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## Horatio Alger: The Persistence of a Ghetto Social Welfare Institution

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HORATIO ALGER: THE PERSISTENCE OF A GHETTO SOCIAL WELFARE INSTITUTION

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I was born, raised and graduated from high school in Watts ...Watts like other black ghettos across the country is for ambitious youths, a transient status....In one sense, I was the archetype of the ghetto child who through hard work and initiative, was pulling himself toward a better life. I was the example, the exception. It was my life that was held up to Watts youth to emulate ....

## INTRODUCTION:

Despite the riots, radical movements and demands for community controls of the 1960's, social scientists and social workers have noted the perseverance of many non-radical, traditional institutions in ghetto neighborhoods. Some of these institutions, like settlement houses, still advance the ideas of hard work, honesty, competition, and individual achievement which are at the heart of the American dream. These institutions were often around long before the War on Poverty and appear likely to last long after its end. They, therefore, seem to be a reliable potential source of aid for many ghetto residents. The question at the heart of this paper is whether there is any contradiction between the more or less permanent place of social welfare institutions in a ghetto community and the goal of changing and improving that same neighborhood. How have these traditional organizations been able to survive during a period of heightened social consciousness and political action? What accommodations, if any, have they had to make? and what does this perseverance indicate about the political culture in the ghetto and the possibility of significant, even radical, change? Our answer to these issues will come from looking at the ideology, staff, budget, and Board of Trustees of one social welfare institution in New York: The Boys' Club.

## METHODOLOGY:

The focus of this paper is on a Boys' Club opened almost fifty years ago, as a branch of the Boys' Club of New York founded in 1876 by E.H. Harriman. The Club under study is located in one of the largest multi-ethnic tenement areas of New York and has served approximately 2,000 boys every year since its opening.

The data for the study are based on four years of participant observation done from 1970 to 1974 as a by-product of volunteer staff assistance in the Club. In addition, formal and informal interviews were conducted with the staff, trustees, Boys' Club of America officials, parents of members, alumni, community residents and school officials on the views of the organization.

Additional background material concerning the specific Boys' Club under study in the context of the Boys' Club movement was gathered from a mail survey of the 53 oldest Boys' Clubs in the country. Clubs formed between the period 1860 to 1906. (The cut off date 1906 was chosen because that was when the national association the Boys' Clubs of America was formed to foster the development and expansion of Boys' Clubs.)

A compilation of primary source material including inter-departmental memoranda, Boys' Club staff reports, out of print and unpublished historical data, and office file material were also used as supplemental secondary source material.

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## A CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY: "RAGGED DICK"

The official history of the Boys' Club written in 1969 stresses the fact that " the continued successful growth of the Boys' Club of New York will be assured as long as the Trustees, the staff, and the alumni continue to use the record of the past as a guide in planning for the future...This spirit is the same today as it was in 1876..."<sup>3</sup> This section of the paper will include discussions of various perspectives on the spirit, ideology, or goals of the Boys' Club. The intention is to outline some of the intended as well as the unintended faces of the Club as they have been expressed and implemented in actual programs which bear on the question of persistence of conservatism.

Boys' Club commitment to the maintenance of the 1876 spirit of the original Club prompts a look at some of the important themes in nineteenth century thinking. "The rags to riches tradition" in nineteenth century thinking centered around the ethical maxims of industry, frugality and prudence -- in short, around the behavioral patterns enjoined by the Protestant Ethic. Men living by these rules were likely to be successful, men living in violation of them were certain to fail."<sup>4</sup> Competition was morally right in that it insured the survival of the fittest-- whether in sports or in the stock exchange. Those who had succeeded had no obligation to help anyone who did not help themselves, in a curious blend of laissez-faire logic and Puritan stewardship.

Ragged Dick, a character created by Horatio Alger, was the nineteenth century hero who found aggressive striving along with luck and fortune to be paths of success. The advice given to Dick reverberates in Boys' Club literature:

There've been a great many boys begin as low down as you, Dick, that have grown up respectable and honored. But they had to work pretty hard fo' it. 'I'm willing to work', said Dick. 'And you must not only work hard, but work in the right way... determined not to steal or do anything mean or dishonorable, however strongly tempted to do so.'<sup>5</sup>

The central image of this advice can be seen in a statement of Boys' Club philosophy which stresses: "a careful blend of the so-called homely virtues of honesty, patriotism, sportsmanship, religion, self-discipline and a wide awake awareness of pressures and problems confronting modern youth".<sup>6</sup> One Boys' Club even gives out an annual Horatio Alger medal to the boys most closely emulating that nineteenth century hero. Boys' Club literature evokes a sense of the nineteenth century, rugged

individualism in which the hardened individual confronts and conquers the world, resisting temptation and staying on the right side of the law. The ideal boy is competitive, but a fighter tempered by virtue. The persistent reiteration of these ideals in Boys' Club literature and reports constitutes the ideological source of conservatism in the Club.

