

Yeah, I'm looking at these list of rules and a lot of them I agree with and seem to apply to organizing that I've been a part of that feels really successful, but I'm also very aware that there's something about a lot of the campaigns that I've been a part of, like Bye Anita, No Cop Academy, We Charge Genocide, that I feel like Alinsky, would have, if he had seen the proposal on paper of what we ended up doing, would've been like, "Absolutely not." And I'm trying to understand-

Maira (25:34):

Why do you think he would've said that?

Page (25:35):

That's what I'm trying to figure out, where is that coming from? So I want to tell you what my hunch is and see what you think. One is that several of these campaigns were not place-based, The how is community is defined. And maybe that's just changed since the 1970s because of the internet, but anyways, place-based. There's another around... It seems like he was very pragmatic and opposed to dogma in ways that make me think I don't know how he would have understood

abolitionist organizing, which has a matrix that it uses to make demands and that how we organize is as important as what we organize for, and that we refuse to make concessions.

Page (26:31):

There is no 10% that we're willing to take on No Cop Academy. It's just No Cop Academy, right? There wasn't even anything we were asking for in We Charge Genocide, we were just being like, "You're not going to act like you didn't do this and that it didn't matter. That Damo's life mattered. And we're just going to make it matter to you whether you want to or not." It seems like I think something about the ways that he understood demands as maybe "smart goals" is like the words we use now. And that's just not how I've organized. They're not "smart goals."

Page (27:06):

Even if Bye Anita was very specific and time-bound and measurable, we either win or you lose, but we still would have done it even if we knew we were going to lose as we did for the No Cop Academy campaign. We knew we wouldn't win that, but it mattered that we fight and that was like a interesting place-based... Anyways, now I'm rambling. So those are some of the things that I'm like, what is it that I feel so out of sync with? And those are some of my hunches.

Maira (27:32):

So this is so interesting to me because I feel like I never really get to talk about this. Alinsky, I think, is applying a very almost electoral-style of organizing to social issue organizing, or rather, part of me wonders if actually electoral politics learned and adopted a lot of Alinsky-style organizing, but this older notion of like... Which I think we still see in labor-based organizing and labor unions, is this idea that you are actually getting people. I think maybe the housing example is a really good one because it is very place-based organizing, and it's asking people to join a tenant union. And so he's talking about literally building, and this is the big difference between the campaigns that you mentioned, is those campaigns are bigger than any one organization. Whereas what he is talking about is, how do you create an organization that is place-based that is fighting for sets of demands, that is willing to then negotiate with whoever's in power to get something?

Maira (28:39):

And I think it is just a different style of... Not even just a different style, it's like a different realm of organizing almost. I think what he would appreciate about all the campaigns you mentioned is the tactics or the techniques in all of those campaigns, were all very unique in trying to hit people where it hurt, hit people in power where it hurt. So this idea of around fired Fire Dante Servin showing up to the police board meeting every month for many months. And those are with people wearing yellow shirts. And I think there are actually tactical things and also tactics people enjoy, things like that. I think he would have appreciated that.

Maira (29:23):

I agree that he probably would not be a huge... He wouldn't find abolition as an achievable thing because he centers so much like “you have to start from where you are, not from start from what you want”, which I think is actually very different than the way we've been doing Defund [CPD]. And just generally in Chicago, we are like, “No, we are running out of time to be talking about what we have and what we could do. We need to actually... We're going to start where we want and you can come meet us.”

Maira (30:01):

I don't know. But also I think he wrote this like right before he passed, and so part of me is like, “2020 is so different from the late '60s.” Something I really like that he says is, he acknowledges the emerging tension of the 1968 Democratic Convention. He had a lot of young organizers who were distraught at the way that after participating in electoral politics in any way, getting votes out and just seeing the complete dismissal of what the masses actually wanted. He was like, “A lot of young people are asking me like, do you still want us to participate in this system and negotiate with those in power?”

