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Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare

THE POLITICS OF TURMOIL

Essays on Poverty, Race and the Urban Crisis

by Richard A. Cloward
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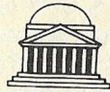

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services for the very poor. Clearly, the country is not yet ready to entertain such measures. But some form of socialized law is necessary if the rights of the poor are finally to be secured.

NOTES

[1] The British action followed the notorious Crichel Down affair, in which the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries tried to rid itself of a particularly irksome farmer by ordering his lands to be confiscated, an action which led to a Question before Parliament.

[2] Donald C. Rowat, *The Ombudsman: Citizen's Defender* (with twenty-nine contributors, including Ombudsmen from thirteen countries), Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1965, 361 pp. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this volume.

Whom Does the Advocate Planner Serve? (Part One)

Frances Fox Piven

A new kind of practice, advocacy for the poor, is growing in the professions. The new advocacy has thus far been most vigorous in the legal profession, where the term originates. Traditional legal-defense organizations are bringing test cases that challenge regulations and practices of agencies serving the poor, and new legal agencies offering direct legal services have mushroomed in the slums. Social workers are also stationed in neighborhood storefronts where they act as the advocates of a "walk-in" clientele by badgering public agencies for services. Now planners and architects are offering their services to local groups confronted with neighborhood-development proposals.

To account for this new practice, lawyers would probably trace their inspiration to Jacobus Tenbroeck and Charles Reich, two legal scholars who exposed injustices perpetrated on the poor by agencies of the welfare state. Social workers might see their advocacy as a reaction against a "mental-hygiene movement" which had come to dominate social agencies, orienting practitioners toward a psychiatrically based therapy and a middle-class clientele amenable to such therapy. And planners and architects would probably say that advocacy reflects their growing unease at the devastations visited on the uprooted poor by a decade and a half of urban redevelopment. In other words, each profession sees the emergence of advocacy as the expression of an enlightened professional conscience.

No doubt early volunteer advocates were stirred by the civil-

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rights movement and troubled by the growing concentration of black poverty in the cities. But the efforts of early volunteer advocates were scattershot and ineffective. Nor were their ideas earthshaking. There are always many currents in professional thought.

Now, however, advocacy has become important as a form of professional practice because opportunities for advocate practice have been created by the array of federal programs for the inner city launched during the sixties. Social workers and lawyers were hired by federally funded projects in delinquency, mental health, education and poverty. Now advocate planning also is becoming both feasible and popular with funds provided by the Model Cities program. In our enthusiasm for the idea, we have tended to see professional advocates as free agents because they are independent of local government, and we ignore the federal dollars which support them and the federal interests they serve.

These federal programs were prompted, as was much else that happened in this nation in the last decade, by the massive migration of blacks into cities. However worthy one thinks the social goals attributed to the programs, and whatever their actual social benefits, they also met the political needs of the Democratic administration in adjusting to population changes in the cities. In fact, despite the presumably different social goals, the various programs were remarkably similar. Under the broad umbrella of "community development," each provided a battery of services not unlike those of oldtime political clubs. Each also called for "citizen participation," to be promoted by federal funds under federal guidelines. Whatever the stated goals, these efforts can be understood as a strategy to integrate the new migrants into the political structure of the city by offering them various forms of patronage distributed by local "citizen participants" whom the projects selected and cultivated. To execute the strategy, the projects brought to the ghetto a variety of professionals, many of whom were called "advocates."

There is a minor irony in this, for whatever the variants of the advocacy idea, two elements are essential to it: Professional services must be made available to the poor, and these services should be so structured as to assure that professionals are responsive to the interests of the poor as the poor themselves see them. In other words, it is not so much that professionals have

been strangers to the slum; rather, it is that those professionals who work with slum people and slum problems are traditionally under hire by, and therefore responsive to, public and private agencies which represent interests other than those of the poor. There is, of course, a dilemma in the ideal, for if professional services are in the end responsive to whomever finances them, where can the poor find the money to pay their advocates? The dilemma, however, concerns the ideal of advocacy, not the realities of advocate practice on the federal payroll.

To point out that advocacy was promoted by national Democratic political interests is not to deny that the poor have benefited from professional advocacy or, put another way, that the poor have gained from federal efforts to integrate them into local and national politics. Overall, it is difficult to dismiss the results. Social workers who pried loose delayed welfare checks, or harassed housing inspectors into taking action, were in a small way easing oppressive conditions, as were lawyers who prevented an eviction or defended a youngster from police harassment. To argue that these small gains diverted the black poor from making greater demands is to set a dubious possibility against a gain that is real, however limited. Furthermore, small material advances, by raising the expectations of blacks, may actually have spurred them to greater demands. In this sense, the federal strategy for the cities, and especially the poverty program, may have contributed to a growing discontent and turbulence in the ghetto, at least in the short run.

