

Rough Draft -- COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN THE GHETTO, A CRITIQUE

Introduction

This is a paper about people although it purports to be about community organization. It touches too many personal experiences to claim objectivity. What it does try to do is to look one long and searching time, at the sufferers in our society to show that the wounds of segregation and poverty are as deep and total as life itself.

I suppose too it suggests that redemption must be as wide and as sweeping as the wound and gained not for one or some, but all. For all, all are losers.

1. The Problem: Alienation and Identity in the Ghetto.

I was standing behind her in line. The ticket agent was, querulously, explaining something to her. She was very confused and kept repeating, "Yes Sir; yes sir; yes sir," though it was obvious she did not understand.

It was a tableau I had seen before, many miles and many years ago in the South and it made me conscious once again of black people working in scrubby fields and walking along hard red roads.

People live under duress in the South for the South is not a region but an institution. An institution that requires of black people, if they are concerned at all about surviving, that they make a thousand daily sacrifices, a thousand daily capitulations to prove that they are unworthy.

This need to surrender in order to live does something to people - it cripples their spirit and erodes their sense of dignity. That is the other aspect of the South, which is inescapably personal: It is a condition of existence, an outlook on life which can exist in any place at all: in Birmingham or Buchenwald, in Harlem or Hattiesburg - they are all the same. They are places where hope does not exist.

There is thus a common factor in the psychology of the deprived - a combination of traits which include a sense of futility and the fact of ignorance. Ignorance in this case is meant literally - the poor do not know life as we know it.

One of the effects of discrimination and impoverishment is to preclude the possibility of experiencing those things that are taken for granted by the "affluent Americans". It means for example, that the excluded do not know how basic institutions of this society work - because they have never worked for them. The rich and the poor, the black and the white view the world differently. It is this distinction in perspective that must be understood before one can reach people because they must be reached where they are.

This estrangement from participation in the democratic process means that people are not only ignorant of this "democratic process", except in vague and non-relevant ways, but also that they have no control over their lives. The dispossessed are bludgeoned by forces they cannot change: the welfare department, the police depart-

ment, the automated firm, and those thousands of functionaries who confuse, and bewilder, and denigrate. The poor, especially the black poor, are at the mercy of everyone. They are treated accordingly.

The reaction against this set of circumstances takes two general forms: rebellion or resignation. But whichever one of these responses occurs it is evidence that the indigent do not believe they have a real future. (Fatalism and superstition go hand-in-hand.) They await misfortune because they are not part of the "American Dream"; nor do they expect their world to get better because they are their world. And for as far back as there is a living relative to tell, their world has not gotten better. The ghetto has been beaten by the lack of victory. If then, it is to be helped, it must know success - success introduced into the streets of despair and made relevant to the lives of many. Success for the few has been a subterfuge we have been involved in for much too long a time, as long as our myth about "the exceptional Negro", and about American advancement, that more encompassing myth that truth and justice will out. They do not.

2. Professional Approaches to the Ghetto.

A multiplicity of approaches has been tried in the ghetto. Most, I think, have been unsuccessful. Any attempt at solving the problems of the ghetto, originating outside it and not responsive to the actual ghetto situation is probably irreparably handicapped. Many programs have been sponsored in behalf of the ghetto that were rarely in touch with the poor - except statistically. The odd thing about these programs is that they have never been designed to eliminate the conditions of deprivation, only to make them more tolerable. Consequently, there is little recognition or admission of the forces acting upon the poor. In Harlem discrimination is not faced up to, nor is automation, nor, really, is poverty. This kind of approach always "begs" the question of change; always proceeds on the assumption that it is possible to remake the society into one complete middle-class Utopia.

Often too, the real needs of people are lost in a morass of bureaucratic priorities. For example, just after President Johnson's declaration of war on poverty, the administration's proposal to build 15,000 additional units of public housing was announced in the New York Times. The annual number of public housing units is 35,000 (a figure that is not sufficient for Harlem much less the country as a whole.)

However, there will be no increase, according to the Times article, in relation to the needs of the population because the government does not have enough people (remember Johnson's administrative cut down) to handle a larger caseload. What in fact has happened here, and is repeated a thousand thousand times, is that the decisions affecting the lives of people are made by some other people in some other place.

