

Community organization: a process of self-help of the poor

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of the Poor

A perennial concern of the helping professions is how to organize the community so that our efforts may be prophylactic rather than remedial. In retrospect we see how many problems could have been avoided if the community had possessed foresight enough to have steered the processes of change so that they did not produce problems. When we see the vast amount of effort and precious resource wasted through duplication and competition, while many equally pressing needs are still unmet, we beat our chests and cry out for better coordination and planning in community welfare. It might also be added that as communities start changing from a higher to a lower status, there is a proliferation of such organizations and agencies among those who are losing out, each vying with the other to be the one to "reach," "save," "involve" or (depending upon his interests) "mobilize" the new comer. New York City's West Side, at one time, had seven layers of organizations each trying to be the "coordinator of the coordinators". For the most part they were representatives of the groups which were leaving the area - each marched as if he had an army following when he did not have a corporal's guard - for the most part they were all the same small coterie who played musical chairs since they were the same people only serving in different capacities in each organization. If these groups made any discernible difference in the plight of the "little man" it was undetected. It did give a few individuals high visibility, and earned for them significant recognition on the part of the power of the power structure of the wider community.

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viable, with a fair amount of escalation for those who are at the bottom, that there is disengagement from the mythologies, and conflict induced to change the rules through which recognition is attained (2). This, it might be said in passing, is the crisis in race relations at the present time.

It is obvious that there is enhancement of human personality when one is involved, purposively, and participating with others in achieving collective goals. It is obvious, also, that community organization which is undertaken by the *powerful*, designed to manipulate the *powerless*, and make them think some things are going to be done about their plight through mutual involvement, is stultifying to the human spirit. Too many community organizers start out thinking they will be able to get the *powerless* to become mutually involved with the *powerful*, and out of this process there will be built in pressure to change the social system. Such people, too often, wind up in frustration and sometimes in shock, because when the moment of confrontation comes the power order will not budge. The professional then breaks faith with the groups who have listened to his promises, for as a professional he cannot or will not sacrifice his own place in the power arrangement.

The alternative pattern of process to that of involvement is conflict. Adler was only half right when he contended that people who feel compromised in their potency overcompensate by aggression. They also resign in apathy. The apathy of the slums of the great cities of America is mute testimony to the pervasive sense of powerlessness felt by the people. The only way through which such malaise can be overcome is through such groups taking power and moving through self-direction to force consideration of their needs and interests in communal decision making. This means conflict, for no power order which is entrenched will surrender its favored position without resistance.

Community organization which mobilizes those who are marginal to the power order must of necessity be of a different sort to that of the power organization undertaking to "coordinate services". The *powerless* will not participate on a sustained purposive basis unless there is considerable attention given to dramatic conflict type activity. I know of no instance where the poor and the marginal to power have participated in community organization and planning on a sustained basis. As social workers and other surrogates of the power order we have decried this situation, and have talked and written extensively about the need for "grass roots" involvement. Where "grass roots" have been middle-class people who were a part of the power order, this has worked wonderfully. Where the "grass roots" have been those marginal to the power order it has worked scarcely at all.

A third and tangential question is "Community organization for what purpose?" There are all sorts of community organizations. The Police Department of New York City sent out a directive several years ago to the effect that each precinct would organize a Police Coordinating Council. The Captains were to involve the leading businessmen, the ministers, the leading agency personnel and others of such types. Shortly thereafter the school system started comparable programs. These

(2) The Black Americans as a group is a case in point for this.

something for the powerless. In this framework, organization may and usually does further enslave those who are served. Service *to* people invariably means dependency upon the service and compromise of those served. The very best intentioned among us may do more harm than good if all we are concerned with is the improvement of services *to* and *for* those served.

The reason for this situation is that service has become a middle-class power order way of trying to buy a clear conscience while still enjoying unshared privilege. It is interesting also that much of it is channeled through the church, for the guilt which needs to be assuaged is a spiritual one. I have just sent my donation to the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies in New York City. It represents 235 Protestant and non-sectarian welfare agencies under this umbrella who spend \$100,000,000 per year on welfare services for New Yorkers. Much of their last Board Member's Institute was preoccupied with poverty, and the accretion of experience they have had in dealing with it. No one can deny that this is a great outpouring of "service". No one would deprive the community of the services which this money provides. Could not a good case be made, however, that by and large this outpouring is much more an effort to service people sufficiently in Egypt that they will not seek the promised land, rather than that it is releasing of the human spirit? Let me take another case which I describe with extreme reluctance. It relates to the Neighborhood Houses in my community. On New York City's Lower East Side we have five of the most outstanding of such Houses of America. A good case could be made that in the one hundred years of their illustrious history the major contribution they have made – in spite of all the other fine things they have done – is that they have managed to keep an indigent population in that area to be served. They stand as mute testimony to the idea that served people are kept people. Compromised people are compromised people. Compromised people tend to become apathetic people. Ultimately service becomes self-defeating – if one expects it to enhance the dignity and worth of those served. (4)

Another aspect of this problem of service is that those voluntary agencies which pioneer the field tend to stake out their claim to it and claim "squatters rights" on such services as they developed first. A considered judgment is that we are far behind in child welfare in New York, for instance, because the sectarian interests pre-empted the child welfare field, and have not supported efforts to get the state to do what it should, and the agencies cannot do, in services to children. It is hard to say today, that community organization which seeks to serve this aspect of community life is enhancing the dignity and worth of those served.

