EDUCATIONAL THEORY

DO THE UNEXPECTED! WHY DEWEYAN EDUCATORS SHOULD BE PLURALISTS ABOUT POLITICAL TACTICS AND STRATEGIES[†]

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Abstract. How should Deweyan educators teach their students about engaging in efforts to bring about social change in a political context marked by polarization, power differentials, and oppression? In this article, Joshua Forstenzer argues that Deweyan educators must encourage their students to engage in pluralistic and creative experiments rather than teach a pre-set model for social change. To this end, he engages with two critiques: one formulated by Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, according to which Dewey's pedagogic vision failed to be sufficiently practically minded; the other formulated by Aaron Schutz — drawing on Saul Alinsky's theory of community organizing — according to which Deweyan educators fail to be meaningfully politically minded, because their democratic faith blinds them to the role of conflict in real politics. In response, this article argues that the Deweyan outlook is closer to Alinsky's than Schutz assumes and that it demands that we Deweyan educators introduce our students to a rich diversity of voices and traditions that address the concrete conditions of social change to provide our students with a fullness of civic experiences, as well as a depth of political and social ideas to challenge the status quo.

Key Words. Deweyan democracy; social change; civic education; Saul Alinsky; community organizing

> Life is an adventure of passion, risk, danger, laughter, beauty, love, a burning curiosity to go with the action to see what it is all about, to search for the pattern of meaning, to burn one's bridges because you are never going to be back anyway, and to live to the end. Terrified by this dramatic vista, most people just exist; they turn from the turbulence of change and try to hide in their private make-believe harbors, called in politics conservatism; in the church, prudence; and in everyday life, being sensible. … The accepted values of security, work, and money as the way to "happiness" went in the great crash of 1929. In the crisis, life became polarized and good and evil stood clear and unmistakable.
>
> — Saul Alinsky[1]

As I write, tent encampments are being erected, sat in, or torn down on university campuses across various democratic countries. Many students, professors, and concerned citizens had already been participating in protests and boycotts to demonstrate their outrage at the manner in which the Israeli army has been conducting its retaliatory war purportedly on Hamas in Gaza, in the aftermath of Hamas's attack on Israeli civilians and military on October 7, 2023. With food and medical shortages taking hold and the civilian death toll in Gaza (made up predominantly of women and children) rising by the day, peace movements as

1. Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Vintage, 1969), viii.

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well as pro-Palestinian organizations across the democratic world have been active, trying to sway public opinion so as to change the geopolitical calculus and, hopefully, bring an end to this war. Much more recently, this protest movement has adopted the tactic of occupying parts of university campuses, calling for their institutions to divest from companies with ties to Israel.[2] In response, there have been counter-protests, and, in some cases, street violence directed at the encamped protesters. A significant number of university administrations have also called on the police to clear the occupations and arrest those participating in them should they refuse to leave when ordered to do so. One recurrent accusation made by the authorities is that these campus protests are in fact led or facilitated by "outsiders" — people who are neither students enrolled nor academics working at the institutions whose campuses are being occupied.[3] Another, even more concerning, feature of the discourse regarding these protests has been the tendency to ascribe unconscionable motivations to those partaking (as demonstrating antisemitic feelings and/or outright support for a terrorist and murderous organization, Hamas) and to those calling on the police to suppress them (as motivated by support for an alleged genocidal government in Israel and/or expressive of deep-seated islamophobia).

For Deweyans like me, this situation invites a challenging series of questions: What is the place of deliberation within and around protest movements of the kind we are witnessing? What should we as citizens do within such a polarized democratic environment? What should a Dewey-inspired university do in the face of a wave of student protests like the ones we are currently seeing? Beyond seeking to uphold the right to free speech of all and celebrating the "town and gown" dichotomy-busting character of this current wave of protests, should good Deweyan university administrators celebrate the confrontational tactics sometimes adopted by protesters, or should they seek to peacefully transform protest into more intelligent, but likely less politically effective, deliberations? What, in the domain of political action, do our Deweyan pedagogical commitments demand of us that we teach our students about and how?

It is this last question that I hope to address most pointedly in this paper, because I think it will help reveal something fundamental about the nature of Deweyan pedagogical commitments. I also think that this is a difficult question for

2. It is an interesting coincidence that this encampment movement seems to have started at Columbia University, the university where Dewey taught for most of his life and where a major named lecture series still honors him. For a timeline of this wave of student protest at Columbia, see Isha Banerjee, "Timeline: The 'Gaza Solidarity Encampment'," *Columbia Spectator*, May 2, 2024, https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/05/02/timeline-the-gaza-solidarity-encampment/.

3. See, for example, Aloysius Wong, Ben Makuch, and Roxanna Woloshyn, "Some blame outsiders for spread of pro-Palestinian encampments. The idea is not new, say students and experts," *CBC News*, May 14, 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/campus-protests-outside-influence-theories-1.7200820.

