

What war and which poverty?

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The most important thing to understand about the Administration's anti-poverty program is that it is not primarily directed against poverty. It is most certainly not anything like a "war on poverty." The failure to notice this has led to massive confusion, and in some cases has turned a supposed war against poverty into an actual civil war about poverty.

In common parlance, the anti-poverty program is understood to be that complex of measures which is built around the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The presentation to Congress made the target clear: that poverty which "is handed down from generation to generation in a cycle of inadequate education, inadequate homes, inadequate jobs and stunted ambitions."

It would appear then, from a crude reading, that the ostensible theory behind the anti-poverty program is this: even if the system creates the twenty or thirty million new jobs that are needed in the next decade — and even if these jobs are productive and pay decent wages — there will be large numbers of people unequipped by skill and education to fill these new-age jobs.

So far as it goes, this theory is clearly valid. Actually, about half the people who fall in the poverty-income bracket are unemployable. They are old, they are disabled, or they are husbandless wives taking care of children. But not all people who are old, disabled or breadwinnerless are poor. Only poor people who are old, disabled, or

breadwinnerless are poor. That is to say, these are the people whose lives have been most marked by marginal employment: by histories of jobs that paid too little for not long enough. So there is substance to the proposition that poverty, in today's America, is largely the product of unemployment and marginal employment. And there is substance to the corollary that among the 50 percent of the poor who *are* employable, a lack of skill and education will make for permanent poverty.

Of course, the system could be adjusted to these people by such means as force-raising wage levels; stabilizing annual incomes even for those who work at low-skill jobs; creating, through public works, full employment at the low-skill level. But even if this remedy could be applied, it misses the point — or at least one of the points. A working assumption of American life is that, in the normal course of events, people will tend to rise or descend to their appropriate occupational levels, according to their individual capacities. It is always possible — in our affluent society at least — simply to put a floor under the incomes of those who, because of individual capacities (or incapacities) occupy the low stations in our economic life. But to do so for *employable* or *working people* (as against, say, the aged and infirm) is to pin a badge of inferior social status upon them. They are not likely to accept it placidly. And the American political credo — individualistic and egalitarian — would be affronted by such an approach to the problem of poverty. Hence the assumption of the anti-poverty program that the cycle of poverty needs to be broken, not simply because it keeps people poor, but because it keeps certain people at the bottom of the economic ladder without regard to their innate capacities. The ostensible aim of the Economic Opportunity Act is highly traditional: a more perfect equality of opportunity for the individual, regardless of race, creed, or previous condition of destitution.

From civil rights to "silver rights"

Now, as it happens, this aim of the anti-poverty program has been the traditional aim of the civil rights movement as well. For decades the civil rights slogans have been couched in terms of equality of opportunity in employment, housing, schools. The administration's anti-poverty program was, among other things, an accommodation to these demands. Its point is not so much the reduction of absolute poverty as it is the reduction of the relative poverty of racially and ethnically disadvantaged groups. This billion dollar program did not spring full-born out of a conscience roused by an evening's reading of Michael Harrington's book. It was part and parcel of the Negro revolution, of the direct action demonstrations and anarchic ghetto restlessness. After all, only 30 percent of the poor are Negro; and only 30 percent of the poor (not all Negro, by any

means) live in urban slums. But it is the slum Negro who is the special target of the anti-poverty program.

So far, so clear — but only superficially. For, in fact, the civil rights movement has, in recent years, undergone a silent metamorphosis. It is now apparent even to the less sophisticated that the American Negro is not, at this late stage of the game, going to be satisfied with mere equality of opportunity. What he demands is something like an equality of achievement. Not formal equal opportunity for jobs, but good jobs, here and now; not non-discrimination in housing, but good housing. As one young Negro said, addressing himself to a congregation of liberals: "You keep talking about civil rights. What we want is *silver* rights."

