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Community Empowerment As A Non-Problem

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It is not much fun to be a radical any more -- as a student, a teacher or a community activist. Often it seems as if there are too many battles and not enough time to begin to fight them. The privileged position in which many on the left found themselves in years past has given way to the treatment usually accorded persons with serious contagious diseases. Feeling unappreciated, unneeded and unwanted, we have tended to become a bit cranky and hypercritical. In our frustration, we have fallen prey to an isolation that encourages us to think only of people who see the world exactly as we do as allies.

Certainly coping with the mid-1980s has its difficulties. As Reaganomics continues to solidify its position throughout the country, communities with social, political and economic problems have faded into the background and, ultimately, out of the consciousness of most Americans. The rallying slogans of the 60s and 70s -- "self determination," "community control," and "power to the people," are but faint memories in the minds of many of today's community organizers. Community empowerment has become a non-issue. Yet community problems--housing, health care, employment,

racism and the like--are worse than ever and the voice of the people has been undermined by years of baseless promises, liberal rhetoric, and services that scratch the surface but fail to touch the causes of oppression. The results are predictable.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that poverty rates are increasing at an alarming rate for those at the bottom of the economic scale while others share at least some benefits of an expanding economy.

Social welfare institutions and social workers have been just as guilty as the planners with their shibboleths--"truly needy," "safety net," and "enterprise zones." The planners in the Reagan administration have at least made a conscious decision as to how they are to treat the poor and disenfranchised. Why the liberal social work establishment is still unsure of its position and strategies is a question that has to be asked. Perhaps it is because we still do not really want to be identified with the truly poor or to jeopardize our positions by insisting that we pay attention to oppressed communities or retain a commitment to fundamental social change.

This paper will look at some of the dilemmas of community organization within a changing practice focus. It will address the issue of why community organization has made an accommodation to the values espoused by the White House. In analysing this question, we suggest the need for a truly radical perspective of empowerment so as to refocus the priorities of organizers. Problems of practice preferences and professionalization will be considered and finally, we introduce some suggestions for a revitalization of community organization and a meta-practice structure within which to nurture a revitalized practice.

Liberal Or Radical Organizer

Before discussing some of the problems in community organization and exploring some suggestions for change, it is necessary to give a brief definition of what we mean by radical and liberal. The words have been so abused that confusion is the norm rather than the exception. In this way what we are proposing will be clearer, especially as we develop our position on ideological practice.

Liberals have traditionally held a pluralistic view of society, with homeostasis seen more or less as a given. The government is regarded as being justified in its action ostensibly because it is in the best position to speak for the broadest range of individuals and attempt to advance their interests. Furthermore, liberals believe in the redistribution of income, yet typically they will not confront the fact that government primarily serves the interests of the upper classes. Liberals are willing to support selected government interventions in people's lives. While they harbor a mistrust of the private enterprise system, they do not regard it as fundamentally flawed. They believe in individual equality and social justice and that capitalism, with some adjustments, works.¹

In contrast, a radical perspective focuses on the economic system and its modes of production. It argues that small elites control the major means of production and, consequently, the working class by wage-contracts. Similarly, production and distribution are regulated by profits, there existing a constant tension whereby profits inexorably push prices upward as long as enough people are willing to pay the price for the available goods and services. One of the most important ways to increase profits is by keeping wages low. This wage pattern contributes to a pyramidal power structure with workers finding themselves at the lower end totally disenfranchised economically. The dynamics of labor and management has increasingly extended its influence over the workers by guaranteeing a measure of job security at the expense of working conditions and contract benefits. Recently this has occurred under the guise of recession cutbacks and lowered profit margins.

A radical analysis sees government as an operating party to class conflict. Rather than encouraging people to compete with each other, service professionals should contribute to the welfare of fellow workers and clients. Radicals argue that theory and practice cannot be separated. This praxis is what makes for an ideological base that dictates actions in ways that help empower people as both the community organizers and the community increase their level of consciousness about the nature of their oppression and who controls needed economic resources. Thus together practitioners and communities can begin to identify their problems and possible arenas of action so as to change their life situations.