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Deweyans, because Deweyan democracy — or what we might call "democracy as a way of life" — often has been accused of envisioning politics as a seminar room rather than as a street fight. These accusations are not entirely unfair: democracy as a way of life typically involves a commitment to working out intelligent collective responses to communal problems in group deliberations, under conditions largely free from oppression and free from marked power differentials. And yet, real politics almost always operates in situations characterized by profound differences of power, as well as obvious and subtle forms of oppression. More fundamentally still, at any one time, the central political cause of those who have relatively less political power *is* the goal of overcoming a currently extant form of oppression.

On the Deweyan picture, education has a key role to play in promoting the general conditions for an egalitarian democratic culture to emerge and flourish, since the school ought to serve as an "embryonic society,"[4] as places where learners, teachers, parents, and community members come together to exercise their problem-solving capacities, since it is in doing so that intelligence — individual and collective — can best be fostered. But what role can a school or a university play when the political context in which we are operating is so deeply marked by polarization, power differentials, and oppression as to make this kind of egalitarian deliberative activity seem all but impossible within the current social and political reality? If the Deweyan outlook fails to relevantly inform us about what needs to be done within these kinds of situations, then one may well worry that it fails to be ultimately practically useful.

In this article, I will argue that Deweyan democracy and its associated pedagogical outlook has the resources to successfully address this question. To show this, I will start by presenting Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett's critique that Dewey's philosophy of education fails to be appropriately practical, but I will show that their own proposals in turn fail to be appropriately political. Then, to seek to properly address the political dimension of education within a democratic education, I will present Aaron Schutz's claim that educators seeking to reinvigorate democratic practice to improve the social world should turn to Saul Alinsky's method of community organizing, with its commitment to conflict tactics. Although I agree with Schutz's basic impulse to include a more explicit form of political education within a Dewey-inspired curriculum, I will argue that the substantive gap he sees between Dewey and Alinsky's conceptions of social change is far less significant than Schutz suggests. Practically speaking, I will ultimately argue that Alinskyan conflict tactics must be supplemented by other ways of conceiving of civic and political engagement aimed to produce social change because we cannot hope for one theory or practice of change-making, however well-established, to replace the perpetual need to learn, to experiment, to adapt to differing circumstances, and to embrace the highs and lows of extemporizing ever new ways of seeking to collectively change the world.

4. John Dewey, *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18.

Dewey and the Problem of Practice

In *Dewey's Dream*, Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett eloquently articulate what is perhaps the highest Deweyan aspiration in the following terms:

> Human beings best develop their innate capacity for intelligent thought and action when they purposefully use it as a powerful instrument to help them solve the multitude of perplexing problems that continually confront them in their daily lives — and when they reflect on their experience and thereby increase their capacity for *future* intelligent thought and action. Intelligence does not develop simply as a result of problem-solving action and experience; it develops best as a result of *reflective*, *strategic*, real-world problem-solving action and experience. Dewey emphasized that action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem-solving education can function as the most powerful means to raise the level of instrumental intelligence in individuals, groups, communities, societies, and humanity.[5]

However, Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett argue that Dewey failed to practically live up to this vision, because he "never actually developed, let alone implemented, a comprehensive strategy capable of realizing his general theories in real-world practice."[6] Although they maintain that in his earlier work, at the University of Chicago, Dewey was appropriately disposed toward making his ideal practical through his development of the Laboratory School and his engagement at Hull House, he failed to identify the rise of the community school movement as the vehicle for his ideas. Once Dewey moved to Columbia University, the authors claim, he became entirely uninterested "in doing the hard, sustained, practical thinking and work necessary to solve" complex social problems.[7]

In one sense, this is a deeply unfair accusation, as it was in the second half of his life that Dewey became more fully engaged in thoroughly practical political affairs.[8] Yet, in another sense, this critique cuts pretty close to the bone because it is true that Columbia Dewey did not work systematically to address the strategic question of how actual schools ought to be set up to democratically empower students and better serve communities, thereby, in a sense, failing Chicago Dewey's ambition. Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett conclude from this that we Deweyans must still answer what they call "the Dewey Problem": "what specifically is to be done beyond theoretical advocacy to transform American society and other developed societies into participatory democracies capable of helping to transform the world into a 'Great Community'?"[9]

Their own solution gives a central role to higher education: universities ought to serve as a "key source of broadly based, sustained, comprehensive support for

5. Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (Temple University Press, 2007), 25 (emphasis in original).

6. Ibid., xiii.

7. Ibid., 12.

8. While at Columbia, Dewey supplemented his philosophical writings with prolific and acute social criticism in public media (not least about education). He was also involved in setting up the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the New School for Social Research. In addition, he took part in the activities of the American Federation of Teachers, led the Dewey Commission on Trotsky, and more.

9. Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett, *Dewey's Dream*, xiii (italics omitted).

community schools"[10] and they should launch "*university-assisted community schools* designed to help educate, engage, activate, and serve *all* members of the community in which the school is located."[11] The key practical pedagogical proposal they make is to integrate service-based learning across much of the undergraduate curriculum, thus providing a resource boost to common schools (flowing from universities) and making higher learning more practical and locally embedded, and thus more relevant to solving concrete social problems within existing communities. Civically oriented universities can provide resources, focus, and expertise to help shape and improve local schools in order to integrate educational and civic purpose. Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett write, "public schools are particularly well suited … to function as neighborhood 'hubs' or 'centers' around which local partnerships can be generated and developed. … They then provide a decentralized, community-based response to rapidly changing community problems."[12] In return, universities receive the embodied knowledge of local participants (who become co-producers of knowledge) about how to solve real-world civic problems. Taken to its idealized end point, university-supported public school hubs would thus become the primary site of democratic agency, with the state and its formal organs becoming secondary to them.[13]

And yet, when reading *Dewey's Dream*, those of us who live a life engaged in various forms of political organizing might well simply conclude that they too end up offering only a partial solution to a well-phrased problem. While the vision of universities deeply engaged in fostering the democratic power and problem-solving capacities of neighboring schools is one that I think Dewey would have found appealing, and while I find their attempt at agenda-setting laudable and inspiring, there is an important problem that I think Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett leave at the door. This is the problem of scale. Many of our most serious problems are not addressable at the level of a university or of a community school. No doubt, university-assisted community schools can help in tackling some problems, but what can they really do when the apparatus of state remains the primary site of political action? The answer, I think, is that it can help teach the young and the less young how to effectively partake in politics. But how exactly is it supposed to do that?

The Promise and Limits of Collaborative Democratic Pedagogies

Dewey's democratic ideal has served for quite some time as a source of inspiration for progressive educators — like Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett — in the United States (and elsewhere) hoping to reinvigorate the political dimension of

10. Ibid., 86.

11. Ibid., 84 (emphasis in original).

12. Ibid., 85.

13. They then go on to provide some empirical basis for believing in the promise of their vision by launching into a rich and detailed discussion of impressive work undertaken at the University of Pennsylvania.

school life by fostering collaborative projects. This is not surprising, since Dewey's pedagogic vision, originally developed at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, is one where the school community comes together to solve common problems as members "get from and exchange with others," drawing on "their store of experience,"[14] looking to each other's differences of opinion as potential hypotheses for action.

The problem with this model, Schutz contends, is that it is relies on a misleading conception of democratic politics.[15] "Collaborative progressives," as he calls them, tend to seek to remedy the growing disconnection between rulers and the public by encouraging greater discussion and greater participation among the masses. Indeed, they believe that "authentic democracy emerges when people are given opportunities to participate as relative equals on common efforts to improve their society."[16] Schutz identifies Dewey as the standard-bearer of "collaborative progressivism." Worse, he contends that this purportedly Deweyan faith in a conflict-free egalitarian ideal of democratic participation as a means of bringing about social change is the product of a middle-class bias favoring a consensual understanding of democratic politics.[17] In fact, he even goes so far as to claim that it borrows features from an idealized model of "trusting, private relationships" to conceptualize the political realm, and in so doing, it fails to pay attention to "the challenges created by the painful, messy, dirty, conflictual, interest-driven, and antagonistic realities"[18] found in much of ordinary democratic politics.[19]

In addition, Schutz maintains that the Deweyan model confronts the problem of scalability — even if this local experience is valuable, its value tapers off when we try to scale it to a large, complex modern democracy — and the problem of trust — since it is much harder to operate cooperatively when one interacts with other participants who do not trust us and all too often do not seek for us to trust them. Schutz asserts, "This need for participants to trust each other restricts the potential for using progressive collaborative strategies in the contentious world outside of

14. Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896–1903* (D. Appleton-Century, 1936), 79.

15. See Aaron Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Progressive Democratic Education," *Educational Theory*, 61, no. 4 (2011): 491–512, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2011.00416.x; and Aaron Schutz, "Power and Conflict in the Public Realm: Rethinking Progressive Visions of Collaborative Citizenship," *Forum* 61, no. 3 (2019): 297–306, https://doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.3.297.

16. Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm," 492.

17. In fact, in "Power and Trust in the Public Realm," Schutz wryly notes that even Jane Addams chided members of the elite and members of the working class for "their inability to engage in reasonable dialogue about their differences," 494.

18. Ibid., 493.

19. Or, as Raymond Guess puts it in *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2008): "[M]odern politics is importantly about power, its acquisition, distribution, and use," 97.

the doors of the protective progressive schools."[20] He then quotes Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, who taught at the Laboratory School: "society brings both shock and conflict to a young person … trained [to collaborate]. … His attempts to use intelligent action for social purposes are thwarted and balked by the competitive antisocial spirit and dominant selfishness in society as it is."[21] This is, of course, intended as a devastating critique of Deweyan pedagogy, since "Dewey … wanted a school with practices that were reflective of the world outside, not separated from it."[22]

I, for one, am less convinced than Schutz that this failure to countenance the grittiness of ordinary politics in Dewey-inspired schooling is such a fundamental failing, since I suspect that even a somewhat rarefied, and often impractical, form of collective engagement can, under the right circumstances, serve as a point of inflection and eventually an anchoring memory that serves to remind those who have experienced it of the concrete possibility of a better kind of civic relationship. In a fashion rather like that "one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult"[23] that seems to be the common denominator for children who have survived trauma and eventually thrive, perhaps that one classroom where a child has experienced the value of their collaborative efforts and the social significance of their own voice might well serve the citizen they eventually become to ultimately engage in various valuable features of democratic life.