So the Civil Rights Movement is turning into the Silver Rights Movement. Now the interesting fact about the anti-poverty program — the *most* interesting fact, which is given no official recognition at all — is that it has developed into a politically astute and discreet effort to cope with this metamorphosis. It cannot admit this openly without seeming to flout certain sacred American beliefs — so sacred that even the Negro militants are loath candidly to disavow them. Instead, it sails forth under the banner of "equality of opportunity" — and then proceeds to engage in a complicated series of maneuvers that astonish and consternate the literal-minded.

Indeed, the anti-poverty program is a kind of sociological surprise ball. Every few unwindings, some new thesis is exposed which changes the character of the whole package. But the package is so tricky that legislators, politicians, social workers, and various segments of the public tend to stop at the thesis which suits them best.

This is why there are so many different versions of what the program is all about. Actually, there are about five stages of logical (or at least sociological) progression, five plateaus of understanding (or misunderstanding) in the anti-poverty program, which would very briefly read like this:

Stage one: Upgrading Skills and Education. In the total "poverty" population, as defined by income, about 5 percent of the breadwinners have white-collar backgrounds and skills, as against about 35 percent of the general population. Conversely, over 60 percent of this low-income population are unskilled. About 80 percent of the low-income population did not complete high school as against about 40 percent of the general population.

When these two conditions coincide — lack of skills and lack of education — we begin to define the constant pool of poverty. And this is the most obvious face of the anti-poverty program: upgrading employment skills and upgrading educational achievement — with special attention to the sub-cultural factors which inhibit such achieve-

ment. Thus the program components of the typical anti-poverty program include special training, counseling, and placement services; there are also preschool facilities and remedial education for the so-called culturally deprived, and for those with special language problems.

Stage Two: Participation. But another condition — beyond low skill and low education — characterizes the constant pool of poverty — a condition sometimes called “low motivation.” And here appears the second stage of the official war against poverty, as encapsulated in the now-famous phrase in the federal law: “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” The thesis goes like this: “We’ve talked a lot about motivation — when all along we really knew that you don’t motivate people by rhetoric — but by demonstration. Low motivation is another term for low expectations. But people’s expectations are raised only when they are convinced that the rewards are actually obtainable. People who feel excluded are not motivated. But people who feel excluded will lose that feeling only when they are included *in fact*. Unless there is that kind of participation — functional participation — the educational and employment services referred to before will work disappointingly — if at all.”

Stage Three: The Group Approach. But if there is to be any mass participation, that can be done most effectively by engaging the participation of groups and sub-communities as against individuals. If the groups become participant, then the individuals who identify with that group will feel participant, will feel in fact that they are being invited into society, no longer excluded.

The anti-poverty program thus emphasizes a group approach to the problem of poverty, rather than just an individual approach. And the “groups” to which it is addressed are not just the welfare recipients, or those who are already completely destitute — but those who are *potentially* destitute, who are caught in the general cycle of poverty even if they are not in trouble at the moment.

This seems to represent a significant turn in our operating social welfare philosophy. It is a theoretical move from secondary prevention — that is, the attempt to prevent individual recidivism — to primary prevention: the attempt to apply a remedy to the whole identifiable high-risk group, before they actually become dependent.

At this stage in the unwinding of the anti-poverty surprise ball, the heart of the program is apparently revealed as the emphasis on “target neighborhoods”, and “neighborhood action”. These approaches are built on sub-community participation; and the various welfare and upgrading services seem to be there primarily as a tool to implement this concept of group participation.

Stage Four: The Groups Revealed. There is a certain unreal theoretical purity about these stages so far. Where are the sub-communities which are going to be the critical participants in this process? There is no generalized community of the poor. The fact of the matter is that, apart from a few special areas in the country, the only identifiable communities of the poor are in the racial and ethnic ghettos.

