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HARRY LURIE'S ASSESSMENT  
AND PRESCRIPTION:  
AN EARLY VIEW OF SOCIAL WORKERS'  
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES  
REGARDING POLITICAL ACTION\*

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*Harry Lawrence Lurie's recommendations and analyses concerning social workers' involvement in political action are reviewed. By reviewing some of Lurie's concerns and activities from the 1930's into the 1950's in this area, it is possible to gain helpful guidance and insight into contemporary concerns about social workers in the political arena. Lurie argued consistently for greater involvement by social workers in political action as individuals, as members of professional organizations, and in coalition with other groups outside of social work who were concerned with progressive social change. Lurie also articulated many of the conditions preventing effective political action by social workers.*

INTRODUCTION

Harry Lawrence Lurie's many speeches, writings, and professional activities offer fertile ground for helping students of social work and social welfare history gain a more

\* This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Social Welfare History Group Symposium at the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, Miami, Florida, March 1986.

complete understanding of the complexities of the development of the social work profession from the 1920s into the 1960s. His beliefs, activities and concerns, however, also offer much of potential benefit to the non-historian social work practitioner or educator. By attending to his assessments and recommendations about social workers' proper roles in political action during his own era, social workers today can gain helpful insight. Lurie offers guidance on what leads to successful political involvement as well as what leads to failure and impotency for social workers in the political arena.

By looking at Lurie's concerns and recommendations in the context of the current socio-political environment it is possible to gain new perspectives in several areas of concern and controversy for many social workers today. In Lurie's assessments and recommendations one can find advice, for example, on the importance of broad-based coalition building in effective political action. This is a political strategy recommended by many contemporary social workers as an important means of increasing political effectiveness in service to social work goals and to the constituencies social workers serve (e.g., Amidei 1982, pp. 112-13; Haynes and Mickelson 1986, p. 70). In Lurie's work one can discover suggestions for becoming more effectively organized *within* the profession in order to improve political potency. Such contemporary efforts as PACE mirror some of Lurie's recommendations in this area. Lurie raised some important questions about the meager results of social work education in preparing social workers with skills and commitments necessary to be effective in political action. Contemporary educators and practitioners alike might do well to reconsider some of his concerns. The realization by some social workers today that many forces which run contrary to social work goals and values are much better organized and more skilled in effecting political change (e.g., Buffum and Haynes 1987) was also apparent to Lurie in his time. Lurie would have had much to offer to the current debate and controversy about the potential costs and benefits of moving toward

privatization of social welfare services and of vastly decreasing governmental responsibility for many of these services (e.g., Gilbert 1986; Abramovitz 1986). Social workers today, concerned that as a profession and as individual professionals we must become effective leaders in political action and the creation of social policy at all levels as demonstrated by efforts to make the National Center for Social Policy and Practice a reality, would find support for their efforts in the analyses and prescriptions of Harry Lurie.

Perhaps even more important than offering guidance in the more widely accepted contemporary issues and problem areas as those mentioned above, Lurie's assessment and activities also have much support to offer those who hold less widely accepted and more radical notions of political activism that call for social workers to be willing to go beyond traditional social work methodologies, political parties and processes when those methods, parties, and processes no longer respond to their needs and to those of their constituencies (e.g., Burghardt and Fabricant 1987, pp. 455-463). A model for individual commitment, involvement and risk-taking when necessary to effect political change such as nuclear arms reduction or to redress injustices such as political persecution can also be found in the activities of Lurie and some of his contemporaries.

### Lurie and His Beliefs

Harry Lawrence Lurie died in Ogunquit, Maine on June 25, 1973. His obituary appeared in the *New York Times* and offered a fitting and succinct summary of Lurie's professional activities and roles. He was referred to in the obituary as "a social worker, scholar, author and a founder and executive director of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. . . . Mr. Lurie was a leader for half a century in social work in public and private agencies" (*New York Times* 1973).

In many of Harry Lawrence Lurie's professional activities which spanned more than four decades from the 1920s into the 1960s, he displayed and called for heightened politi-

cal awareness, involvement and skill on the part of social workers. He believed that such attributes were vitally important to the achievement of social work goals, but he also found them to be sorely lacking within the profession.