Maira (30:45):

And he doesn't fully... He still says yes, because he says like, “What else are you going to do? You're going to lose a lot of people.” But it doesn't sound like a resolved question. I think he almost surfaces this idea of like, I don't know, actually, this is... It was devastating. It was

traumatic. And then he died. So I don't know, part of me thinks that the 1968 Convention in Chicago was the beginning of the... Maybe end of Alinsky style organizing.

Monica (31:19):

Yeah. I'm looking at... Yeah, a lot of what you said is making me think back at the No Cop Academy campaign, because so many of the rules apply within the No Cop Academy campaign, but then at the same time clash with each other, especially number 12, "the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative." And it's like this idea that you have to have a solution or else you're not going to have a successful campaign. And what does that look like when we weren't doing literal place-based organizing with No Cop Academy? We were doing coalition-based intergenerational, multiracial, Black youth-led organizing. And people wanted answers. People wanted to hear, well, "what are you going to put instead? How many resources are you going to put and where are you going to put them in West Garfield Park?"

Monica (32:13):

And we were like, "That's not for us to decide." That's the beauty of Black-led... Sorry, my cat is all over me. That is the beauty of Black-led, youth-led organizing, is that they decide and they determine what is best for the communities that they're living in and that they're directly impacted by the oppressions of. And so it's making me think a lot about how there's overlap in what we are seeing now in organizing, but then there's so much clashing with like... But like you said, this isn't the 1960's anymore, this is 2020.

Maira (32:54):

Right. Well, I think there is a difference in possibility for tactics and making a decision about what is the grounding, is it place-based? Because we have access to reach a lot of people and get a lot of support across the city and outside of the city, when we have campaigns that are not place-based. I do think though, there is still something to be said for the value or the strategic choice to have a very place-based campaign. Like just thinking about us getting closer to an eviction crisis, which, I mean, in some ways we're already experiencing, but like South Shore for example, is going to be like ground zero for an eviction crisis in Chicago and in the country.

Maira (33:45):

And I think that there is a lot of people power in the idea of like, how do we make sure that community leaders or tenants are the basis and the substance of fighting for their own anti-eviction needs and also for their basic human rights? Versus if we, as organizers, are doing a giant anti-eviction campaign that is trying to hit the people in power where it hurts in our communication tactics. But this is something I think about a lot with Defund. Defund is not a place-based campaign. I mean, it is, and that it's about Chicago, but there's always this constant tension or work to reconcile the fact that a lot of people with lived experience are really afraid of the idea of defunding 75%. And so if this were to be... And I think it matters that Defund CPD is not place-based because I think if we were to start with a neighborhood about how police are in their neighborhood, we would be getting into these like, "Okay, well, what can we actually literally make the cops do and not do in our neighborhood?" That's not going to necessarily structurally change the game.

Maira (35:10):

So in a thing like Defund, yes, it needs to be a lot bigger than one neighborhood. In a thing like housing and concrete life changes and the next couple of months, I think that it makes sense for those fights to be really grounded in the people in a neighborhood. And I'm sure there are better examples that we actually have in our recent history. I'm thinking even Assata's Daughters with Washington Park and the University of Chicago, it is important that that is based in Washington Park. So I don't know. I think Alinsky is just talking about something different than our mass movement work.

Page (35:51):

That's where my brain was going, is I think that Alinsky was describing the importance of organizations. And so I guess that my disclaimer, something that folks should know is, I believe in organizations. I think 2020 was the year where I was like, "Let's not worry about that. That is not the priority of what needs to be grown right now." But there is amongst the communities, the community that I organize within, big picture, not everyone agrees with me in organization, as opposed to something less structured. And there are dangers to building, I think there are many dangers to building organizations because they can become dogmatic on their own. And this is

how I think one of the critiques of Alinsky is this professionalization of organizing that leads to just new bureaucracies that aren't actually about the importance of organizing, which is people taking control of the conditions that determine their lives, as opposed to keeping an organization funded and going.