These are the communities which notably have the nascent sense of community, the identifiable physical boundaries, the embryonic structure, which can most readily fit the specifications of the anti-poverty program. There was never any question about it. The early discussions of the program with city representatives, even before the Act was passed, indicated that the racial and ethnic communities would be chiefly involved. In discussing the problem of "reaching the poor", there were frequent references to the need to make contact with the NAACP, CORE, Mexican-American organizations, etc. And indeed, the "target neighborhoods" in the cities have turned out to be the racial and ethnic ghettos, to nobody's surprise.

There is, of course, great justification for such a direction, even if it was slightly hidden in the package. All of the theoretical strands seem to blend smoothly at this point. The sub-community, preventive approach is conveniently served by the prior existence of these sub-communities. And, more cogently perhaps, the most constant pool of our poverty is made up of people from these disadvantaged racial and ethnic communities. The conditions of cyclical and generational poverty are most startling in evidence within these communities. In the metropolitan areas of the country about 36 per cent of non-white families live on a sub-marginal income of less than \$3000, as against about 12 per cent of white families. But that figure does not yet begin to describe the differential. Among husband-and-wife families with children, about 5 per cent of the white families in the urban areas live below this minimal poverty line as against 22 per cent of non-white families. The number of unskilled workers among Negro men is proportionately four times greater than among whites. Their educational achievement is substantially lower. And there is, of course, a higher quotient among these groups of the third condition which completes the classic trap of the ghetto: deliberate exclusion, and low expectations.

So it would make sense for the anti-poverty program to concentrate on reducing poverty in these most severe pools of deprivation.

Stage Five: Power! So, the community action program of the war against poverty is apparently revealed as a war against the poverty of the disadvantaged racial and ethnic communities — mainly through the technique of involving these communities in "participation" — which participation is an essential ingredient for the significant up-

grading of skills and education — which upgrading will break the cycle of poverty.

A very neat theoretical circle — indeed, too neat for the life that we know. An entirely new pattern of meaning emerges with an examination of what is meant by "participation". Originally, there was a tendency to define participation in terms of hiring poor people to do many of the jobs that had to be done — aides and sub-professionals who would provide a bridge between the poverty populations and the programs. They would serve as living signals to the neighborhood people that they were now in fact being "invited into" the society.

But very swiftly, there came a shift in the definition of participation. The "neighborhood boards" became the focus of interest. And it was *the policy-making functions* of these neighborhood boards that became the important thing. Within the confines of the theory, the ability of the neighborhood boards to shape their own program under the Act — and related programs, too — was even stronger symbolic proof to the embattled community that they could get "in"; and the mass therapy could then run its course. *This* kind of participation was indeed a bold exercise in "self-help" — and was this not the key to the shift from dependency to independency, from welfareism to bootstrapism?

The note was: "We can't say on the one hand, 'Why don't these people help themselves,' and on the other hand, 'We don't trust these people to run their own affairs.'" An unambiguous note, still within the context of the administration of programs funded under the Act.

But it did not take long for the definition of participation to shift again. It soon became apparent that it was not the administration and planning of these programs which was at the center of interest at all.

In one Western city, an enlightened Mayor set up the first steps for the implementation of the Community Action program with the iron-bound stipulation that neighborhood boards, composed of neighborhood people, were to have virtually complete control over the programs in the neighborhoods. In effect, they were to have the power to hire and fire their own personnel, and were to have absolute veto power over any program for their respective areas, as well as the responsibility for devising their own new programs. The neighborhood boards, once they formed themselves, were also to elect their own delegates to the overall Economic Opportunity Council for the community. However, as the plans developed, these delegates were to comprise only about one third of the governing body of that council.

Of course, the Mayor, being a Mayor, had in mind some maintenance of control over a body which was going to operate in his political domain. And this central body did have in its veto the theoretical power to stymie neighborhood programs, even if it did not have the power to impose anything or anybody on the neighborhoods.

