The War on Poverty

The Limitations of "Empowerment"

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Fall 2019

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In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson promulgated a set of reforms known collectively as the Great Society. One of its most significant programs, the War on Poverty, was part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. It directed $3 billion to place antipoverty programs called Community Action Programs in local communities.[1] Some have celebrated the programs for their localized focus and potential to "empower" the immiserated, even seeing it as a valiant effort to stem or even eradicate poverty. However, its aims were actually much more limited. Because it framed poverty as a problem of individual misbehavior or cultural pathology, its aims were to promote self-help so that people could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, rather than eliminate the structural economic conditions that produce and reproduce poverty.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the Office of Economic Opportunity, which administered most of the War on Poverty programs. Its programs were Job Corps to train the youth in both urban and conservation camps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) to place volunteers in community-based projects across the United States, and the Head Start early-education program for children of the indigent.[2] The Community Action Program (CAP) was the most controversial program, however, because it placed the poor themselves into the position of deciding what was best for them, and presumably was less "elite-run" as a result.[3] Some, such as Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright, spoke favorably of this approach in *The American YAWP* because it could supposedly "give disfranchised Americans a seat at the table."[4] They argue that

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[1] Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright, eds., "The Sixties," in *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Textbook* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[2] Aaron Cooley, "War on Poverty," Encyclopedia Britannica, March 8, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/topic/War-on-Poverty.

[3] Locke and Wright, "The Sixties," 326.

[4] Locke and Wright, 326.

the War on Poverty enabled indigent minority community empowerment and inspired a new generation of community activists to carry on its legacy.[5]

However, the community-led approach facilitated a different sort of elite-run model of local black governance, as it facilitated the recruitment of future black political elites. This did not so much challenge the existing regime of inequality as it did legitimate it because it "socialized a pool of potential black officials" into the protocols and operating logic of public management and familiarized them with "existing policy processes."[6] In other words, the Community Action Program introduced the potential black officialdom with the acceptable political practices and processes of municipal governance, and advanced "black representation among beneficiaries *within* existing policy and institutional regimes."[7]

Municipalities established and administered community programs that were, in effect, "buffering" mechanisms. These programs were separate and often enough subordinate to the "established structures of authority."[8] This had the effect of bringing community organizers into essentially powerless organizations that took on more of a cue-taking role from civic elites than a participatory role of governance on behalf of the poverty-area residents.[9] For example, in St. Louis, political scientists found that the Human Development Corporation (HDC), which

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[5] Locke and Wright, 326–27.

[6] Adolph L. Reed, "Sources of Demobilization in the New Black Regime: Incorporation, Ideological Capitulation and Radical Failure in the Post Segregation Era," in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 131.

[7] Reed, 131.

[8] Robert J. Kerstein and Dennis R. Judd, "Achieving Less Influence with More Democracy: The Permanent Legacy of the War on Poverty," *Social Science Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1980): 210.

[9] Adolph L. Reed, "The Jug and Its Content: A Perspective on Black American Political Development," in *Stirrings*, 3; Adolph L. Reed, "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints," in *Stirrings*, 98–115.

administered the War on Poverty initiatives at the local level, functioned so independently of the municipal structures of authority that the city was generally unchallenged by the community organizers.[10] In fact, later in the decade, from roughly 1966–67, the HDC regulated conflict from black activists "by hiring and subjecting them to local and federal guidelines" to neutralize any radicalism.[11]

The War on Poverty was, in many ways, a retreat from the social-democratic programs that civil rights activists had pushed for. For example, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and even Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz all emphasized the impact that automation and deindustrialization had on increased African-American unemployment.[12] In 1966, A. Philip Randolph and the AFL-CIO's then-new A. Philip Randolph Institute released *A "Freedom Budget" for All Americans*. Its goals were much more ambitious than the War on Poverty because it had the possibility to challenge significantly the structures that produce inequality and poverty. It called for raising the minimum wage to a level that would lift people out of poverty, guaranteed quality health care for all, quality housing for all, and education at costs within one's means.[13] This program had a focus on altering the political and economic structures that produce poverty.

Historian Touré F. Reed has identified the social democratic approach advanced by Randolph and Rustin as an economic structuralist approach, while the approach favored by most

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[10] Kerstein and Judd, "Achieving Less Influence with More Democracy: The Permanent Legacy of the War on Poverty," 209.

[11] Kerstein and Judd, 212.

[12] Touré F. Reed, "Why Moynihan Was Not So Misunderstood at the Time," *Nonsite.Org*, no. 17 (September 4, 2015), https://nonsite.org/article/why-moynihan-was-not-so-misunderstood-at-the-time.

[13] Adolph Reed Jr., "Black Politics After 2016," *Nonsite.Org*, no. 23 (February 11, 2018), https://nonsite.org/article/black-politics-after-2016.

of the mainstream proponents of the War on Poverty and its programs was institutional structuralism. Institutional structuralism saw the problems of poverty as caused by the poor themselves. According to this perspective, they either lacked motivation or were socially disorganized and held back by cultural pathology or some combination of the two.

In this context, the aims of the War on Poverty, although often appearing militant and "grassroots," were really institutional structuralist programs to help poor people learn to help themselves. The notion of "empowerment" and securing a "seat at the table" obscured the class character of this politics and gave greater verisimilitude to the faux-radicalism of the Community Action Programs. The programs tended to portray poverty not as a political problem, but as the product of individual shortcomings. Because, as historian Judith Stein observed in *Running Steel, Running America*, "Discussions of unemployment, underemployment, and low wages were replaced by discourses on inadequate motivation, education, and culture," the focus shifted to identifying and reducing "factors limiting a person's ability to take advantage of opportunity."[14] In positioning the idea of "empowerment" and a "seat at the table" as radical demands, the CAP concealed much of the victim-blaming intrinsic to institutional structuralism.

The War on Poverty's orientation toward instilling motivation and attitudes conducive toward self-help stems at least in part from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In it, Moynihan identified not economic structural causes of unemployment and poverty affecting African Americans, but cultural and behavioral, or institutional-structural, ones instead.[15] The War on Poverty's conservative self-help approach dovetailed nicely with this perspective, and it so significantly influenced the Johnson

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[14] Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 87.

[15] Reed, "Why Moynihan Was Not So Misunderstood at the Time."

administration that President Johnson even had Moynihan draft his Howard University address in June of 1965.[16]

Ultimately, the aims of the War on Poverty were too focused on institutional structural causes of poverty, rather than economic structural, to be successful. Because of this, the War on Poverty ultimately failed. Indeed, the way the Johnson administration and local leaders devised the War on Poverty ultimately guaranteed that it could only reduce poverty and not completely eliminate it because of its indifference to the structural economic causes. If the economic structuralists had ultimately been successful at implementing their plans, perhaps the complete elimination of poverty would have been the outcome.

[16] Reed.

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