

## THE POLITICS OF POVERTY

A growing number of people are becoming disenchanted with the welfare-social worker approach to poverty; welfare systems, they feel, only perpetuate the problems they attempt to solve by encouraging dependency and alienation. What follows are discussions of various experiments in self-help, designed to put an end to paternalism and give the poor a measure of control over their own futures.

### SHOULD THE POOR ORGANIZE?

*Inasmuch as an overwhelming majority of Negroes in the United States live in slums, it is impossible to discuss poverty without also discussing racial problems. In a book, Crisis in Black and White, Mr. Silberman, who is a member of the board of editors of Fortune, analyzes an attempt to mobilize a Negro slum in Chicago.*

Charles E. Silberman

"In the last analysis . . . Negro children will be able to climb out of their slums en masse only if they see their parents doing the same—only if the adults of the community are involved in action on their own behalf. For it is the disorganization of the community at large—the evidence on all sides that their parents are unable to control their own behavior, unable to impose sanctions on people who threaten the community's well-being—that persuades the young that the cards are stacked against them, that the omnipresent 'they' will not permit them to 'make it' in any legitimate form, and so leads them into apathy, withdrawal, or rebellion.

"But can this be done; can the adults be mobilized? The answer, quite simply, is that it *has* been done— in Chicago, where The Woodlawn Organization, created in late 1960, has become a major factor in that city's life and politics. Indeed, T.W.O. is the most important and the most impressive experiment affecting Negroes anywhere in the United States. It is a living demonstration that Negroes, even those living in the worst sort of slum, can be mobilized to help themselves, and that when they are, neither the Negro community nor the city as a whole can ever be quite the same again."

T.W.O. was organized by Saul Alinsky, the executive director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, at the request of a group of clergymen in the community. Alinsky, a sociologist and criminologist by training, is nothing if not controversial. At various times he has been attacked as a communist, a fascist, a dupe of the Catholic Church, the mastermind of a Catholic conspiracy (Alinsky is Jewish), a racist, a segregationist and an integrationist seeking to mongrelize Chicago.

"The essential difference between Alinsky and his enemies is that Alinsky really believes in democracy: he really believes that the helpless, the poor, the badly educated can solve their own problems if given the chance and the means; he really believes that the poor and uneducated, no less than the rich and educated, have the right to decide how their lives should be run and what services should be offered to them, instead of being ministered to like children. 'I do not believe that democracy

**A trade-union  
approach to  
poverty?**

can survive, except as a formality,' he has written, 'if the ordinary citizen's part is limited to voting—if he is incapable of initiative and unable to influence the political, social and economic structures surrounding him.'

"The individual can influence these structures only if he has power, for power means nothing more or less than the capacity to make one's interests felt in the decisions that affect him. There are two sources of power, in Alinsky's view: money and people. Since the residents of Woodlawn and of areas like it obviously have no money, their only source of power is themselves—which is to say the creation of an effective organization. Alinsky's frankness about power is upsetting to a good many people who regard open discussion of power as somehow lacking in taste. . . .

"Alinsky takes delight in violating this etiquette. 'The only reason people have ever banded together,' he baldly states, 'and the only reason they ever will, is the fact that organization gives them the power to satisfy their desires or to realize their needs. There never has been any other reason.' In his view, people join a trade union to develop enough power to force a change in their working conditions; they join a political party in order to have a power instrument that can win an election and carry out their political objectives; they organize a church as a power instrument to convert others to their religious belief. . . .

"The conventional appeal to homeowners' interests in conserving property values is useless in a community in which the majority of people rent, and in which the homeowners would have to sell if forced to comply with the building code. A call for civic pride falls flat in a community which hates its neighbors and which is convinced it is going to be bulldozed out of existence sooner or later; neighborhoods like Woodlawn are too drab and dismal to cause anyone to rally around them. Even civil rights is too much of an abstraction. 'The daily lives of Woodlawn people,' an early Alinsky memo on Woodlawn suggested, 'leave them with little energy or enthusiasm for realizing principles from which they themselves will derive little practical benefit. They know that with their educational and economic handicaps they will be exceptions indeed if they can struggle into a middle-class neighborhood or a white-collar job.' Instead of these appeals of the conventional neighborhood organizer and group worker, Alinsky uses the classical approach of trade union organization: he appeals to the self-interest of the local residents and to their resentment and distrust of the outside world, and he seeks out and develops a local, indigenous leadership.