#### A CONSERVATIVE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

In addition to the importance of ideology in maintaining the conservative posture of the Boys' Club, at least one other element should be discussed to more clearly understand the sources of conservatism and the basis of their persistence. This element is the Board of Trustees of the Boys' Club.

All major policy and administrative decisions for the Boys' Club have been and remain controlled by a 49 member Board of Trustees. Former Vice-President Spiro Agnew has described these men:

"...You are successful products of the free enterprise system. You are representatives of our fine institutions and of the professional freedom that is enjoyed in the United States. Everyone of you, by virtue of his intelligence, his stamina and his fight, has attained a high plateau of accomplishment in some field -- be it government, labor, law, the military, sports, or some other business or profession. In short, gentlemen, you are the establishment."

The "Establishment" leaders of the Club are drawn from elite, even "super rich" backgrounds and institutions. The present Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Club is, for example, the son of the Clubs' founder, whose family fortune derives from oil, banking, and railways. The Harriman family controls Brown Brothers, Harriman, a large Wall Street investment bank; fifteen of the Trustees of the Boys' Club either work for the bank or are executives with banks or brokerage firms doing business with the bank. Fourteen of the trustees are listed in Poor's Registry of Corporation Directors and Executives. Twenty are listed in Who's Who in America; and seventeen are listed in the Social Register.<sup>9</sup> The last volume reportedly lists the top one tenth of one percent of upper class families.<sup>10</sup> The trustees include present or former directors of the U.S. Steamship Lines, Chris Craft Industries, Milliken Woolens,<sup>11</sup> Doubleday and Company, and Wellington Computer Systems.<sup>11</sup>

While it has not been possible to learn very much about specific decisions made by the Board, their general duties were described to them. "A prime responsibility of the Trustees is to help manage the organization and see to it that it is adequately funded."<sup>12</sup> Adequate funding would presumably include enough funds so that programs and staff could reach their objectives of developing boys with an aggressive, yet moral virility, and with a deep<sup>13</sup> sense of respect for others, one's community, and society.

The Trustees have, however, opposed drawing on any funds from the Federal government, preferring reliance on general contributions and investment income for the roughly one million dollars a year needed to run the Club. This policy might have been acceptable in earlier times, but recent stock market losses and inflation have resulted in smaller returns from investment income. One consequence of the decline in income has been a freeze on expenditures. The Trustees, have, for example, recently turned down a request for a twenty-five cent an hour increase for one part-time worker. The Trustees argued that they could not afford to pay any part-time worker more than \$3.25 an hour regardless of his education, skills, or effectiveness with the boys.

Little else can be learned about the operations and aims of the Board, largely because of the lack of self-evaluation and its secrecy in managing the Club. The Board is, however, clearly self-perpetuating. Individual Trustees are never removed from the Board, but remain on as actual or honorary members. New members are suggested by friends and join the ranks of a Board lacking accountability or responsiveness to the members of the Club. Ultimate responsibility for the Boys' Club is held neither by the staff nor by a body of members but by its self-perpetuating Board of Trustees.<sup>14</sup>

The conservative nature of the Boys' Club stems partly from the nineteenth century origins of a wealthy group of industrialists and bankers whose heritage was formed under the benign auspices of laissez-faire economic theory and Protestant Social Darwinism. This heritage is expressed in a structure of decision making which concentrates all effective financial and administrative power in the hands of a group of men who are out of touch with the day to day realities of the "shameful poor" they profess to serve.<sup>15</sup>

### THE CONSEQUENCES

Having briefly discussed the ideology and structure of the Boys' Club, it is now possible to look at some of the effects of these ideas and structures on the staff and programs of the Club.