Harry Lurie believed that the roles and responsibilities of social work should extend far beyond those concerned with individual adjustment and social palliation. He believed that while these were necessary aspects of the social worker's responsibility, they were not the only, nor the most important, of the social worker's duties. Social workers were responsible, in addition, for social criticism and for social reconstruction directed toward removing the social and environmental barriers to individual well-being and security. Indeed, the social worker, in Lurie's eyes, was responsible not only for supporting progressive social changes instigated by other elements in society (such as labor) but the social worker was also responsible for being a salient force for such changes. It was not sufficient even for the social worker, then, to be a supporter and follower of progressive change; the social worker must be in the vanguard and play the role of leader in social change efforts, Lurie believed. In order to fulfill this responsibility, he maintained that the social worker must become intensely involved in organization and political action directed toward removing the root causes of individual malfunction and insecurity. The fact that social workers had been timid about and often were opponents of such actions was no excuse for continuing such a narrow and reactionary perspective, Lurie contended.

Throughout his career Lurie called upon social workers, as individuals, as members of their professional organizations, and as allies of other progressive movements and organizations to become involved in and indeed to lead, political action efforts. Lurie's career was marked by numerous examples of his own involvement, both as a participant, and as a leader, in political action efforts. Only a few selections from Harry Lurie's many writings and presentations have been used in this article. The selections have been carefully chosen to focus as specifically as possible on Lurie's

assessments and prescriptions in the areas of social work and political action. The selections have also been chosen to reflect chronologically the developments and continuities in Lurie's thoughts and actions in the area of political action during some of the most active years of his professional life.

### Lurie on Social Work and Political Action

In 1932, in response to the continuing and worsening Depression crisis, the American Association of Social Workers (AASW) Executive Committee appointed a Committee on Federal Action on Unemployment. Among its members was Harry Lurie (Fisher 1980, p. 71; Lurie 1933, p. 639).

In a report on the Committee's work given by Lurie in the June 1933 annual session of the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW), he pointed out that social workers had a responsibility to become involved in formulating constructive solutions to social problems, even when such formulations for change "become controversial issues between political parties and economic classes" (Lurie 1933, p. 639). If the social worker chose not to become involved in such political action, Lurie and the Committee contended in the report, the worker "thereby aligns himself with reactionary elements and with laissez-faire methods of social organization" (Lurie 1933, p. 639). Social workers clearly had the responsibility for involvement in change, and it was "desirable to go farther by taking the initiative in stimulating and sponsoring important legislative advances and extending our interest to a national program" (Lurie 1933, p. 640).

While Lurie was involved in efforts of professional social work organizations to influence political decision-making, he saw such efforts as being too infrequent and usually ineffective. He continued, however, to call consistently upon social workers and their organizations to counter national events and political decisions which he saw as detrimental to those most in need of social work services—the poor and the unemployed.

Lurie's response, for example, to such actions as the Roosevelt administration's dismantling of early New Deal

emergency programs was to call for political action to reverse the setbacks. Such political action was essential to halt and reverse these moves by what he viewed to be an increasingly reactionary national administration and Democratic party (Lurie 1934, p. 1-2). He called upon social workers in particular to become involved in political action. To him it was not optional, rather it was a responsibility of social workers, and to be passive or against progressive social welfare measures was reactionary and "tantamount to a criminal indifference to social needs" (Lurie 1935a, p. 1).

Lurie's impatience with social workers' timidity about getting involved in political activity to push for social welfare legislation was obvious. As he saw it, "social workers and social agencies, on the whole, have not played a conspicuous part in the development or promotion of broad programs of social legislation" (Lurie 1935b, p. 1). This was not only true, in his eyes, of individual social workers and their agencies, but their professional organizations were equally guilty. He pointed out specifically that the NCSW played no role at all and that the AASW discussed a program but had never formulated a detailed plan for such a social welfare program. He agreed that AASW had endorsed a few progressive issues such as federal responsibility for relief and that it had opposed the termination of federal relief responsibility. But he found the AASW to be vague in its position on the aims of social security, and it was, in his opinion, indifferent or negligent in the areas of housing and health. In addition, it lacked a definite position on labor standards and organization (Lurie 1935b, p. 1; Lurie 1937a; see also the brochure "An Institute on Modern Social Work Problems" 1937). He believed that there were a number of non-social work organizations which were far ahead in this area, such as the League of Women Voters, the AF of L, and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ. It was his disappointing conclusion that "as a whole, it may be stated that social workers and social agencies are timid, inactive and have conflicting opinions in this important field of effort" (Lurie 1935b, p. 2). In fact, he believed that social work was not only lax in pursuing social legislation, it was actually a

force against it: "Viewed as a whole, social work today is following a conservative role in social progress." As he put it, "inaction is a sign of acquiescence with the status quo" (Lurie 1935b, p. 2). It was his contention then, that social workers and their organizations could not choose to simply be uninvolved or neutral because in his eyes, "a passive social institution is a decaying institution" (Lurie 1935b, p. 3).