"While indigenous leadership is crucial if the organization is to mean anything in the lives of its members, the initial impetus must come from the outside, and the mean and difficult job of building the organization must be handled by full-time organizers who know how to conquer the apathy of the slum and how to weld its disparate fragments into a unified whole. . . .

"But the Industrial Areas Foundation insists that help be used to make the local community self-sufficient, not to keep it dependent. Alinsky will not enter a community unless he is invited by something like a cross-section of the population, and he usually insists, as a condition of entering, that the community itself, no matter how poor, take over the full responsibility for financing the new organization within a period of three years. Alinsky has a standard way of dramatizing the importance of financial independence at the convention at which a new group formally approves its constitution. The audience is usually full of enthusiasm and terribly proud of the constitution, which local citizens have hammered

**Why rent  
strikes work**

weights and false totals publicized. Most of the offending merchants quickly agreed to comply with the 'Square Deal' agreement. To bring recalcitrant merchants to terms, leaflets were distributed through the community accusing them of cheating and urging residents to stay away.

"The Square Deal campaign served its purpose. It eliminated a considerable amount of exploitation and chicanery on the part of Woodlawn merchants. More important, it made the residents of Woodlawn aware of the existence of the new organization and drove home the fact that through organization they *could* improve some of the circumstances of their lives. . . .

"To capitalize on the enthusiasm this campaign created, the I.A.F. staff of men moved next to organize rent strikes in a number of Woodlawn buildings. Wherever a substantial majority of the tenants could be persuaded to act together, a tenants' group was formed which demanded that the landlord, within some stated period of time, clear up physical violations that made occupancy hazardous or uncomfortable—broken windows, plumbing that did not work, missing steps from staircases, inadequate heat, etc. When the landlords ignored the ultimatum, T.W.O. organized a rent strike; rents were withheld from the landlord and deposited in escrow in a special bank account.

"To dramatize the strike on one block where several adjoining buildings were involved, residents spelled out 'This Is A Slum' in huge letters on the outside of the building. If the landlord remained recalcitrant, groups of pickets were dispatched to march up and down in front of the landlord's own home, carrying placards that read 'Your Neighbor Is A Slumlord.' The picketing provided a useful outlet for the anger the tenants felt, and gave them an opportunity, for the first time in their lives, to use their color in an affirmative way. For as soon as the Negro pickets appeared in a white suburban block, the landlord was deluged with phonecalls from angry neighbors demanding that he do something to call the pickets off. Within a matter of hours landlords who were picketed were on the phone with T.W.O. agreeing to make repairs. . . .

"It is precisely this sort of tactic that leads some of Alinsky's critics to denounce him as an agitator who deals in hate and who incites to conflict, a troublemaker whose stated goal is to 'rub raw the sores of discontent,' as an early T.W.O. memorandum put it. 'The fact that a community may be stirred and organized by "sharpening dormant hostilities" and "rubbing raw the sores of discontent" is not new,' says Julian Levi, executive director of the South East Chicago Commission and mastermind and director of the University of Chicago's urban renewal activities. . . .

**Why "going  
through channels"  
doesn't work**

"As an example of the methods to which he objects, Levi cites a T.W.O. leaflet naming a local food store and warning people to 'watch out' for short weights, spoiled food, and short-changing. 'If this is what this merchant is really doing,' Levi says, 'he should be punished by the court—but with all the safeguards the law provides. This is not the way people should be taught to protect themselves,' he argues; they should be taught to register complaints with the Department of Health (about spoiled food), and Department of Weight and Measures (about short weights) and the Police Department (about short change). Levi similarly deplores the use of rent strikes. If landlords were violating the building code, he argues, T.W.O. should have brought action through the Building Department, the way the South East Chicago Commission does, instead of taking the law into its own hands.

"But slum dwellers, as Levi surely knows, have been complaining to

the Building Department and to other city agencies for years, to no avail. The reason the South East Chicago Commission is able to get rapid action on complaints it registers with the Building Department or any other city agency is that it has what politicians call 'clout': the Commission is the urban renewal arm of the University of Chicago, whose board of trustees includes some of the most influential businessmen and politicians in the city. . . .