The real crunch in getting from ideas to practice comes first and foremost in the type of staff you are able to attract and hold for the operation of your program. The Boys' Club has six full time professional workers to handle the daily needs of two to three hundred boys. Two of the six are administrators with substantial duties involved in keeping the Club running smoothly. The remaining four serve as department heads and guidance counselor, assisted by three other full-time workers. They are in turn assisted by twelve part-time workers and eight occasional volunteers. The two most senior staff, with masters degrees, have worked at the Club for twenty-five years, and earn approximately \$16,000 a year. The four other full-time workers earn between \$9,000 to \$12,000 per year. The remaining workers earn from \$2.75 an hour to a maximum of \$3.25, without regular hours or fringe benefits like health coverage.<sup>16</sup> Part-time workers may work three hours, twice a week and have their programs lengthened or shortened without prior notice. They are also not guaranteed work in the summer when the Club program is cut back. Due to the low wages and unstable working hours, most workers see their job as short term, transitional work. One department head even said that such staff are not expected to work at the Club for more than one or two seasons, or to be able to support a family on their salary. Volunteers, who provide unpaid labor, undermine any bargaining power of the staff because it is understood that lower level staff can be replaced by a volunteer who will do the same work for free. The bulk of the staff who are responsible for the day to day supervision of boys are, therefore, largely young, inexperienced, untrained, and poorly paid.

The Club's commitment to provide "opportunities to develop emotionally, physically, socially, intellectually, and vocationally",<sup>17</sup> for 2,000 boys is severely affected by the limitations of staff and budget. The primary result of these limitations is a basic division of programs into mass activities for the majority of members and special education for a select few.

About 100 boys have participated in the latter programs in which members endowed with "exceptional industry, motivation, leadership, quality, and sterling character" are tested for a scholarship program that can send them to private schools such as Andover, Phillips Academy, and St. Paul's. Such boys become the Ragged Dicks of the Clubhouse, entering

...an entirely different environment of learning-one that is designed to prepare him for a chosen career in the best possible way ...The result of their hard work has opened the door to high positions in a widely divergent field of professions ranging from medicine, law and journalism.<sup>18</sup>

Only four boys, however, received such scholarships in 1973,

while another twenty to thirty have participated in an in-house remedial education program. Thus, while the ideology or goals of the Boys' Club proposes competent achievement and success for all, the structure of opportunities provided places for only four out of 2,000 members.

What, then, is happening to the other member of the Club while this selective educational training is taking place? Well over ninety-five percent of the members participate only in sports and recreation programs designed to bring "constructive order"<sup>19</sup> rather than success to members' lives; to develop respect for the property of others, especially the Boys' Club, rather than to instill a sense of the virtue of competition. The majority of boys drift in and out of the Clubhouse, and from one activity to another, taxing the limited staff with simple custodial duties. Instead of "sound relationships" developing between boys and staff, the relationships are punitive and authoritarian emphasizing the rules against smoking, running, cursing, fighting, drugs, alcohol, girls, and other "ad hoc" offenses. Even the limited goal of instilling constructive order in the lives of boys, in an effort to "reduce vandalism"<sup>20</sup> and serve as an after school alternative to juvenile delinquency, falls short of the mark under the weight of such a system as custodial control.

The failure of the Clubs' programs and staff to reach its minimal objectives seems even more surprising because its failures have been known for almost forty years. An evaluation of the Club's performance, published in 1936, warned that the Boys' Club was not effective as an alternative to juvenile delinquency for masses of boys. Nominal memberships, with boys joining for short, interrupted periods, resulted in the formation of few close relationships with the staff, and consequently a positive rather than a negative effect on delinquency. It was found that boys who were in the club the longest had higher, rather than lower delinquency rates than new members.<sup>21</sup> Thrasher's recommendation that membership be restricted to expose boys to more in-depth, rather than mass activities and limited supervision, was never implemented. The Boys' Club continues to provide mainly mass activities and limited supervision. And while we have no direct evidence on delinquency rates our research tends to support the belief that Club members have records of delinquency and truancy in schools.

Neither the goals of individual success nor constructive order are sufficiently important to overcome the reluctance of the Board of Trustees to spend enough to deter rather than to enhance the risk of delinquency in the Clubhouse. The Board is accountable in its own words:

"If he (the boy) has built up a sound relationship over the years and if he truly gets something of value from the Boys' Club there is a very good chance he will stay on the right side of the law."<sup>23</sup>

With so few chosen to succeed in programs of higher education, the vast majority of the boys seem to learn alternatives to individual achievement in the form of delinquency and crime as if to demonstrate their need to be outstanding - no matter what. The "right side" of the Club includes so few that the many who fail may wonder if rules and staff are only destined to keep them in their place.