This rationale, however, had some substance: if there was to be a comprehensive effort to reduce poverty, the matter of jobs was crucially involved; if jobs were to be affected, and tax money used, the business and the labor communities and the general community would have to be involved more than routinely; they would not be so involved if they were not to some degree proportionately represented on the overall council.

But this reasoning had no appeal at all to those who were now emerging as the "anti-poverty militants". They demanded an automatic majority control over the city-wide council. And, after some backing and filling, the Mayor capitulated!

The main body of these militants then made their position clear: they were not interested in any kind of service program for some time to come: they were interested in using *all* of the available funds for the purpose of "organizing" the people in the neighborhoods. These people would be organized not just for the purpose of planning and administering their own welfare programs, but for the purpose of expressing and implementing their needs and desires in all arenas of public life.

The same basic process has taken place or is taking place in hundreds of other communities, in a variety of forms and paces. The pattern is clear: "Participation" as a principle of the anti-poverty program has emerged, not only or even primarily as a means of motivating people to upgrade themselves occupationally and educationally, but as a value in itself. And the value is Power, political power.

Power for whom?

Of course, it is possible to point out, properly enough, that power is not, after all, unrelated to the question of poverty. Poverty, in our common usage of the term, has three distinct connotations: no money, no hope, no power. What image, after all, is invoked when we use the term "poverty stricken"? Do we have an image of people who just happen to be broke? Someone once said that he didn't mind being broke as long as he wasn't poor. No, our image of the poverty-stricken — in this era, at least — is rather of people who are stuck with their poverty, hopelessly trapped by it. But more than that, our image of the poverty-stricken is of people who don't have much influence over their economic condition — or indeed over any other aspect of their lives. Deep poverty connotes power poverty. It might theoretically be suggested that the elimination of group powerlessness, *per se*, might be one way to break the cycle of group poverty; it might be the speediest way to raise group expectations and motivations, and actually to change some of the patterns of the ghetto.

But again, and finally, it is necessary to break with this web of abstraction. Some of the architects of the community action program

may indeed have had this kind of abstract theory in mind, although the politicians who legislated it certainly did not. But the people who drew the concept of "participation" to its ultimate definition of political power were the local militants. And they were not generalized spokesmen for the poor: they were the Negro and Spanish-speaking activists left over from the civil rights movement. As a matter of fact, they tended to be the newer, younger, more militant, more chauvinistic wing of the old civil rights movement.

The theoretical concept of the gaining of political power for the poor became the practical tool for the gaining of political power for these "militant" representatives of the Negro and Spanish-speaking communities.

But what does "political power" mean in this context?

To some of the militants, it means revolutionary politics of a sort. Many of those who were quick to seize the moment could be vaguely identified with the spirit of the "new left"; they were firmly attached to an anti-establishment non-ideology. Others, angry, intoxicated, or just not to be left behind, gathered around them. Here was an unprecedented opportunity, and a kind of rebirth.

Several years before, with the success of direct action on the Southern front, with the civil rights movement in the North imperceptibly turning into the silver rights movement, with the traditional anti-discrimination measures having run their course, there was a savage period of direct action assaults on the job front in the North. These assaults did not finally produce anything like massive remedial results with respect to upgrading Negro employment. The direct action movement faltered, and its leaders were ever more frustrated and bitter about the impregnability of the "power structure." This had become their demonology.

But there was, by and large, no movement of people swelling behind them. It indeed became more difficult to mount the picket lines impressively. In effect, at this stage of the game in the North, and on this kind of issue, their appeal was apparently too abstract, too removed from the possibility of concrete results to attract the people "from the neighborhoods". Organization was thin, funds were low.

Now, *here* was a direct invitation from government to use funds from city hall to fight city hall. Not just organizing money, but leverage for power negotiation was being deliberately handed over to the powerless. The federal funds for various welfare programs are just fat enough so that no city's establishment wants to lose them. But by the terms of the Act, as it has come to be interpreted, no city's establishment was going to get these funds unless they were willing to negotiate with the hitherto powerless, on rather equal terms.