The idea of a resonance between early and later democratic experiences strikes me as all the more important since we live in a social world where relational bonds between people who fundamentally disagree with one another are increasingly hard to maintain. As Audre Lorde poignantly puts it in her famous essay, "Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference":

> Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.[24]

In such a social context, experiences that serve to concretely exemplify norms that celebrate non-oppression, the potential unique epistemic and moral insights

20. Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm," 496.

21. Mayhew and Edwards, T*he Dewey School*, 439, quoted in Schutz, "Power and Trust in the Public Realm," 496.

22. Schutz, "Power and Conflict in the Public Realm," 298.

23. Bari Walsh, "The Science of Resilience: Why Some Children Can Thrive despite Adversity," Usable Knowledge, Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 23, 2015, https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/15/03/science-resilience.

24. Audre Lorde, "Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 115. Many thanks to Casey Strine for reminding me of this quote.

of all individuals within a group, as well as steadfast collective striving toward a communal good, probably serve an important democratic function, namely: providing a concrete experience of a highly desirable mode of interaction. In other words, the opportunity to learn how to engage with one another through what might be rare experiences of imperfect but committed egalitarian, future-oriented collective efforts that are respectful of the diversity of the individuals composing the group, are probably ultimately democratically beneficial to students.

Yet, Schutz maintains that a simple-minded embrace of collaboration as an all-encompassing democratic good can invite the irrational belief that the weak can obtain equal consideration and even just redress by merely seeking to skillfully collaborate with the strong. The suspicion here might be that, as Thucydides has the figure of the conquering Athenian tell the weaker Melian in his famous dialogue, "right … is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[25] Now, on one interpretation, this is obviously false: right is clearly not, in all circumstances, successfully defined by those with the most power, otherwise righteous contestation sustained over time would be unintelligible. However, it strikes me that Schutz can be more charitably interpreted as making a much more credible point, namely: learning how to engage in real democratic politics requires, at the very least, recognizing that coming together across lines of enduring difference to cooperatively resolve collective problems is unlikely to yield, of itself, the civic tools that might enable citizens to make the wider social world ultimately more cooperative. In other words, just because we experience something good, it does not mean that we know how to make that something good more pervasive in the world. Worse still, if we, as teachers, mislead students into thinking that experiencing cooperative problem solving teaches us, of itself, how to bring about a world highly characterized by cooperative problem solving, then we will have failed in our role as educators because we will have taught our students something false. So, when Schutz suggests that educators seeking to reinvigorate democratic practice to improve the social world ought to pay more attention to Alinsky's community organizing, I think we should consider his proposal seriously.

Community Organizing and Alinsky's Conflict Tactics

Alinsky was, for much of the twentieth century, a figure reviled by American conservatives and celebrated by the organized American Left. He wanted to apply principles of organizing that he had learned in the labor movement "to the worst slums and ghettos, so that the most oppressed and exploited elements could take control of their own communities and their own destinies. Up until then, specific factories and industries had been organized for social change, but never whole communities."[26] Born and educated in Chicago, it was another political figure

25. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (J. M. Dent, 1910): Book 5, 89.1.

26. Saul Alinsky, in Eric Norden, "Playboy Interview: Saul Alinsky — A Candid Conversation with the Feisty Radical Organizer," *Playboy*, March 1972, 72.

associated with the same city, Barack Obama, who made Alinsky into something of a household name — at least in those where politics was followed relatively closely in the late 2000s. Indeed, Obama's 2008 presidential campaign drew overt inspiration from the spirit of Alinsky's community organizing, which Obama had been trained in and practiced in Chicago after graduating from Columbia University.[27]

Alinsky-style community organizing aims to empower local communities by fostering bonds and highlighting the aggregate self-interest of groups and individuals among those who are at present "powerless." As Obama explains,

> Organizing begins with the premise that (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and the money [they raise] around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership — and not one or two charismatic leaders — can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions [and "grassroots" people].[28]

The notion of "indigenous leadership" referred to here is an Alinskyan innovation and represents one of the central ideas of his theory and practice of community organizing. On his account, the professional organizer's job is to identify local leaders who are already well-implanted with local organizations — he calls them "little Joes"— and build a unity movement for change, while making sure to allow the community to identify the goals toward which that change aims. This is an odd, and perhaps even conflicting, set of practical postures. Why would an organizer exercise leadership, but without providing the substantive vision of the end goal toward which the action they spark ultimately aims? This is because the main goal of the organizer is not to ensure that the change itself takes place, but that the community that engages in the action learns that it *can make a difference*.