#### BOYS' CLUB CULTURE: MACHISMO AND ANTI-FEMINISM

In addition to the above more or less intended aspects of Boys' Club programming, one additional factor needs to be considered in order to appreciate the unintended ways in which the Club sustains a conservative presence in the ghetto community. The first step in this unintended effect is the stress placed on displays of physical strength and manliness as signs of achievement in sports. "The Hornets are a great team, and for the first time in their lives these boys are performing as men ... each one puts in a hard half day of work every day... Given manly work to do, they receive the recognition that men deserve."<sup>23</sup> Quiet, unathletic, non-competitive boys are deemed unmanly and in need of special remedial physical education. Achievement and performance become associated with manliness in a setting in which the culture of the Club members is already predisposed to glorifying masculinity. Well over sixty-five percent of the members are Puerto Rican or of Hispanic background which emphasizes the "cult of machismo."<sup>24</sup> This cultural pattern stresses the importance of being "muy macho" or very virile, sexually aggressive, and domineering over women. Women in turn, are expected to be absolutely submissive with the prime task of bringing male children into the world. A girl who deviates from this role can bring disgrace to herself and her entire family.<sup>25</sup> The Boys' Club reinforcement of this practice of sex stereotyping and machismo interferes with recent changes emphasizing the equalization of decision making powers, career opportunities and sexual expectations of men and women. The presence of such unintended "anti-feminism" in the Boys' Club is not likely to support their entrance into main stream America but will likely enhance values which interfere with social mobility. The programmatic theme in the Boys' Club which supports "machismo" will more likely, therefore, strengthen the conservative thrust of Hispanic culture, further reducing the options of members to

successfully pass from the ghetto to the mainstream of American Society.

### CONCLUSION

We are acutely aware of the limitations of the present case study and offer conclusions which can, at the same time, be seen as recommendations for others to compare our findings with similar social welfare institutions. The persistence of conservatism in the Boys' Club can be laid only partly at the foot of an ideology which stresses a nineteenth century concern with hard work, individual achievement and high virtue. The small and limited programs of higher achievement for an elite few only reinforce the sense of persistent inequality which is the clear and present hallmark of the ghetto. Constructive order becomes, in fact, a password for minimal supervision and containment, with the prospect that these auspices will foster nothing other than increased delinquency. The ever present history of delinquency and crime in the ghetto receives tacit, if not intended, support from a skeleton staff and meager programming.

The fundamental responsibility and credit for the persistence of the conservatism of the Boys' Club must be given to the Board of Trustees. Their policy of fiscal conservatism rejects the intrusions of outsiders, like the Federal Government, who might enforce unwanted standards of effectiveness or goal compliance, and leaves their staff, programs, and members at the mercy of an unaccountable and invisible portfolio of private investments.

The rejection of reform, in the form of smaller, qualitatively superior programs has left the Club without the excuse that it did not know it was failing. One can only suppose that the failure to reach even their own stated objectives to be an acceptable part of "doing good work", and gaining tax exemptions for charitable deductions. The Boys' Club seems destined to provide the rich with a means of selecting the very best and leaving the rest behind much as they have been since before the first Boys' Club promised to "win the battle against the streets" for the possession of the youth of the ghetto. The structure, financing, and philosophy of the Boys' Club combine in seemingly unintended ways to perpetuate rather than alter a system of inequality in which a little is given to the many by the few who control, leaving the rest to wonder where they went wrong.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Saunders "I'll Never Escape the Ghetto" in Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro American Literature (New York: Mentor, 1968), pp. 347-350.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting case study see Ely Chinoy, Automobile Workers and the American Dream (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> The Boys' Club of New York, A Short History of the Boys' Club of New York, 1969 (pamphlet).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Weiss, The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale (New York: Basic Books, 1969) p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Horatio Alger, Jr., Ragged Dick and Mark the Match Box (New York: Collier Books, 1962)p.89.

<sup>6</sup> Boys' Club of America, Good Kids Don't Grow on Trees, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Spiro Agnew, "Address to the Board of Directors of the Boys' Club of America," New York City, December 7, 1970 (transcript).

<sup>8</sup> The executive director of one of the clubhouses referred us to Ferdinand Lundberg's, The Rich and the Super Rich to find out about the backgrounds of the Trustees of the Boys' Clubs.