A large part of the reason that social work "as a whole" was playing "a conservative role in the social progress" and was not an active force for social reform through political action was due to its continued over-emphasis on casework, Lurie contended. The continued loyalty to casework as the dominant function of professional social workers presented, he believed, not only a problem for the profession as a whole, but was a "dilemma" for the individual social worker as well. (For a more detailed treatment of Lurie's views on the proper role of casework in social work see Schriver, "Harry Lurie's Critique: Person and Environment in Early Casework Practice," forthcoming in *Social Service Review*.) His position on casework, as it related to social workers' responsibilities in the area of political action, can perhaps best be summarized with the following quotation: "shall he [the social worker] continue to create, if he can, these little islands of security which may give some tangible expression to his effort or shall he plunge into the general turmoil and engage in the larger battle for social welfare" (Lurie 1935c, p. 14).

Lurie believed that for the individual social worker to be most effective in political action, or, as he described it, in "the larger battle for social welfare" would "require identification with a workers' movement, an organization of individual workers of all ranks and vocations seeking through political and economic means to place the whole of our common life under democratic control" (Lurie 1935c, p. 15). These comments emphasize the necessity he saw of uniting individual social workers and their organizations with other organizations seeking similar goals. Much of what Lurie had to say in this respect was founded on his faith in the capacity of the individual (in this case the individual social



worker) to play a substantive role in effecting needed change in spite of a tremendously unequal distribution of power. Lurie believed that through unity, organization, and political action the great power inequalities could be redistributed.

It seems to have been this belief that kept Lurie in the fight for what he believed was a better system of social organization. He doggedly refused to accept what he considered the continuing footdragging of many mainstream social workers and he continued to urge that social workers get involved in political action both to stop the backsliding of the New Deal accomplishments and to push for more comprehensive and basic answers to unemployment, insecurity, and social problems. In a paper he wrote in 1936 called, "Political Action for a Social Welfare Program," (Lurie 1936) he urged social workers to take the lead in creating and pursuing a platform of social welfare legislation even if that meant creating a third party to do it. By this time he no longer saw any real difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. Since they did not "deserve the support of intelligent social workers . . . we must turn to a new party, if necessary a minority party," he urged (Lurie 1936, p. 1).

Lurie was not naive, however idealistic he might have been, in his call for such a third party. In being more specific about the tactics and program of such a party, he displayed a good deal of pragmatism. In the first place, he admitted that there was at present no sign of such a party though he felt sure the demand for one would grow. He was also realistic in suggesting that such a party would need to be extremely careful not to alienate and frighten business interests to the point of complete disruption of the economic system (Lurie 1936, pp. 5-6).

Lurie stressed that an important role of social workers in such party efforts was to help develop political platforms that would include adequate social welfare programs to meet human needs (Lurie 1936, pp. 6-7). He believed that social workers must connect with and support parties which offered "the possibility of a constructive social order." Social

workers should not allow themselves to be put off by compromising "on the terms of a lesser evil." They must instead seek basic changes to improve social welfare, for "in a rapidly changing world, the future belongs to the idealist" (Lurie 1936, p. 7).

While Lurie was adamant that social workers must not compromise when it came to programs to adequately meet human needs, he also realized that they could not succeed in bringing about such programs alone. In fact, in a lecture in an April 1937 series he delivered in Los Angeles at "An Institute on Modern Social Work Problems" (1937) he noted for example, that because of social workers' connections primarily to groups who are resistant to change (i.e. conservative private philanthropists), or to groups without sufficient power to effect change (i.e. the poor), "The more advanced proposals for social legislation" came largely as a result of the efforts of groups other than social workers (Lurie 1937a, p. 1). Because of this, Lurie stressed the need for social workers to align themselves "with progressive forces in labor and in politics" (Lurie 1937a, p. 2). In another lecture in the series which he called "Organized Labor and Social Welfare," (Lurie 1937b) he concentrated specifically on the growing role of the labor movement in social welfare and political action. He noted that the increasing interest in the area was "based upon an awakening philosophy of the close relationship of economic and political action" (Lurie 1937b, p. 1).