At first the erstwhile civil rights activists couldn't quite believe it. They expected treachery. But every time they screamed "no participation," the federal government held up the funds. By the time the large city mayors discovered what was in the wind, and began screaming themselves, it was too late.

"Who represents the poor?"

The "No participation" flag was raised early and often. It was raised against whites and middle-class Negroes alike. The stern cry, "Who here represents the poor?" rang through the public chambers throughout the country. Nobody, it usually turned out, was the correct answer — because the operating definition was pretty rigorous. You had to be poor, a Negro or Spanish-speaking ghetto resident, of poor and ghettoic antecedents — and duly chosen by the other poor residents of your ghetto.

It was an impossible circular problem: how were the qualified representatives of the poor to be chosen by the organized poor until the poor were organized by their qualified and chosen representatives? Breaking the circle had of course always been a middle-class function, even to the organization of proletarian revolutions. It was to be no different in this case, but the main point was no different either: the middle-class people who insisted on organizing the poor were those who were ideologically anti-middle class.

"Who here represents the poor?" served to clear out the traditional Negro leadership, and then served as a focus of attack on the middle class generally, and on the Negro middle class particularly. Negro professionals quietly expressed their annoyance at this tack, and in one city, a group of Negro ministers, long active in the civil rights struggle, had this comment to make about the anti-poverty militants: "The wave of tension in our city is being deliberately inflamed by an unsavory element who are distributing the false philosophy that the religious leaders of the community represent a so-called middle class who are not close enough to facts of poverty in our city to give guidance in its relief."

The anti-poverty militants were themselves, of course, more middle class than not. They were for the most part broke but not poor. At least one meeting of anti-poverty militants was interrupted by a little old indigenous lady from the neighborhood who rose to demand: "Who here represents the poor?"

But with the help of the government, they won their initial objective more often than not. This objective was two-fold: one, *they* should run the program, and two, the program should turn to the people in the neighborhoods and be mainly involved in *organizing* them. There was no great interest in the various and ultimately scanty social welfare programs held forth by the anti-poverty Act.

The upshot is that many of the anti-poverty militants, the former civil rights militants, are now professionally running these neighborhood programs as employees of the Economic Opportunity program. This is not to say that these people were motivated by thoughts of personal gain. On the contrary, they could doubtless have done better in the middle class occupations on which they turned their backs. And it is also very likely that, without their ideological biases and stringent tactics, the community action programs would have turned into a stale rehash of old welfare programs.

It is probable that they touched off something significant, but it is not likely that the significance will be quite what they had expected. For what their drive for revolutionary political power is turning into is a variant of old fashioned ward politics — and that term is not used here pejoratively.

The revolution that never happened

The "organizing drives" in the neighborhoods under the community action program so far have given no evidence that they have the potential for developing a mass movement, revolutionary or otherwise. The traditional failure in America to organize poor Negroes, or poor Spanish-speaking groups, or poor whites for that matter, was never for lack of organizing funds. Rank-and-file Negroes, for example, can be rallied on certain select issues that touch their lives immediately, e.g., abhorrent redevelopment programs that would uproot them, police brutality, blatant discrimination. But there is no evidence that they can be rallied around abstract and generalized hostilities towards the middle class or towards the American society. Sometimes their accumulated bitterness can explode, à la Harlem and Watts, but that is quite different from organizing them around ideological principles of dissent. The evidence is that such dissent is not really there. Recent opinion surveys indicate that the overwhelming body of American Negroes believe that things are getting better, that there is hope for their future, and that their main aspirations remain to join the great American middle class. This is not a revolutionary mass.