What has mainstream social work and social welfare as a system done to foster a radical perspective? In recent years, nothing. The authors suggest that social work as a profession mitigates against the empowerment of the poor and against the development of a radical consciousness. We offer this not as something new or startling, but rather to emphasize that community organization has, no less than casework, been a part of this control. Some of the sources for this continued trend are: the nature of social work as a profession, the functions of schools of social work and the changing nature of students in graduate schools, and the implications these trends have for curriculum and practice.

Social Work as a Profession

Wilensky and Lebeaux have defined professionalism as a job that is technical by nature, where the worker's knowledge is so specialized that she or he has a monopoly over that field.² The knowledge base for the technical expertise comes from a discreet foundation of information with many years of training. The normative value base of the profession dictates behavior that is objective, impartial and has a strong motivation to help people. Does this sound like social work as we now know it? We do not think so.

If we accept the above definition, then it should come as no surprise that social work is in even more trouble than what we have been led to believe. As far back as 1973 Richan and Mendelsohn cried for change in a much-maligned profession. Their position was that social workers were being trained to be the "sanitation department of society."³ A report for NASW showed that only two percent of MSWs are working in the "field of poverty and its elimination."⁴

The view offered by many outsiders is not less castigating in tone. A well-respected historian sees the social welfare approach as "elitist and manipulative, seeking to maintain existing class arrangements by palliating social problems and coopting social disorder."⁵ Not surprisingly, this historian sees community organization as being basically reformist in its approach.

Its liberal objectives, consensus strategies, scanty resources, relative lack of power, and professional orientation

characteristic of the social welfare approach mitigate against developing democratic grassroots projects that could truly serve the interests and needs of neighborhood residents.⁶

If the profession believes its claim to uniqueness then it should not have to fear its turf being threatened by allied professions. This is not quite the case, however, as social workers see themselves competing with psychologists, psychiatrists, public health workers, public policy types, social planners, political and social scientists, economists and even people from the business sector. Rather than openly competing with these other professionals and letting their values emerge in discussion and debates, social workers have dug a hole for themselves by moving more and more towards specialization. The dramatic move toward psychotherapy with "clean" clients has put increased pressure on community organization. Is social work becoming so secure in its specialization and sub-specialization that it can eschew some of the most important, time honored, practice areas? What happens then to the social, economic and political arenas? Is the profession assuming that some "other guy" is going to do what needs doing in the area of social change: Hardly. The evidence has shown us that entrepreneurship has won out over ideologically-based practice. Practice fashions always follow human service dollars.

Schools of Social Work

More and more schools of social work are changing their focus towards working with families and individuals using psychotherapeutic interventions and apolitical diagnostic assessments. A recent research study brings this alarming and oppressive trend home most poignantly. Rubin and Johnson report that past studies by CSWE and NASW have shown a steady rise in psychotherapy interests by entering graduate students around the country.⁷ In their study, 68% of students indicated this practice preference. In the schools where the authors teach the numbers are even higher and the proportions still increasing.

In identifying their therapy interests further, the students' inclinations towards working with clean clients was clear. In

order of appeal of client groups, 76.7% wanted to work with "people with marital or family problems," 63.4% chose "clients experiencing a turbulent adolescence," and 54.9% picked "people who are depressed" as their choice. At the opposite end of the appeal continuum, 16.2% identified their desire to work with "the chronically mentally disabled discharged from state hospitals," 19.1% identified "adult criminal offenders," and 17.8% identified "the physically disabled." Of the total of 247 students, 220 of them wanted to go into private practice--an unbelievable 89%. What we are seeing here is, among other things, a movement away from the disenfranchised people of the community. So the profession, instead of trying to live up to its early mandates to serve the poor and oppressed has, at least symbolically, turned its back on them.