Alinsky developed the theory and practice of community organizing basing it on a simple diagnosis: within large advanced democracies, ordinary people experience themselves as socially insignificant. As he puts it,

> In our modern urban civilization, multitudes of our people have been condemned to urban anonymity — to living the kind of life where many of them neither know nor care for their neighbors. This course of urban anonymity … is one of eroding destruction to the foundations of democracy. For although we profess that we are citizens of a democracy, and although we may vote once every four years, millions of our people feel deep down in their heart of hearts that there is no place for them — that they do not "count."[29]

27. See, for example, in Ryan Lizza, "The Agitator," *The New Republic*, March 19, 2007. Lizza explains that "[Obama's] 1995 memoir, D*reams from My Father*, recounts his idealistic effusions: 'Change won't come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots. That's what I'll do. I'll organize black folks. At the grass roots. For change,'" https://newrepublic.com/article/61068/the-agitator-barack-obamas-unlikely-political-education.

28. Barack Obama, "Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City," *Illinois Issues*, August and September, 1988, 40–42, https://www.lib.niu.edu/1988/ii880840.html.

29. Saul Alinsky, "Statement of Purpose," quoted in Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky — His Life and Legacy* (Vintage, 1992), 105.

As a result, making people feel like they count, like they have power, is the proximal goal of the organizer. But this feeling must be rooted in the *practical* conditions they face, not in fantasy. In other words, being able to make a difference must be a realistic expectation, or a reasonable hope at the very least, never a mere wish or fancy. Organizing is therefore about building people power: "Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together."[30] How is the organizer to do that? By demonstrating to the people that they already have power, if they act together, and that they can in fact already do something that matters, so long as they do so in a collaborative manner.

So far, this account of Alinsky's community organizing should sound highly congruent with a Deweyan outlook. Why then does Schutz take Alinsky to be an important point of divergence from the progressive model of democratic engagement he associates with Dewey? The answer, I think, is twofold: (1) Alinsky's model insists on the centrality of self-interest to motivate social action; and (2) Alinsky insists on the necessity of conflict to bring about social change and empower the "have-nots." Let me explain each of these in turn before offering a critical assessment of this claim.

First, let's consider *self-interest*: Alinsky's community organizers aim to build on the personal self-interest of community members and build it into collective solidarity. To this end, they must not shy away from appealing to the self-interest of individuals. However, this is for the sake of building an overt community of shared self-interest. Alinsky explains,

> In the last analysis all these people and agencies find that they have put their individual objectives into a collective basket and the easiest and best way for them to get what they want is to work with the whole group so that the whole group will get the whole basket. After a while, it really isn't such a complicated thing because when these fellows really get to know each other they all forget about the nooses and they stick together because they want to, because they like each other, because they really are concerned about the other guy's welfare and because they know by that time that the other guy's welfare means their own welfare.[31]

And now we turn to *conflict*: Since his approach is aimed at helping those seeking to reclaim power from the dominants, Alinsky thinks that a willingness to engage in strategic conflict is essential. He makes this point clear:

> The People's Organization does not live comfortably and serenely in an ivory tower where it not only can discuss controversial issues but actually possesses the choice of whether or not to take a hand in the controversy. …
>
> A People's Organization lives in a world of hard reality. It lives in the midst of smashing forces, clashing struggles, sweeping cross-currents, ripping passions, conflict, confusion, seeming chaos, the hot and the cold, the squalor and the drama. …[32]

Allow me to explain here how self-interest and conflict fit within the bigger picture. For Alinsky, power takes two forms: money and people. The haves have

30. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Vintage, 1971), 113.

31. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 100.

32. Ibid., 135.

money, but not people; the have-nots have people, but no money. Furthermore, the have-nots cannot hope to systematically convince the haves by engaging earnestly in well-reasoned dialogue. In fact, from the perspective of the dominants, dialogue constitutes a delaying tactic, a way of waiting out the have-nots. A better approach, Alinsky argues, is to engage in strategically, carefully thought-out conflict that combines the self-interest of the masses of have-nots and brings its force to bear on the powerful. Schutz quotes Alinsky sarcastically explaining,

> You've got to get away from all of this reconciliation jazz and all this friendship … business. Reconciliation, in this world, means only one thing: when one side gets enough power so the other side gets reconciled to it. Then you've got reconciliation. Then you've got peace and love. And then you've got a *dialogue* going on.[33]

Conflict is necessary because it is only through the agonistic encounter that the more powerful enemy can be properly goaded and guided in their reaction such as to stumble. In other words, it is only in a conflictual situation that the powerful can be pushed or tricked into making a mistake that is to the benefit of the weaker party. But, in order for this to work, a highly strategic form of action must be taken by the have-nots: simply engaging in open conflict on the terms already set by the dominant is extremely unlikely to succeed. Sticking to the same tactic, even if at first successful, is unlikely to remain successful over time. The dominants have time and money on their side, so we should anticipate that they will eventually adapt. Tactics require that one moves with the action. When in doubt, one should aim to do the unexpected.[34] But the purpose of this action should always be to further the struggle, for "[t]he radical recognizes that constant dissension and conflict is and has been the fire under the boiler of democracy."[35]