As the New Deal years continued to pass and international events surrounding World War II began to take precedence over purely domestic concerns, it became more difficult for Lurie to (as he put it), keep his "mind on the limited field of social work" (Lurie 1938). He continued, though, to urge his social work colleagues to remain politically active. In a 1941 paper presented to the NCSW he urged social workers to attend to "Social Action [as] a Motive Force in Democracy" (Lurie 1941). In the paper he outlined, defined, and made recommendations for an enlarged, but realistic role for social workers in social/political action.

He reasoned that "when established social institutions and legal relationships are challenged and transformed by the emergence of new cultural, economic, and political phenomena, the process and the results may be called social action" (Lurie 1941, p. 631). Likely in reference to the then current world situation he noted that war and civil strife were the most destructive and most rapid forms of social action. It was his contention that social work sometimes influenced the changing of social processes through social action, but not very often. The tendency of social work was instead to approve social action in the past or future, but not to be involved in it in the present. He saw some rather obvious reasons for social workers not being directly involved in ongoing efforts to bring social change. These reasons were bound up in what Lurie (1941, pp 631–32) believed was the basic conservatism of social work which was in turn rooted in the nature of the conservative, voluntary, private, philanthropic sponsorship of social work efforts. He believed that while, in theory, necessary social changes could come through voluntary action, in practice the people who controlled material resources had not been willing to make the decision to bring about needed changes. As a result, he contended that most major social changes had come through government action. He offered as examples the abolition of slavery, the acceptance of labor's right to organize, income taxes, women's suffrage and social security (Lurie 1941, p. 633).

Lurie (1941, p. 633) contended that another reason that social workers had not been in the forefront of social changes brought about through political action, was one of skill. He argued that because of their historical experiences largely in the private sector, social workers were simply better at persuading wealthy contributors to support voluntary and thus more conservative actions than they were at political action to bring about social change through government actions with its potential for being less conservative.

Because social workers looked to the same conservative interests for support of their efforts, they were hesitant to be seen as advocating causes which could be controversial or

might run contrary to those represented by their benefactors: "Knowing of the overt or latent opposition to less conservative measures, we are uneasy about proposals that may be charged with having a pinkish tinge or are definitely considered to be an outgrowth of radical movements" (Lurie 1941, p. 636).

Lurie (1941, pp. 636–7) also found a partial explanation for social workers' impotence in social/political action in the fact that conservative forces in society were much better organized than progressive interests. He reasserted that the only hope for bringing about the substantive changes he felt necessary was for the progressive/radical forces to organize to counteract and overcome the superior organization of the conservative forces. In this effort he believed the social worker, in alliance with other progressive forces, should play a significant role. He contended that:

Within the ranks of organized labor, among groups of professionals and intellectuals who are able to advance beyond the basic ideologies of their class, and in the undercurrent of popular dissatisfaction with the lack of essential economic progress there is a potential base for popular strength that can become a counterweight to conservative opposition. . . . We have the difficult task of enlisting these natural allies without frightening the other elements (Lurie 1941, pp. 637–38).

To exercise such influence meant, to Lurie, going against considerable odds. Social workers must realize, he cautioned, that

organized pressures, especially from groups that have traditional prestige, are more important influences than real expressions of popular opinion. We have not yet learned how to make the views of a hundred thousand unknown individuals equal the weight of a single identifiable conservative leader who speaks for a fraction of that number. One of the perennial shortcomings of legislators is that they do not seem to know how to count (Lurie 1941, p. 639).

Lurie believed that political action to accomplish social work goals had the greatest chance of success when it resulted from broad-based and disciplined organization of social workers and others with similar interests. He, however

also recognized that social workers, for a variety of reasons, several of which have been discussed here, were a long way from such broad-based and disciplined organization. He recognized that it was not only the superior organization of conservative forces which was to blame for social workers' failures in the area of political action, but he also pointed out that "party and group discipline is alien to social work. We seem to be the true rugged individualists" (Lurie 1941, p. 639). Lurie (1941, p. 640) concluded that given this reality

social action, to be effective, must be an organized salient within social work and that it must free itself sufficiently from the general body to engage in militant action without the impediment of carrying the entire group along with it. Obviously, a successful movement requires that we enlist as large a part of the field as we can reasonably secure without destroying the essential core of our program. Social action, large or small, depends upon popular approval, since it represents some desired action on the part of the majority in an agency or in a community.