What are the implications of these trends for community organization? They do not augur well for us. Indeed, we must share the responsibility for these trends because we have done little to thwart them. The so-called professionalization of students sees increasing numbers heading into the social problems-for-profit market. There they may exert all manner of social control with virtual impunity. What happens to people in need of services who cannot relate to a verbal exchange as a means of being helped, or compete in the fee-for-service market place, (as is the case with so many ethnic minority people of color)? What happens to people who need jobs, decent housing, and medical care; to the elderly and handicapped living on fixed incomes, battered women, single parents and thousands of others in need of crisis intervention? As the buck gets passed along from the most expensive and professionally "sophisticated" services to the already weakened public agencies, who will serve these multi-problem social push-outs?

Community organization curricula in responding to the curricular pressure of psychotherapy has accommodated to the move by curtailing its course offerings. As the professors of direct practice so astutely point out, community organization no longer has the students to teach, therefore, the need for multiple sections of advanced psychodynamics, family therapy and the like is obvious. Is having warm bodies in the classrooms the sine qua non of higher education? Do they dictate curriculum? To a considerable degree the answer is yes. We would like to believe that community organization faculty are ostracized from their colleagues and students because of their radical stance on the issues

and their preference for radical practice--but the reality is another matter. Burnout, the shifting job market and the typical status quo orientation of so many in the field have been responsible for this trend to a point. But we cannot put the blame squarely on shifting student interests. The sad fact is that community organization has not made itself viable to students by carefully defining what community organization is and by demonstrating what jobs exist throughout the entire social welfare system for building an empowerment-oriented and change-oriented practice.

The Invisible Communities

If problems of professional perceptions and curriculum have changed social work education from within, what has happened to social work in the field? What has community organization done to merit the kinds of students entering its graduate programs? Can we safely hypothesize that if community organizers and teachers of community organization were actively involved in current issues areas as grassroots movements, domestic violence program planners, single parent policy analysts and medical needs assessment, the publicity they would receive from these activities would help to attract students to their respective schools. As one of our students recently noted:

I have two problems with your (community organization) program. The first is that you are not beginning to do what you could to support change efforts now going on at the community level (of various women's groups, gays, elderly, people of color -- especially recent arrivals from Southeast Asia and Latin America, etc.). The second is that, with the exception of a very few people in your faculty, you seem to spend very little time working out in the community on the problems that you tell us are in urgent need of our attention. No wonder you complain that so few of us (entering students) seem committed to social change.

We believe that this student's assessment is pretty accurate for a large number of social work schools. It would seem reasonable to assume that if we could put our actions closer to our

rhetoric, our programs would be more attractive to students. It has worked in the past and it will work in the future. Part of the problem has been that of accommodation by the organizers who in their liberal stance seem to be saying "wait until the right moment" to act instead of working to create those moments.

If we as organizers are serious about empowering communities, then we should say it and go out and do it. However, we may no longer believe our own rhetoric. If so, we have a choice -- to shut up (and stop perpetuating a fraud that students and client groups find so nauseating) or to explore the possibility of more radical actions. The current conservatism can be confronted in more fundamental ways. For example, students in one Eastern city took the abortion struggle to the doorstep of the "pro-life" forces (quite literally in a substantial, well-coordinated demonstration) to demand that the leadership disavow the violent attacks on a local abortion clinic. They achieved a small, but important victory (and did it by going on the offensive rather than using typical, defensive liberal tactic of physically "defending" the clinic).

We have seen individual mobility and autonomous participation, fighting and mobilizing participation. The latter would involve the development of group consciousness and true political participation and civil disobedience, even with the threat or the use of major disruptive tactics. One problem has been that for years there has not existed any large-scale, national or regional organization that is oriented to the oppressed poor. The atrophied action systems nation-wide have contributed to plans of accommodation. An excellent example of this kind of accommodation is shown in an article by Austin that is ameliorative in tone with suggestions for dealing with agency cutbacks like "team building," "strategic planning," and using the "administrator as leader." The lack of any ideological stance in his paper is reflective of the amnesia confronting our organizers. He goes further to state that we should "protect the agency's viability by political lobbying and reducing agency costs by increasing fees," (emphasis ours), "emphasis on fee-generated services, changing services to reduce costs," and, "adapting programs to the changing environment."⁸