Page (36:56):

So anyways, I'm rambling. And there's organizations, there's organizing, community organizing and then there's movements. And I think No Cop [Academy], we keep mentioning it, but it sits at this interesting crux because it is talked about in terms of being a movement. And this was something we talked about with young people a few times, is like, actually, it's a campaign and that's different, but it's a part of this movement that gets called the Movement for Black Lives. But I think right now, it's understood as the Defund movement. It's an invest-divest campaign. And part of, it's not a coincidence that two of the main... That No Cop was so successful because it was centered around young people and it was centered around young people, some of which did not belong to an organization and to this day, do not. And their political home is No Cop.

Page (37:39):

And that's fine and fabulous. And I don't think Alinsky would fuck with that. But also, a lot of the especially initial oomph of the campaign was made by young people that were a part of Assata's Daughters and BPNC, two place-based organizations. And I think there's this relationship that we don't talk about enough about, in order to have strong movements, you have to have strong community organizing, which usually means you need strong place-based neighborhood organizations to create these complex webs that... What I don't see Alinsky suggesting, also make room for the unorganized. And there's this sort of dialectical thing that's happening all the time where... I lost, I had a point and I didn't nail...

Maira (38:26):

No, that was actually so well said. It's like in this map of, you have campaigns, you have a bigger movement for an actual successful campaign, there needs to be a political home. Monica was just mentioning like, there needs to be political homes that people from a campaign can be absorbed into.

Monica (38:47):

So we've talked a lot about the pieces we can pull from Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* and the ways that the style of organizing also butts heads with our current model of mass movement building and grassroots organizing in Chicago. So I'm curious how this book has influenced the ways that you personally organize or aspire to organize in the communities that you're part of?

Maira (39:09):

So this book, despite all the tensions, has still, I think, deeply influenced my practice of still encouraging participation in civic institutions, specifically voting and democracy. And he says that... I don't know if I have the direct quote at the ready, but he says that the reason why we still participate in democracy is right now, it is the best means to achieve the values of equality, freedom, resources for people. He just talks a lot about how the... It always comes back to these values that are different depending on what community you're in, but democracy is the system that we can work on. And he also talks about how it is not really a true democracy, but to completely give up on it is like actually going to just further entrench the power structures of it not being a democracy.

Maira (40:21):

So I think about this tension a lot and how my practice is in that tension where one of my favorite things to do with young people who I've known over a course of at least two years, and then continue to know them is, take a lot of people to vote for the first time. And there's always a conversation beforehand of, "do you want to vote? Why and why not?" Many times we have a conversation and they're like, "I don't want to vote." And it's like, "Okay, well, would you be down to have a conversation with me about why you don't want to vote?" And not in like let me try to convince you, but in a genuine like, "Let's have a conversation. I really want to hear what you're..." At least to get stronger at articulating why that system is not for them and how they feel about it.

Maira (41:06):

And oftentimes by the next election, they end up voting, but it's like that in itself that it's like, okay, if you're going to choose to not participate, let it be a civic participation in your decision to not participate. And I might disagree with it, but I want whoever I'm working with to feel that.

Page (41:22):

Let's talk about 2020 and how you've thought about these ideas. And you mentioned at the beginning, you've been doing a lot of mutual aid and you're a part of the Defund campaign and all these things. So I'm curious if you could just connect the dots between what you've taken away from this book to how it applies to 2020 from your own experience, then also just... If more people picked up this book, knowing some of the tension of it, what do you think might happen if more people read it?

Maira (41:54):

So this year I was a trainer at the Defund campaign. And I agree with you that Alinsky would probably be like, "This isn't place-based, and 75% is not reasonable." He's like a political strategist in an electoral sense. And so I think... And it was also some of the first work that I did that was not in a direct conflict to the university. Though, through my work with the Defund campaign, I became more vocal about my opposition to the crime lab. And so to me, that still felt like okay, still thinking about the institutions that I'm calling out.

Maira (42:38):

I also think that in a lot of the mutual aid work, so specifically I developed with a few other people at 61st and Blackstone, I developed a food mutual aid program called Market Box where we funded like 20 local farms to source and pack fresh food bags of eggs, bread, produce, and delivered to 200 households each week for the past 26 weeks, today is the last day of it. And in that [crosstalk 00:43:09]. In that, we made sure to include the South Side Weekly, we were like, "Okay, it can't just be food. How do we politicize every mutual aid act? And how do we make sure that it is always framed as a direct action and not necessarily around just Defund?" Market Box wasn't tied explicitly to Defund in any way. But it was specifically about the same idea of

like, our institutions are failing us. And so we have to find ways to better take care of each other and go beyond the norms of what it means to collaborate.