Ultimately, we find in Alinsky's political thought a rejection of liberal pacifism, since he considers it to be a kind of moral and political cowardice. Furthermore, we find an attempt at characterizing a self-willed, bare-knuckle, streetwise, political "realism" that sees carefully intertwined self-interest to be the most stable basis for sustained collective action. This togetherness, in turn, is thought to be the basis both for strategic interaction and a well-grounded hope that things can ultimately get better for the relatively powerless on the condition that they take the right actions within the right circumstances. In sum, the community organizer must seek to build in-group togetherness, as well as careful strategic engagement with a stronger and ever threatening foe. This is the picture of social struggle which Schutz believes contradicts the Deweyan vision. But I am skeptical of this claim.[36]

33. This quotation is taken from Alinsky speaking in *Saul Alinsky Went to War* (documentary film), directed by Peter Pearson and Donald Brittain (National Film Board of Canada, 1968) cited in Schutz, "Power and Conflict in the Public Realm," 298.

34. This is a turn of phrase I first heard from my own father, Tom Forstenzer, when describing his own approach to building a protest movement in the 1960s.

35. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 18.

36. I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to Christophe Point here. His essay has been a great starting point for me, and I highly recommend it to interested French readers: Christophe Point, "John

How Big Is the Alinsky-Dewey Gap?

At first glance, the Alinskyan position does seem at odds with a certain understanding of key Deweyan commitments. It is true that Dewey's political philosophy (especially as revealed in *The Public and Its Problems*) is typically associated with a pursuit of collective intelligence via peaceful means and with a celebration of the role that the community plays in ultimately shaping the individual self. However, I contend that the gap between the Deweyan and the Alinskyan outlook is far narrower than this might suggest. Why? Although Alinsky uses words and expressions that Dewey might have shied away from, I think that this is a cosmetic rather than a substantive difference in their practical theories of social action. Allow me to explain.

First, I doubt that Alinsky's appeal to self-interest is as deep as it often appears to be. Why? Alinsky tells us that the Foundation of a People's Organization — that is, the main vehicle for community organizing — "is in the communal life of the local people."[37] This means that shared experiences and respect for the communal life of the pre-existing groups or communities are essential components of good community organizing. Indeed, I contend that Alinsky's collectivism goes even further when he says,

> [T]he first stage in the building of a People's Organization is the understanding of the life of a community, not only in terms of individuals' experiences, habits, values, and objectives, but also from the point of view of the collective habits, experiences, customs, controls, and values of the whole group — *the community traditions*. …
>
> … It is impossible to overestimate the importance of knowledge of the traditions of those people whom it is proposed to organize.[38]

In fact, even Schutz attests to this when he writes that the Alinskyan vision of self-interest "was not simply about selfishness."[39] He goes on to say,

> Instead, organizers in the Alinsky tradition seek people for their organizations, for example, who have deeply rooted motivations for their engagement — people you can depend on over the long haul … organizers understand "self-interest" to include "our whole selves, our stories and memories and the relationships we have with close friends and family. It involves all that makes us tick and why."[40] Even Mother Teresa, on this reading, had a "self-interest." [41,42]

Dewey et Saul Alinsky: un professeur inutile et un militant dévoyé? Relecture pragmatiste de l'œuvre d'Alinsky pour une pratique émancipatrice du community organizing" [John Dewey and Saul Alinsky: A useless teacher and a misguided activist? A pragmatist rereading of Alinsky's work for an emancipatory practice of community organizing], *Sciences & Actions Sociales* 1, no. 9 (2018): 185–203.

37. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 76.

38. Ibid.

39. Schutz, "Power and Conflict in the Public Realm," 300.

40. Here, Schutz quotes Michael Jacoby Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations: A Personal Guide to Creating Groups that Can Solve Problems and Change the World* (Long Haul, 2006), 154.

41. Here, Schutz quotes Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

42. Schutz, "Power and Conflict in the Public Realm," 301.

Here, Schutz suggests that the conception of self-interest that lies at the heart of the Alinskyan tradition is highly capacious and can even take into account the ethical commitments of an individual. It is therefore hard to imagine that Dewey would have objected to this.

Second, I am not as convinced as Schutz that Alinsky's embrace of conflict is as whole-hearted as it sometimes sounds. Although Alinsky regularly asserts the need to engage in conflict, he also identifies with the American radical tradition, and for him, this demands a deep sensitivity and care toward others: "The radical is so completely identified with mankind that he personally shares the pain, the injustices, and the suffering of all his fellow men."[43] When Alinsky asks what the radical wants, he answers, "[T]he creation of a kind of society where all of man's potentialities are realized; a world where man could live in dignity, security, happiness, and peace — a world based on a morality of mankind."[44] This shows that, although conflict has a role to play in the Alinskyan outlook, it must always serve the wider purpose of making society more equal and just. For this to be un-Deweyan would require the Deweyan belief that conflict never serves this purpose. However, Dewey also recognizes the value of conflict in making us confront social problems, even calling it the "gadfly of thought."[45]

However, my attempt at softening the purportedly sharp distinction between the Deweyan and Alinskyan visions of social change still faces an important obstacle: the question of violence.