The prioritizing of services has been one of the major stumbling blocks in community organization, for, rather than viewing

the community as a broad dialectical and interactive process among neighborhoods and groups, politics and economics, issues, strategies and tactics, the social welfare pundits have looked upon them as categorized service areas and problems with little or no coordination at the metropolitan, regional or national levels. This fragmentation of organizing and planning efforts has not only permitted a wedge to be driven by the center and right between increasingly splintered groups of radicals, but also the organizers, in all their liberal thinking, seem to have rationalized their ineffectuality by telling us that they are at least introducing reforms at the local level and that this is better than trying to work within a reactionary larger context.

The authors do not believe that perspective makes sense, for the practice gaps even within our own neighborhoods are more than evident. One example here suffices to illustrate our position. The authors have written about the emerging neo-gemeinschaft minority communities with their many problems as a prime area for community organizers to involve themselves.⁹ It has been our experience that, although a modicum of direct services have entered these communities (usually by their own racial minority group), there has been little or no serious organizing taking place. The large numbers of refugees, political emigres, migrants and immigrants in these enclaves throughout the United States is staggering. Their numbers alone pose a nascent political force that needs to be tapped.

What we are espousing, however, is not just identifying and working with constituencies around the country. This is but the beginning stages of a significant movement. This movement has to be couched within an ideological perspective or radical community organization practice.

Some of its tenets are:

- Community organization must work towards the empowerment of people so that they may liberate themselves from their oppression
- Community organization must have an integrated sense of the history of social problems and how personal concerns develop from a broader historical experience

- Community organization should attempt to work with community problems at the primary level of problem severity and magnitude, not the secondary or tertiary levels
- Community organizing, in understanding the dynamics of racism, sexism, and classism, needs also to understand the limitations of "a political position" at the expense of losing the community people.
- Community organization's "political position" should be based on an ideology that is flexible rather than fixed along a political continuum. What is critical here is the praxis that organizers bring into the community and the subsequent development of a shared sense of critical consciousness as it emerges.
- Community organization needs to be educational by emphasizing social, political, economic and class dynamics.
- Community organization's results must not only be those that may be discreetly measured, but also what Martin Rein has identified as community socio therapy¹⁰ as the ways of maintaining them.
- Community organization must always see its role as a temporary one. As it works towards the empowerment of people, it is also working towards reducing the professional presence in the community by training indigenous leadership from the earliest possible time.
- And, finally, community organization should be practiced in such a way that organizational power sharing is to be sought above power consolidation, participatory decision-making is to be sought above leaderships between and among organizers and client groups are sought instead of competitive ones.

A Meta-Practice Approach to Community Organization

In identifying the problems of social work and the ineffectual liberal tradition in community organizing, we have also suggested a number of daily operating "rules" for organizers. We will now

propose an overall framework to help facilitate the implementation of our suggestions. In developing a meta-practice perspective, that is, the practice of community organization practice, we hope that discussions will follow addressing the efficacy of such a formulation. Attachment to favorite strategies by organizers has led to limited knowledge-building in our field. The nature of our activities has too often dictated ad hoc interventions with little time for analysis and reflection on strategies (whether they work or not).

Little can be done to improve community organization by other than incremental means without reformulating the knowledge base, that is, without considering and improving meta-practice. Furthermore, efforts to improve meta-practices are often the best way to introduce more powerful strategies for organizing.

Our reasons for this position are as follows:

- Innovative community organization strategies have little chance of being considered, implemented and revised, unless our field develops new capacities for creativity, implementation and feedback to practitioners around the country. New ways of thinking about interventions and communities (e.g. neo-gemeinschaft communities) are needed, which, in turn, would require changes in how we have traditionally viewed our practice, our "rules of the game" and, in general, a vitally shared ethos of our area of involvement.

- Because of our dependence on a crossdisciplinary approach, the improvement of an area of practice will have limited value unless it is synergetically related to other disciplines, with careful thought being given to common elements of practice. This requires improvements in the information systems of our field, and this can only come about through changes in the way we view our practice (and social change).