"In any case, Levi's criticisms miss the point—that the tactics he deplores are designed to serve more than one end. In the case of the fledgling Woodlawn Organization, the most urgent need was to persuade the local population that it could solve some of its problems through organization. It is impossible to understand Alinsky's tactics, in fact, without understanding the basic dilemma inherent in organizing any slum area, and particularly a Negro slum. The basic characteristic of the slum—its 'life style' so to speak—is apathy; no organization can be created unless this apathy can be overcome. But slum residents will not stir unless they see a reasonable chance of winning, unless there is some evidence that they *can* change things for the better.

"This reluctance to act is perfectly understandable; it is not true that the very poor have nothing to lose. Quite the contrary. In some respects, they have more to lose than the middle class; they face the danger of having their relief checks cut off, of losing an unskilled patronage job, of having a son on probation remanded to jail—of suffering any one of a host of reprisals a politically-oriented bureaucracy can impose. . . .

"Quite frequently, therefore, the apathy that characterizes the slum represents what in many ways is a realistic response to a hostile environment. But realistic or not, the adjustment that is reached is one of surrender to the existing conditions and abdication of any hope of change. The result is a community seething with inarticulate resentments and dormant hostilities repressed for safety's sake, but which break out every now and then in some explosion of deviant or irrational behavior. The slum dwellers are incapable of acting, or even of joining, until these suppressed resentments and hostilities are brought to the surface where they can be seen as problems—*i.e.*, as a condition you can do something about. . . .

"What makes The Woodlawn Organization significant, however, is not so much what it is doing for its members as what it is doing *to* them. 'The most important thing to me about the forty-six busloads of people who went to City Hall to register,' Alinsky commented at the time, 'was their own reaction. Many were weeping; others were saying, "They're paying attention to us"; "They're recognizing that we're *people*."' Eighteen months later, an active member observed, 'City Hall used to be a forbidden place, but we've made so many trips there and seen so many people that it's beginning to feel like a neighborhood store.' Other members expressed themselves in much the same way: 'We've lost our fear of standing up and expressing ourselves'; 'We don't have to go hat in hand, begging, anymore. It's a wonderful feeling.' What is crucial, in short, is not what the Woodlawn residents win, but that *they* are winning it; and this makes them see themselves in a new light—as men and women of substance and worth. . . .

"It would be inane to pretend that Woodlawn has become a model community; it remains a poverty-stricken, crime-ridden slum, though a slum with hope—a slum that is developing the means of raising itself by its own bootstraps. Most of the problems that make Woodlawn what it is—high unemployment, lack of education, family disorganization, poor

munication which often exist between the middle-class social worker and the poor. . . .

"It is from this expanding nucleus of indigenous service workers, non-professional and professional, that yet another sizable source of leadership in political and mass direct action can come. Not all, to be sure, will have the temperament or the driving interest to extend their energies into political organization and demonstrations. But experience in Mobilization for Youth and other action-oriented agencies has already indicated that many indigenous workers do become enthusiastic participants in and organizers for social action." (*The New Equality*)

## WHO ASKS THE POOR ABOUT POVERTY?

*It is Saul Alinsky's belief that the war on poverty must be fought by the poor, not for them. Yet in his experience social action by the poor must necessarily come into conflict with the established political structure. This has happened to The Woodlawn Organization and to Mobilization for Youth as well. But unlike T.W.O., Mobilization draws much of its financial support from local and Federal government; its social action, therefore, is often directed against its "benefactor."*

*For some months now, Mobilization for Youth has been under attack by the City of New York (a chief source of funds) for encouraging rent strikes and other forms of social dislocation. Mr. Silberman feels that experiments in self-help are unlikely to spread because they are too threatening to their probable sources of financial support.*

**Silberman**

"The Woodlawn experience deserves—indeed, requires—the most careful study by anyone, black or white, interested in solving 'the Negro problem.' Unfortunately, it is not getting that attention—at least not from academic researchers and foundation executives, who seem to be repelled by the controversy in which T.W.O. basks. Not a single social scientist from the University of Chicago, for example (as of February, 1964, at any rate) has shown the slightest interest in T.W.O.; with the most important social laboratory in the country across the street, they have turned steadfastly the other way. The large foundations have shown much the same lack of interest. . . .