Another agency approach is to abstract a particular problem from the ghetto and devise a program to deal with it. This attack fails short too, because the ultimate reason why any particular

problem exists is that the people permit it and they permit it because they are unaware of their power to change it.

This fact tends to hamper even the "good" programs because to ~~tip~~ means to effect change; to change the practice of some other agency or to change the practice of some institution. Such behavior is traditionally viewed as being outside the scope of the program. (One can always tell when this particular kind of tension is going on: ... its activities become controversial.) This process is inevitable, for one cannot alter an existing system, or go against any prevailing norms, without a reaction. Thus in New Haven, when the community lawyer division of Community Progress Inc. began actively to support the indigenous and attempt to see that they were dealt with fairly, that part of the program was "phased out."

Then too, there are those agencies which supposedly represent the ghetto but receive financial backing from outside it; i.e. they have access to the antichambers of the powerful.

The ironic factor is that the poor are "invisible". Those who most need aid are unaware of the mechanisms by which one competes for governmental or municipal assistance. They have very little wherewithal to impress decision-makers. Only the abjectness of their lives and the world seems inured to that. There is thus the most tremendous gap between those who dispense bounty and those who are in need of it. The poor are involved in a great monstrous charade. They wait humbly to receive their dole while people from some other place decide how much they need to live and grow and survive. (And have even the audacity to be outraged if it is suggested that the allotment is not enough.)

Money, for some strange reason cannot be funneled directly into blighted areas. It must go through some intermediary: the state, the city, the "responsible" local agency, who will watch over the allocation as a good patron should. (But how much money is spent on the salaries of professionals who have come-and-gone into the "gray" areas of this country and left its pallor unchanged. Money that could have fed a child, repaired a home, or paid hospital bills.)

Lastly there are the settlement houses. The settlement houses which have nestled in the forgotten places of our city and administered to our forgotten citizens, They do not change the ghetto either. They tend to inject middle-class values into the slums and select out from their clientele those who most share these motivations. For example, in Street Corner Society, William Whyte reveals a non-scientific indignation at the manner in which the Boston settlement house rewards the middle-class aspirant and covertly punishes the rest. If a Hull House produces a Benny Goodman, that is not an answer for the neighborhood. And there will always be Hull Houses just there will always be neighborhoods in need, until a solution for the community is found. A solution that does not concern itself with the one, but with the many.

Agencies are concerned with the visible and demonstrable people because they must prove themselves. They must show results. The results, however, are defined in middle-class terms.

3. Change in the Ghetto

The person who would change the ghetto must deal with two forms of alienation; that of the community from the mainstreams of society, and that of the individual from himself. An external and an internal battle must be won. It is not enough to point to the system which deprives, unless the individual's sense of capability to deal with that system in a personally meaningful way is bolstered. (That is, the view of the world we mentioned in the beginning must be expanded to include the fact of possibility.) The pathway to the liberation of the ghetto lies in altering the psyche of the poor. All the manifestations of the ghetto's sickness and squalor illustrate that there is little hope, little use. The ghetto and its ills are accepted.

This analysis has several implications for community organization. It sees leadership training conferences that are run outside of the ghetto (and hence are but theoretically related to reality) as dysfunctional. It sees identification as necessary for understanding. It sees indigenous leadership being created only after years of cooperative effort. It sees community organization as being chronically limited because one cannot really do anything for or with the people until they trust you and trust is a long time coming. It sees the need to inculcate a social ethic into the struggle for freedom so that those involved will be motivated to work with other groups for common ends. It sees the need to recreate the structure of emancipation in ten thousand thousand places; to build small voluntary associations which are educated not to a segment but to the totality of life. It sees the need for social service to evolve into social action to involve people in actual behavior experiences that will contribute to a feeling of competence. It sees the need to build stable indigenous leadership out of these social action groups which will be concerned with comprehensive change in all the ghettos in all the cities. It sees the need to take that last painfully slow step into political action on a national front that will at last deal with the entire matrix of iniquities.

Failing that, it sees nothing.

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