Once again, it is possible to see Lurie's efforts to balance the need for broad-based, unified action with the reality that we would have to settle for and work from considerably less than total agreement and completely unified action.

An example of Lurie's efforts to put into operation his notions about a "salient" within social work capable of decisive action without the necessity of obtaining unanimous agreement from the entire organization can be found in his involvement beginning in 1945 with the National Committee on the Human Aspects of Reconversion (NCHAR). The Committee was an interdisciplinary effort to prepare for a return to a peace time economy in anticipation of the war's end. Lurie was a Vice-Chairperson of the Committee. In his words

the Committee on the Human Aspects of Reconversion [h]as set up as its first order of business, the assembling of information from the social work and religious fields on the human aspects of reconversion and the use of this information as quickly as possible in support of the unemployment compen-

sation bill which seeks to extend unemployment compensation in the various states on the basis of payments of \$25 per week for a 26-week period. (Lurie 1945, p. 1)

During the same period Lurie was also involved in the Social Actions Committee and was a member of its Steering Committee. The Social Actions Committee was related to and financially supported the NCHAR (Lurie 1945, p. 1; King 1945). Both Committees were formed to carry out political action. The NCHAR was more interdisciplinary in its inclusion of the "religious field" and its purposes were more specifically related to lobbying for President Truman's Re-conversion programs. The Social Actions Committee was more broadly directed and was made up solely of social workers interested in political action. It was an ad hoc committee and was purposely formed to be outside the formal structure of the mainstream NCSW and AAWS organizations. Lurie explained the reason for its ad hoc and independent structure: "I am of the opinion that an ad hoc committee of individuals can move more quickly than an instrument which has to represent officially an organized body set up for various other purposes" (Lurie 1945, p. 1). This had long been a criticism of Lurie's about both mainstream professional associations, and especially about the AASW.

Still another component of the problems Lurie saw in social workers' lack of skill, involvement and success in political action efforts, was in their education. In 1946, in a paper titled "The Next Twenty-Five Years," Lurie addressed the educational preparation of social workers. In the paper, he noted that current social work education was much broader than what had been available to social work "pioneers." It now included a broad general undergraduate education as well as graduate education including "special techniques required in social case work, public welfare, group work, social agency administration and community organization" (Lurie 1946, p. 4).

Given this broad preparation, Lurie wondered why so many social workers still chose "the limited areas of our techniques in dealing with individual maladjustment" rather

than the broader areas of concern such as "economic, social and political organization" (Lurie 1946, pp. 4-5). He believed such a limited view of social work "results in an indifference or even antagonism toward some social workers who still feel that social work has a real contribution to make to political action" (Lurie 1946, p. 5).

Lurie also continued to be involved in a variety of political action efforts into the 1950s. These activities included his involvement as one of many prominent signers in the Spring of 1949 of an "Open Letter to the President and the Congress of the United States" (1949) urging an end to the Cold War. The signers urged that negotiations and reciprocal understanding replace the fear and hostility characterized by the arms race. Other signers of the letter included Wayne McMullen, Bertha Reynolds, Mary Van Kleeck—all social workers—as well as Linus Pauling, Lee J. Cobb, Aaron Copeland, W.E.B. DuBois, Robert S. Lynd, Arthur Miller and Scott Nearing ("Open Letter to the President and the Congress" 1949). In addition, Lurie was involved in efforts to aid a college professor in the early 1950s who had fallen victim to McCarthyism and anti-communist hysteria (Tandy 1953). These activities are only two later examples of Lurie's willingness to become personally involved throughout his career in political action efforts to aid individuals as well as in support of more broad-based efforts to bring about social and political change.

### Conclusion

Lurie's support for and involvement in political action to accomplish social work goals throughout his career, serve as useful reminders that while controversial and often unsuccessful in terms of results, political action has long had supporters of its rightful place within social work, though those supporters have been a minority in the field. In the sociopolitical climate of today, more social workers and our organizations might do well to heed these reminders.

Lurie's call for and demonstration of social worker involvement in the political arena is especially important because of its comprehensive and activist nature. He recognized that in order for social workers to be effective in the

use of political action it must flow through all aspects of our professional lives. Individually and collectively, through both education and practice, as actions of social workers as members of a distinct profession and in coalition with other progressive groups, Harry Lurie called for us to be politically aware and active. Only in this way did he believe we could fulfill our professional responsibilities to those we serve.

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