"Where will the necessary support come from? Not from the government, in all likelihood; no government, no matter how liberal, is going to stimulate creation of a power organization that is sure to make its life uncomfortable. The much-heralded 'Mobilization for Youth' project on New York City's Lower East Side, for example, which has received some \$14 million from the Federal, state, and local governments and from the Ford Foundation, is based upon a sociological theory very similar to Alinsky's. . . . But the fact that the agency's funds come largely from government, together with the fact that the board of directors is dominated by representatives of the old-line settlement houses and social work agencies, makes it difficult for the Mobilization staff to act according to its stated principles. . . .

"Support is no more likely to come from the large foundations. They are too frightened of controversy and too deeply committed to paternalism to be able to offer Negro slum dwellers 'the healing gift' of self-help. The Ford Foundation, for example, which is sponsoring large-scale 'gray area' programs in five cities (Boston, New Haven, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Washington) plus a statewide project in North Carolina,

has bet millions on a grandiose fusion of paternalism and bureaucracy. As Mitchell Sviridoff, executive director of Community Progress, Inc., the Ford Foundation's arm in New Haven, Connecticut, has suggested, the nature of the urban problem 'calls for a unique effort—an effort that treats social problems as being so tightly interrelated in their causative characteristics that anything short of a comprehensive preventive attack on the totality of the city's social problems and their causes is unrealistic'...

"Certainly no one could take exception to the argument that social problems are so tightly interrelated that they require a coordinated attack. The crucial question raised by Sviridoff's oratory is, who is to do the planning for whom? The answer is all too plain. 'The composition of the Board of Directors' [of his non-profit corporation], he told a Maryland Social Welfare Conference, 'is a reflection of the basic community-wide consensus which has been achieved. Represented on the Board is the Community Council, the United Fund, the Board of Education, the Redevelopment Agency, the Citizens Action Committee, Yale University, the New Haven Foundation, and the Mayor's Office.' Everybody, in short, except the people being planned for. . . .

"The Ford programs, therefore, are well-intentioned but self-defeating. Besides paternalism, they reflect a naïve search for 'community-wide consensus'—a search which leads the Foundation to eschew 'goals which emphasize the self-interests of some at the expense of others,' as Dr. Paul N. Ylvisaker, director of the Foundation's Public Affairs Division, says. Unlike the nation as a whole, Ylvisaker complains, 'The American metropolis . . . has no preamble of noble objectives' comparable to the Preamble to the United States Constitution. 'Without these soaring objectives,' he argues, 'we become in the metropolis but a collection of warring self-interests concerned with the means rather than the ends of human existence. . . . "We the people" become "Some of us people" and "Some of you people."'

"The result is that the Ford Foundation all too often flees the really hard and controversial issues that lie at the heart of the Negro problem—issues that involve the most fundamental conflict of interests between Negroes who want jobs and white trade unionists reluctant to surrender their job monopolies; between Negro tenants and white landlords; between Negro homeowners and white universities seeking land for expansion, and so on. The Preamble to the Constitution defines a set of 'soaring objectives,' to be sure—but the framers of the Constitution were realists well aware of the role of self-interest in human affairs. 'Rich and poor alike,' Madison wrote in *The Federalist* papers, 'are prone to act upon impulse rather than pure reason, and to narrow conceptions of self-interest.' . . .

"The Preamble to the Constitution, moreover, with the objectives Ylvisaker admires so greatly, was the result of a controversial revolution fought with whatever means were at hand. Men like Sam Adams, who destroyed the private property of others in the Boston Tea Party, General Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, whom the British denounced as a criminal (he did not engage in warfare 'like a gentleman or a Christian'), and Thomas Jefferson, who indulged in considerable exaggeration, distortion, and omission in drafting the bill of particulars against the British in the Declaration of Independence, would not have understood Dr. Ylvisaker's careful distinction between means and ends. But then, as Saul Alinsky suggests sarcastically, none of the Founding Fathers would have merited a grant from the Ford Foundation." (*Crisis in Black and White*)

**Was Thomas  
Jefferson  
an agitator?**