The now government-funded organizers of the poor are finding it slow going, consequently. In some cases, they are finding *ad hoc* issues that enable them to mount the appearance of an old-fashioned demonstration. A local Housing Authority was recently "sat-in" briefly by a number of "neighborhood people" under the organizational leadership of neighborhood EOC employees, to protest eviction practices. There was another demonstration, in which EOC employees were also involved, protesting employment policies in a public construction project. But these are just ghostly extensions of old civil

rights activities, involving the same issues and pretty much the same people as before. There has been no general firing of the body politic of the poor on either general or concrete issues related to poverty. After much campaigning and publicity only 3 per cent of the Philadelphia poor, and 1 per cent of the Los Angeles poor — including Watts — voted in elections for poverty board members.

Furthermore, some of the new EOC organizers of the poor are becoming initiated into the necessities of official responsibility, including forms, charts, and the compromise which turneth away disaster. In short, they are becoming slightly establishment-oid.

In one neighborhood recently, the EOC organizers who were yesterday the leading anti-poverty militants, and the day before yesterday the leading civil rights militants, were themselves picketed as "\$12,000 Finks" by a grass-roots neighborhood delegation. It was their first experience on that side of the signs. Some have suggested that the whole poverty program is but further evidence of Johnsonian brilliance, that it has been designed exactly to coopt the most militant of the young race-activists. But that's a Monday morning misconception. It is true that anti-poverty militancy appears to have drawn the teeth of a less ordered and controlled civil rights militancy in many communities around the country. But such teeth-drawing was the destiny of the aging civil rights struggle in the North in any case. The community action program is not a sell-out. It just is not going to become a revolution.

Then what it is going to become? There is the good possibility that while community action programs will not develop mass proletarian movements, they may develop traditional centers of political power in the Negro and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. There will be *places* to which neighborhood people can go to register political complaints and aspirations. There will be *representatives* of the neighborhoods to whom city hall and the political parties will listen — and who is going to count the active constituents? There will be new, and newly-effective, bridges between the neighborhood people and the various "power structure." This will be a variant of ward politics which served earlier ethnic communities well.

It is even possible that this new political power, if it is developed, will actually spur the kind of economic job creation programs which are not contained in the anti-poverty program itself. But that will be done, if it ever is, not through the development of separate Negro or Spanish-speaking political movements of the poor. It will be done through the tying-in of the new neighborhood political structures to the reigning community political organizations. Regular-line politicians are well aware of this possibility, and have already been operating behind the scenes.

A peaceful and inexpensive pause

This is the sociological surprise package which is commonly titled the "anti-poverty program." No Machiavellian bureaucrat planned this package. It is what it is because of what happened to it on its way to the poor.

Obviously, this surprise package varies somewhat in structure and content in the different communities across the country, depending on size, stability, and history. But, nevertheless, the core meaning and ultimate fate of the anti-poverty programs are best revealed in those communities in which the program has already most fully unfolded, layer after layer.

It is not possible for any but the most innocent to linger long on the first level of meaning: the provision of an additional billion dollars worth of rehabilitative welfare services for a specific portion of the poor. We already were routinely spending well over ten billion dollars yearly for the same services to the same people, to humanitarian purpose but without any mass rehabilitative results.

The second and third levels begin to excite the less tired social workers: the reorganization of welfare services towards primary prevention and sub-community participation. It is certainly the case that the complacent paternalism of united community funds and social welfare departments is being somewhat shaken up. But this is an internal, almost professional ferment; it may well brighten the field of social welfare, it is not destined to shake the very foundations of poverty.

The logic of history and the structure of American society have invested the anti-poverty program with its central meaning and purpose: the pursuit of political power in the Negro and similarly disadvantaged communities. But also because of the logic of history and the structure of American society, the political results will surely be more traditional than revolutionary.

In sum, the anti-poverty program may yet provide a peaceful pause while the civil rights movements readjust themselves, and it could help create some new if limited arms of political pressure and patronage for some Negro and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. None of these objectives of the anti-poverty campaign really has anything to do with a substantial reduction in poverty. But they could have their own values — and what do you want for a mere billion?