- Since community organization is an ongoing activity, it is more important that we focus on the macro concerns of our practice rather than on a specific strategy that may be too case-specific. This approach is more efficient, and, hopefully, will lead to better community organization interventions.

In looking at our knowledge base as being in a state of constant change, we may begin to consider the various components of our practice--the many roles played by us--as defying a specific structure. Thus we may say that community organization meta-practice demonstrates the following:

- Solutions to community problems may be reached in a variety of ways. Different combinations of techniques and tactics may be useful in achieving quality changes in community organization. As we continue to look at case studies, empirical verification will teach us the most effective interventions for a given problem. This method must be open ended with only our imaginations and intelligence limiting what may be perceived as useful. The evidence may show us that techniques that may have been given minimal importance as a strategy or tactic keeps appearing in our catalogue of activities whose outcomes are positive ones. In essence, incremental methods lead to metapractice considerations. This approach is in keeping with how most decisions are made. Although radical change is difficult to orchestrate in the United States, the accumulation of evidence of workable methods can contribute to more fundamental upheavals.

As we develop meta-practice strategies, areas of consideration by community are:

-- A systematic evaluation of strategies employed in the past and their outcomes. How do these strategies reflect the present knowledge base around community power analysis, for example, of citizen participation in neighborhood organizations, or the dynamics of small group behavior?

-- A more critical look at the future. Are we going to be surprised once again by another trend like Reaganomics? We need a careful and thorough identification of the structures and processes tht go into making predictions about future issues and problem areas. This may require, for example, watchdog organizations that coordinate their findings around the country. We need organizer "futurists" who can develop a multiplicity of scenarios so that we may put our imaginations and experience to work in learning new ways of solving these future crises.

-- The development of support systems for individuals and organizations involving themselves in creative thinking about

theories and interventions in working with different constituencies.

-- The development of politicians. If we are to have nonhostile "ears" in the policy making areas of our government, then we must work towards improving the qualifications of those running for office. One way is to encourage and support the entry of qualified individuals into the political mainstream. The introduction of courses on political behavior in our curriculum, not just for lobbying purposes, but to utilize our own candidates may be important.

-- The awarding of paid sabbaticals to student practitioners and professors working in theory-building in community organization by a national coordinating organization. (As funding permits, community activists might be included as well).

-- The establishment of a number of research organizations throughout the country to work on central community organization issues. Some of these organizations might well be developed in other countries with coordinated conferences, publications and papers being shared.

-- The development of innovative social experimentation designs in order to develop knowledge from unique perspectives. Such areas as critical theory and phenomenology have yet to be applied widely by community organization practitioners, although their relevance for our field is obvious.

Two further questions are in urgent need of attention. The first is, who is going to accompany us on this journey of change? The second is, how are we going to sustain ourselves in the struggles that lie ahead?

What about the liberals, we are often asked, what about them? Well, the truth of the matter is that they are both enemy and ally. When they oppose the forces of meaningful change they must - even if they are our "best friends" - be called what they are -- "enemies." This is not going to make us very popular. We see no way around it. Our analysis must document the part liberals play in undermining, undercutting and smashing important change efforts at the community level. We must not trade our desire for their

support for our own acquiescence in approaches and programs that violate the rights and legitimate needs of oppressed people.

How, finally, do we keep ourselves together for the struggles that lie ahead? We must be mindful of others' needs to balance the demands of security and freedom in ways that are different from our own. Patience and a strong sense of humor should be sustained. The battle against thoughtless adventurism on the one hand, and debilitating frustration and isolation on the other, is ongoing. Find and contribute to a support group for the kind of community organization to which you are committed. A little selfdoubt is a good antidote to perfect-appearing single-theory views of social reality and social change.

If you wait for thanks and appreciation, you may be waiting for a very long time. Learn to appreciate small successes, while at the same time always looking to confront issues of importance. The streets of social change in community organization are strewn with burnouts. Do not become a statistic. Know your own limits and back off when necessary. But stick with your commitments. The authors promise exciting times ahead.

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