The Question of Violence

Alinsky invites us to build from self-interest toward community interest in order to mobilize relevant resources for engaging in conflict. We might therefore ask whether, on his account, this conflict can ever legitimately become violent? Although Alinsky's community organizing is a reformist and not a revolutionary project and community organizers are typically known for deal-making rather than for violent escalation, Alinsky strongly suggests that violence (and, especially, the threat of violence) has its place in political struggle. For example, he writes,

> [The radical] firmly believes in that brave saying of a brave people, "Better to die on your feet than to live life on your knees!" The radical may resort to the sword but when he does he is not filled with hatred against those individuals whom he attacks. He hates these individuals not as persons but as symbols representing ideas or interests which he believes to be inimical to the welfare of the people. This is the reason why radicals, although frequently they have embarked upon revolutions, have rarely resorted to personal terrorism. … To the general public radicals may appear to be persons of violence. But if radicals are stormy or fighting on the outside, they

43. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 15.

44. Ibid., 15.

45. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology (1922)*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 207.

> possess an inner dignity. It is the dignity that can only come from consistency of conscience and conduct.[46]

For Alinsky, making progress requires getting one's hands dirty. Removing the option of violence *a priori* is to remove oneself from the real world of politics where power is often yanked from the hands of others at gun point. Defending oneself, even violently, is legitimate for Alinsky. Thus, determining in advance that violence must always be off the table is to engage in a kind of wishful thinking. The question of violence, he maintains, must be confronted on its own terms in each unique political situation. In fact, Alinsky puts it plainly:

> 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?"
>
> … To say that corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles. The real arena is corrupt and bloody. Life is a corrupting process from the time a child learns to play his mother off against his father in the politics of when to go to bed; he who fears corruption fears life.
>
> … "[C]onscience is the virtue of observers and not of agents of action"; in action, one does not always enjoy the luxury of a decision that is consistent both with one's individual conscience and the good of mankind. The choice must always be for the latter. Action is for mass salvation and not for the individual's personal salvation. He who sacrifices the mass for his personal conscience has a peculiar conception of "personal salvation"; he doesn't care enough for people to be "corrupted" for them.[47]

To cut to the chase: Alinsky here articulates what I take to be a highly Deweyan theory of social action, according to which the legitimacy of selected means and pursued ends is to be determined in a case-by-case manner, ultimately depending on their consequences for their legitimacy. This position, in fact, strongly echoes Dewey's reply to Trotsky about means and ends, since he too "holds that the end in the sense of consequences provides the only basis for moral ideas and action, and therefore provides the only justification that can be found for means employed."[48] Even more precisely, on the question of the role of violence in social conflict, Dewey does not exclude its potential legitimacy: "The position that I have indicated as that of genuine interdependence of means and ends does not

46. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 18. It is worth pausing to note the masculinist language found in much of Alinsky's writing. I often find it jarring while reading him, as this feature of his writing might suggest an implicit assumption about the likely gender of key social actors. However, I think, in the case of Alinsky, this language is simply more likely to be reflective of the writing conventions in operation during the era in which he was writing than any misogynistic assumption about politics being primarily "men's *business*." Or, at the very least, I think that we, his contemporary readers, should read Alinsky as hoping to address himself to all "radicals," whatever their gender. Is this attempt ultimately successful? I am not entirely sure. But I cannot hope to intelligently address this question here, so I will have to revisit it another time.

47. Ibid., 24–25.

48. John Dewey, "Means and Ends: Their Interdependence, and Leon Trotsky's Essay on 'Their Morals and Ours'" (1938), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 350.

automatically rule out class struggle as one means for attaining the end."[49] The term *class struggle* in the context of his debate with Trotsky refers to violent proletarian revolution. In fact, in this text, Dewey — rather like Alinsky would do eventually — decries the Orthodox Marxist assumption of fixed relations between means and ends; violent proletarian revolution may not end class oppression once and for all.

In sum, despite the appearance of a chasm between Alinsky and Dewey on these important questions relating to social change, I find little more than the superficial appearance of disagreement. But what are we to make of all of this in practice?

Back to Practice

It should be clear by now that, although Dewey did not provide a fully worked out practical proposal for educational institutions to serve as democratic incubators, he did intend for them to instill in learners a sense of civic empowerment by engaging in democratic change-making practices. With regard to social change, the key insight shared by Dewey and Alinsky is that finding out which methods to employ in the task of making our societies more just, more democratic, more capable of intelligent collaborative efforts is itself a matter of experiment, of careful study of each situation, of cumulative learning over time, of questioning, and even of individual and collective creativity. If I am right, we must therefore ask which practical conclusions should be drawn from Schutz's arguments.