Maira (43:44):

So the Invisible Institute was a part of Market Box, and I think a lot of funders from traditional organization standpoint are like, “Why is a journalism organization doing food?” Well, our thought is, there's a weekly phone bank and there's distribution of the South Side Weekly in the bags. And so this is a critical information network that we as journalists need to be thinking outside the box, outside of the rules of like, well, don't touch food because you're not a food organization. And so I was really inspired this year by the lack of proprietariness and the idea of collaboration as genuinely you put the work first, I'm going to promote, I don't work for City Bureau, but I'm going to tell everyone I know about their COVID Resource Finder.

Page (44:30):

There's something about this year that I feel like made us think about our neighbors and our community in even deeper ways than we had, that feels relevant to Alinsky for me. So even as you were talking, I don't know where the line ends and Alinsky leaves and your other theories come in, but that's like, this is about people. Yes, we want to win things and change the way things are done and transform power, but also it's about people and our ability to love and support each other. And what does that actually mean?

Monica (45:00):

Right. And I think it's about before we can even win a campaign, we need to make sure that our people can survive. If we're not all surviving and thriving in fact, then we can't organize together. We can't have a successful campaign if we're not eating and have all of the basic necessities that we need to survive. So thank you so much, Maira, for doing the work that you do, for making sure that mutual aid isn't depoliticized, right? Because mutual aid is so political. And I feel like the more we are talking about it this year, the more it's becoming mainstream and therefore, the politics are pulling away from that. And it's so important for us to make sure that we know that mutual aid is deeply, deeply anarchist in a lot of ways.

Monica (45:52):

And so I'm glad that you're bringing that into the space and into your organizing work. So thank you so much. Well, we're near the end of our show and I think that the takeaway is that if you're listening, you don't necessarily need to read this book for an analysis of an organizing strategy, but for Chicago history's sake, you should read the book. So we ask every guest to close us out with their favorite passage from the book. So Maira, can you read to us what moved you in this book?

Maira (46:23):

Yeah. And just like everything else in this conversation, I want to say that this sits with me as a tension point, but I think about it all the time.

Monica (46:32):

Absolutely.

Maira (46:33):

Okay. Yeah. And also, should I change the pronoun or I'll say it how Alinsky says? He says "him" all the time and I'm like, "I don't even work with that many people who go by "he/him. Who are we talking about here?" [crosstalk 00:46:50].

Page (46:52):

Switch it up.

Monica (46:52):

Use some "she", use some "they". Switch it up.

Maira (46:56):

All right. All right. I'm going to switch out "him" for "they." "What I am saying is that the organizer must be able to split themselves into two parts. One part in the arena of action, where they polarize the issue to 100 to nothing and helps to lead forces into conflict, while the other

part knows that when the time comes for negotiations, that it really is only a 10% difference. And yet both parts have to live comfortably with each other. Only a well-organized person can split and yet stay together. But this is what the organizer must do.”

[OUTRO MUSIC FADES IN]

Page (47:49):

Thanks so much for listening to another episode of The Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about books to help grow our movement. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionist organizers. We'll be back next week with another episode next Sunday, same time, same place. Want to learn about a specific book, email us your suggestions at thelitreviewchicago@gmail.com or find us on Facebook. And if you like this episode, give it a shout out on Twitter or Instagram. Our handle is [@LitReviewChi](https://www.instagram.com/LitReviewChi). Financial support for the production of this podcast is thanks to our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patron at patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading.

References made in the show:

- [Assata's Daughters](#)
- [Bye Anita](#)
- [Brighton Park Neighborhood Council \(BPNC\)](#)
- [City Bureau's COVID Resource Finder](#)
- [Market Box](#)
- [No Cop Academy](#)
- [We Charge Genocide](#)