**Beyond pragmatism**

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Organizations committed to changing the world for the better must deal with a fundamental tension: On the one hand, they need to present a vision for the kind of society they would like to create. On the other hand, they are forced to reckon with everyday realities of the existing economic and political order. In the community organizing tradition in the United States, this tension is often described as the conflict between “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be.”

Over the past half-century, some of the most prominent community organizing networks in the United States – ranging from the Gamaliel Foundation to Faith In Action to the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF – have taught about this divide as a key part of their introductory trainings, using it as a means of orienting new organizers to their approach to organizing. Over the years, the framework has been invoked by Barack Obama, Saul Alinsky and countless rank-and-file organizers. For advocates of this concept, understanding the “two worlds” dichotomy is fundamental to developing the type of people who can effectively produce change: namely, realistic radicals.

So what is the origin of this idea? And why might it be useful for us today?

In his 2003 memoir, “Roots for Radicals,” Edward T. Chambers, who led the Saul Alinsky-founded IAF from 1972 to 2009, explains the idea this way: “Until we die, we live with a tension under our skin at the center of our personhood. We are born into a world of needs and necessities, opportunities and limitations, and must survive there…” Continuing, he writes, “Self-preservation, food, clothing, shelter, safety, health care, education and work are necessary for everyone. Large numbers of people agonize over these things every day of their lives; many of us think of nothing else.” Like it or not, these are the circumstances we are thrown into and the conditions we must confront. They are the world as it is.

But that is only one side of the story. As Chambers notes, “We also have dreams and expectations, yearnings and values, hopes and aspirations. “We exist from day to day with the awareness that things not only might, but could be, should be, different for ourselves and our children.” Our hopes and ideals for a better society make up the world as it should be. And these are integral to who we are as people. “Cynics deride vision and values as irrelevant in the real world,” Chambers wrote, “but the fact is that they are indispensable to our sanity, integrity and authenticity.”

To succeed, organizers are forced to deal with both worlds at once. They have to figure out how to reconcile them without sacrificing either a broader vision for change or the demand for concrete improvements in the here and now. Radical movements seeking to alter the material conditions of people’s daily lives must first contend with the constraints created by those conditions – including the despondency engendered by a system more accountable to moneyed interests than ordinary people. They must deal with the reality of power as a guiding force in the world. In the course of pushing for a given demand or policy change, organizers might find that winning requires navigating their way through very compromised institutions or entering into unsavory alliances. Therefore, they must weigh the costs and benefits of engaging with the system while also trying to remain true to their values.

While the need to balance the two worlds is challenging, the ongoing conflict between them can also become a creative force: “When these two worlds collide hard enough and often enough, a fire in the belly is sometimes ignited,” Chambers explains. “The tension between the two worlds is the root of radical action for justice and democracy.”

Alinsky, Obama and the problem of ideology: By the time Chambers wrote his memoir, activists had been discussing the tension between the two worlds for many decades. The roots of the framework can be traced to Saul Alinsky himself, a foundational figure in modern US community organizing traditions, who deployed it as an argument for rejecting utopian self-isolation and being willing to interact with the system, with all its flaws and limitations. Barack Obama, who started his career as an Alinskyite community organizer, incorporated the phrase as part of his political worldview and occasionally referenced it after becoming president. However, it was Alinsky’s less famous successors who fleshed out the framework and adapted it for their organizations, weaving it into the DNA of community organizing networks such as the IAF.

Even as the framework attracted adherents, it has also drawn detractors. Critics of Alinsky’s model of community organizing see focusing on “the world as it is” as a way of avoiding ideology and hemming in a movement’s more radical aspirations. In a critique for Jacobin, socialist writer Aaron Petcoff argues that, coming out of the 1960s, Alinsky “tried to convince a new generation of radicalizing youth from the New Left to adopt his ‘pragmatic’ approach to organizing, which rested on accepting ‘the world as it is’ and rejecting more militant politics.”

While they may not entirely agree with Petcoff’s critique, a variety of organizers trained in the community organizing tradition have also noted the anti-ideological biases that were baked into their formation. In a 2018 essay for The Nation, journalist Nick Bowlin quotes Detroit organizer Molly Sweeney, who recalls that her training in Alinskyite organizing lacked “any analysis of the greater forces of white supremacy and capitalism that shape our world.” As Sweeney explains, “The ‘world as it is’ was articulated in my training void of any analysis of how the world became that way.”

Expressing similar sentiments, Katie Horvath of the Symbiosis Research Collective wrote in a 2018 reflection for The Ecologist about her experience with how the framework was used: “It’s framed as pragmatism: We don’t live in the world as it should be, we live in the real world, and we have to act according to its rules to get what we want,” she explains. “At training, this was always explained as a necessary strategy in order to achieve the world as it should be,” but Horvath found herself wondering about the limitations it imposed. Being overly pragmatic, she reflects, “constricts what is politically possible, as it means you end up working off of the lowest common denominator of shared values for fear of alienating member institutions.”

Excerpted: ‘Changing the ‘World as It Is’ into the ‘World as it Should Be’.

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