On the one hand, if Schutz's point is that progressive educators all too often curtail the domain of investigation for learners for fear of encountering uncomfortable questions about the nature and reality of political and social change, then I would agree with him that this narrowing is unhealthy, illegitimate, and ultimately wrong-headed. (However, I reiterate that I highly doubt that this attitude is in any interesting sense "Deweyan.") On the other hand, if Schutz aims to highlight the fact that Dewey never really developed a theory of resistance, to assert that this absence might mislead educators who admire Dewey, and to recommend that they turn to Alinsky's teachings for a useful place to begin thinking about ways to provide students with a concrete education in how to resist and overthrow domination, I wholeheartedly agree with Schutz. Deweyan pedagogues must navigate between the Charybdis of wallowing in the overwhelming political confusion of our age and the Scylla of presenting ready-made solutions in the realm of politics as anything more than mere starting points. This is a tall order in the political world in which we live. And yet, the task before us is not to provide simple answers to our students, but rather to support and guide them in their own explorations, as wisely and yet as humbly as we can.

Practically speaking, in the classroom and beyond, I contend that we Deweyan educators have a responsibility to introduce a plurality of ways of thinking about political and social change. The Alinskyan model can be a good starting point,

49. Ibid., 352.

but limiting our students to this way of envisioning social change would be just as narrow-minded as what Schutz identifies as "the middle class" tendency to occlude the role of conflict and violence in politics. Conflict tactics have their place; they respond to a rather distinctly American context (where important levers of power can be found within any locale) and are designed to be used in smaller-scale rather than larger-scale social conflicts. Other ways of conceiving of the task of social change are likely necessary for making sense of politics on a grandeur scale. Gandhi-inspired theories and practices of nonviolent resistance and Marshall Ganz's narrative account of leadership can provide important starting points for building social movements and national campaigns.[50] Pedagogical efforts, like those advocated by Matthew Lipman,[51] Paolo Freire,[52] bell hooks,[53] and others that invite exploring first-person experiences of domination and resistance also probably have an important role to play in shaping civic discourse. Finally, a certain kind of *high theory* associated broadly with Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory, is often necessary to help students come to realize that they live in a world in which the present sense of what is politically feasible is the product of deep systemic forms of domination. Pretending that conflict tactics alone can help address all of these features of civic life is simply too narrow-minded for exploring the realm of practical possibility. Since we Deweyans are at heart experimentalists, we should envision civic education as a continuous collective experiment. As a result, we must look to diverse voices, sources, and traditions that address the concrete conditions of social change to provide our students with a fullness of civic experiences, as well as a depth of political and social ideas to try on.[54] In the end, if we fail to be appropriately pluralistic in our pedagogical approach, we risk turning what must by its nature remain an open and risky series of experiments into a narrow and overly prescribed form of mere collective play-acting. Or to put it in slightly more Alinskyan language: we must encourage our students to honestly face the inexorable complexities, pains, and joys involved in the task of seeking to make meaningful social and political change so that they may learn to do the unexpected, and eventually win.

50. Key sources on nonviolence are well known, but the obvious place to start is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*, vol. 4 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, and Kieran Taylor (University of California Press, 2000), 473–481. For an introduction to Ganz's theory of narrative leadership, see Marshall Ganz, "Why David Sometimes Wins: Strategic Capacity in Social Movements," in *The Psychology of Leadership: New Perspectives and Research*, ed. David Messick and Roderick Kramer (Lawrence Elbaum, 2005), 209–238.

51. See Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, 2d ed. (Temple University Press, 1980).

52. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970).

53. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

54. Civic Studies, in general, and Peter Levine's recent *What Should We Do!* (Oxford University Press, 2022), in particular, strike me as providing a promising framework for conceiving of the pluralism of tactics, methods, and approaches that I have in mind.

A Closing Note

Concretely, what should we Deweyan teachers do in our classrooms in the face of student protests? Our first response must be to celebrate the civic-mindedness exhibited by these students. Our second response — especially under present circumstances — demands that we be vocal about their right to protest and exercise free speech. Our third response should see us engage in civic dialogue — frank, but civil — with our students about the topic at hand, but also about their selected tactics and strategies. If they ask for advice, we may freely dispense it, so long as we underline our unavoidable fallibility. If they do not ask for our advice, we may still, as co-equal citizens, express our agreements or disagreements with them, but I think it serves us well to do so while reminding our students of the fact that we are neither neutral observers nor experts in the art of change-making; we are but co-inquirers in seeking to establish what democracy and justice truly demand of us in our present situation. Ultimately, in our interactions with our students, our responsibilities as pedagogues to appeal to their critical capacities, to reflect, to inquire, and to be judicious, to be fair-minded with one another, must take precedence over the desire to immediately win in the marketplace of political ideas. Facing the risk of unpopularity or, in some cases, of administrative punishment to assert both our collective civic power and our civic responsibility is no small ask in the often-threatening public political culture of our age. Yet, I believe that it is what is required of us to keep the Deweyan legacy alive.

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