Ferdinand Lundberg, The Rich and the Super Rich: A Study in the Power of Money Today. New York: Bantam, 1968, p.162. Lundberg estimates the Harriman wealth to be above 75 to 100 million.

<sup>9</sup> Being listed in Poors' indicates you are among the " top ranking corporation officials and business people". See the introduction to Poors Register of Corporation Directors and Executives, New York;Stanford and Poor Corporation, 1972.

Social Register 1972, New York: Social Register Association, 1972. Social Register Locator, 1973, New York: Social Register Association, 1973.

Who's Who in America, 1972-1973, Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> E. Digby Baltzell, Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class, New York;Free Press, 1958, pp. 17-21.

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For a relevant discussion of some of the other upper class characteristics for the group refer to G. William Domhoff, The Higher Circles: The Governing Class in America, New York: Vintage, 1970.

12 Statement by the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Minot K. Milliken, Special Report, 1971, p.2.

13 The Boys' Club is in many ways like other social welfare institutions. See Walter Friedlander, An Introduction to Social Welfare, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968, pp. 415-416.

14 Betram Beck, "The Voluntary Social Welfare Agency, A Reassessment", Social Service Review, 47, June, 1970.

15 For a discussion of voluntary board service to the "shameful poor" and Board of Trustees lack of accountability see Violet Sieder, "The Historical Origins of the American Volunteer" in The Government of Associations: Selections from the Behavioral Sciences, edited by William A. Glaser and David L. Sills (New York: The Bedminster Press, 1966); Lois Forer, "The Obligations of Board Members." Social Services Review, June, 1963.

16 Boys' Club of America, 1972 Salary Survey of Full Time Professional Workers in Boys' Clubs. (pamphlet)

17 The Boys' Club of New York, Annual Report, 1971.

18 The Boys' Club of New York, Education Program Profile, 1969. (pamphlet)

19 A Short History, op. cit.

20 These are the same objectives of the first Boys' Club founded in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860.

21 Frederick Thrasher, "The Boys' Club and Juvenile Delinquency", American Journal of Sociology, 44, July, 1936, pp. 71-74.

22 Annual Report, 1971, p.4.

23 The Boys' Club of New York, "News Briefs", Fall, 1971.

<sup>24</sup>Raymond L. Scheele, "The Prominent Families of Puerto Rico" in Julian H. Steward (ed.), The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology, Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1972, pp. 418-463.

<sup>25</sup>Evelyn Stevens, "Machismo and Marianismo", Society, 10, September/October 1973, pp. 57-63.

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#### OPINIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF NURSING HOME ADMINISTRATORS<sup>1</sup>

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From a comparative analysis of 21<sup>4</sup> nursing homes in the Chicago area, it was found that the nursing home field is composed of institutions with great variations in treatment resources available to the residents (Kosberg and Tobin, 1972). While the determination of organizational correlates to the extent of treatment resources was the major objective of the study, an exploration of the attitudes of a sample of nursing home administrators was undertaken in an effort to learn of possible relationships between attitudes and the characteristics of facilities.

There is a commonly-held assumption that not only the academic background of an administrator is related to the orientation and characteristics of the institution, but that the attitudes of the administrator are also of prime importance. That is, administrators with positive opinions of the client group will have better facilities than those with negative opinions. Similarly, administrators with low expectations of their clients' chances for improvement will provide less in way of care and services than administrators with higher expectations. Such conclusions have been reached by those interested in organizational theory or service provision, such as Etzioni (1964), Linn (1966), Terman (1965), Scott (1955), Kostick (1964), and Gottesman (1970).

It was the purpose of this exploratory endeavor to learn whether there were differences in the attitudes and opinions of administrators representing polar types of proprietary nursing homes and, if so, whether these attitudes might begin to explain the characteristics (i.e., extent of treatment resources) of the nursing homes. What was sought from this limited study were areas for further detailed analysis.

#### PROCEDURES USED AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Random samples were taken from polar types of proprietary nursing homes analyzed in the study. It had been found that nursing homes rich in treatment resources were (1) large, (2) expensive and (3) cared for private or Medicare-paying residents. Nursing homes sparse in treatment

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<sup>1</sup> Revision of a paper presented at the 25th Annual Meetings of the Gerontological Society, San Juan, Puerto Rico, December, 1972.