For several years I have been concerned with this concentration of sectarian agencies upon "service" as an end in itself. I have tried to ask church groups, "What are we in the business for?" It is patently clear that we cannot serve all the needs of all the people through such auspices. Most have long since passed the point at which they seek to serve only their own. Hence, a re-evaluation of service becomes increasingly urgent. One would hope that our service agencies were established to help us test our commitments as religiously motivated people, rather than that we accepted gifts

(4) It is for this reason that Mr. Saul Alinsky, founder and director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, has deplored the established social welfare work by calling it "welfare colonialism".

The alternative to this siphoning off process is for the group itself to take power and come to communal decision making as peers in the decision making process. In such situations it is hypothesized that the taking of power becomes the antidote to apathy, and that involvement and participation in achieving a place in the power order demands that skills be learned which make such participation possible. For instance, there were many reports of a vast upswing in study and self-improvement at the time of emancipation when Negroes thought they were going to be given a chance to participate as equals with the whites in the South in the building of a society. They tied their Bibles between their plow handles so they could read and study as they plowed. Then came reconstruction (6) and blew out the light of hope, with its attendant sense of powerlessness and apathy.

You ask me how power is to be taken? It must be taken through organization. It should be emphasized, also, that it has to be taken, it cannot be given. This means that community organization in this context is by the powerless, and has to be genuinely grass roots. It has to be organized around the burning issues and frustrations of the group – not some vague do-good goals. It has to be organized with leaders who have a charismatic quality of leadership – people who can “quicken the spirit”, not by bureaucrats who see it as an interesting experiment in social work. This type of community organization has to bring the larger power order to significant confrontation and keep it there until the issues which relegate the “little people” to such subservient status have been resolved and the social structure altered. In other words, social conflict must run its course until it has restructured a society.

In this context such a group is not necessarily looking for more charity. Services may be needed, but under these conditions they will be demanded as a right. By and large, however, they will not be asking to be better served. They will be asking that they be allowed to come to communal decision making as peers in the decision making process. The best model of what is referred to here is the labor organization. Labor has been respected in its dignity about its proportion as it has achieved power and sat at the decision making councils with management as peers. The past summer's revolution in race relations is another aspect of it. (7) One of the best illustrations was the selective buying campaign here in Philadelphia. The Negro community organized and disciplined itself to the point that it said to many of the leading national and local organizations, “If you want us to buy your products you will have to employ Negroes in your organization.” Of course the usual complaint went up that they did not discriminate, and that it would be a violation of the law to pass over qualified whites to hire unqualified Negroes. The Negro leadership said this is your problem. You got yourself into it by shutting the doors of opportunity in the past, you will have to deal with it now. As a result they cracked employment barriers in several leading organizations. Another aspect of it was that when they really started searching for Negro talent they found it.

(6) The period following the U.S. Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation is called the Reconstruction Period.

(7) The summer of 1963 was the first “hot” summer in the face of which the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. established a Commission on Religion and Race to make concerted efforts with Roman Catholic and Jewish groups.

father image with which to relate", "matriarchial domination", "inability to forego immediate pleasures for long-range goals", and now the latest — that cultural deprivation distorts perception in the early years. (This, by the way, seems a modern version of the one current when I was a boy in East Texas. It was that something closed in a Negro's head when he is about six years of age, hence it is not profitable to try to teach him beyond that point.)

In reviewing a book on this literature of the social sciences recently, I felt at the end like saying, "For God's sake, if that is all we see in the human potential with which we work, perhaps we had better call the Black Muslims (10) and let them have them". Somehow when they get a dose of that ideology their low I.Q.'s, their low social class, and their weak ego strengths do not seem to bother too much. Somehow they seem quite disciplined people. Granted we think the ideology is anti-social, it does give the lie to the supposition that the limitation is in the human potential. This type of approach means that a major hurdle the powerless have is that of beating down the mythology the scholars have created.

It would not be right to close without some statement of where the church fits this situation. It is commonplace to say it is a part of the status quo and of the social order which is. At the same time it is a major bastion or organization for the Negro group when it mobilizes to take power. The church is mortgaged to work through integrative processes when it is part of the power order. The Black Muslims say its ideology provides the perfect rationalization for the continued servitude of the Negro. There has been little to convince those who are asking whether this is so or just the contrary.

It is not hard to persuade a congregation to help pay for services. It is very hard to persuade them to share power. It is very hard for one to persuade them to work through conflict processes and identify with the "little man" unless perchance the congregation is made up of the powerless. Hence, the church tends to reflect the social order, and in many respects provides the rationalizations for its methods of work. When disputes occur it is frequently called upon to be the arbiter — usually aimed at reconciliation. Too often the reconciliation is to restore the status quo.

If religious leadership is concerned with community organization processes, it seems some things should be kept clear. One of the first is clarity as to who is the drummer. Is it the power order? Is it the little man who is trying to shake off his apathy and shape his own destiny? Is it to The One whose mission was "the more abundant life" without footnotes which exempted any group because of race or circumstance? If the latter, the religious leader will not be mortgaged to any group, but will bring all to confrontation — inducing conflict here, interpreting the healing effects of love there, and seeking throughout to interpret the process through which all are going so the encounters of peoples with differences will be one of growth.

(10) Black Muslim is not really Islam. They stand on their acceptance of themselves as black people, taking pride in their blackness, not being ashamed of it, on the one hand, and on their rejection of what they associate with white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, on the other hand. By calling themselves "Muslim", they want to express their disenchantment with Christianity and to identify themselves with black people in Africa. (For an authoritative study on Black Muslims, see C. Eric Lincoln *The Black Muslims in America*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961.)