But whatever may be said for the tangible accomplishments of social workers and lawyers stationed in the ghettos, the same cannot be said for planning advocates. Planners offer no concrete service or benefit. Rather, they offer their skill in the planning process. The object, planning advocates would say, is to overcome the vast discrepancy in technical capability between local communities and the city bureaucracy, because it is with the bureaucracy that local groups must contend to protect and improve their neighborhoods.

Implicit in this view is the recognition that planning decisions are decisions about who gets what in the city. That is, to determine what kinds of schools, or hospitals, or housing, or recreational facilities will be built, and where they will be located, is to determine who will benefit from the facilities. And

to determine which neighborhoods will be demolished to provide space for new facilities or housing is to determine who will lose out. Planning decisions, in other words, are political decisions.

Implicit in the advocate planner's view also is the notion that the urban poor can influence these decisions once they are given the technical help of a planner—or better still, once they actually learn the technical skills of planning. And this is exactly what many neighborhood groups have been trying to do, sometimes with volunteer planners, more often with the help of eager young professionals hired with Model Cities or poverty-program funds. The results are worth pondering.

One of the earliest and most dedicated of such efforts began in 1959, in a neighborhood called Cooper Square, on the Lower East Side of New York City. Various neighborhood groups had rallied to fight an urban-renewal designation which, familiarly enough, called for demolition of 2150 existing housing units, half of which were renting for under forty dollars a month. They secured the services of Walter Thabit, a dedicated New York planner, who set to work in consultation with neighborhood representatives on an "Alternate Plan for Cooper Square." By 1961 the Alternate Plan was presented to the public with much fanfare, and the chairman of the city's Planning Commission pronounced it commendable. Then, from 1961 until 1963, the Cooper Square Committee and its advocate planner negotiated with city officials. In 1963 the city prepared once more to move on its own renewal plan. Again the neighborhood rallied, with mass meetings of site tenants. The city withdrew, and new conferences were scheduled to discuss the Alternate Plan. In 1966, however, a new mayor announced indefinite postponement. Then, in January 1968, Walter Thabit was asked to prepare a new, smaller plan, and in 1969 new meetings were conducted between city officials and the Cooper Square Committee.

Early in 1970 the Board of Estimate approved "an early action plan." After ten years of arduous effort on the part of an extraordinary neighborhood group, a small portion of the Alternate Plan had been given formal sanction even though that portion was still far from implementation. The chief accomplishment was that the neighborhood had stopped the early threat of renewal. As Walter Thabit said sourly when it was all over, "Protest without planning could have done as much."

Most advocacy efforts are not yet old enough to provide such overwhelming discouragement. But the signs so far are bleak. In one city after another, local groups in Model Cities neighborhoods are involved in the technical dazzlements of planning, some to prepare plans, others to compete with counterplans. But there is little being built in these neighborhoods. Nor are locally prepared plans likely to change the pattern. A plan, of itself, is not force; it is not capable of releasing the necessary federal subsidies or of overcoming the inertia of the city agencies. Quite the contrary, for those people who might otherwise have become a force by the trouble they made are now too busy. As one advocate planner for a Harlem neighborhood that is still without construction funds proudly said, "They are learning how to plan."

What all of this suggests is that involving local groups in elaborate planning procedures is to guide them into a narrowly circumscribed form of political action, and precisely that form for which they are least equipped. What is laid out for the poor when their advocate arrives is a strategy of political participation which, to be effective, requires powerful group support, stable organization, professional staff, and money—precisely those resources which the poor do not have. Technical skill is only one small aspect of the power discrepancy between the poor and the city bureaucracies.

Not only are low-income groups handicapped when politics becomes planning but they are diverted from the types of political action by which the poor are most likely to be effective. For all the talk of their powerlessness, the masses of newly urbanized black poor did prompt some federal action long before advocates came to their aid. The threat of their growing and volatile numbers in the voting booth and in the streets exacted some responses from national and local political leaders: the curtailment of slum clearance; the expansion and liberalization of some existing services, such as public welfare; and the new federal programs for the ghetto. But the planning advocates who came with the new programs have not added to the political force of the ghetto. Quite the contrary, for the advocates are coaxing ghetto leaders off the streets, where they might

make trouble. The absorbing and elaborate planning procedures which follow are ineffective in compelling concessions, but may be very effective indeed in dampening any impulse toward disruptive action which has always been the main political recourse of the very poor.

To be sure, a few neighborhood leaders do gain something from these planning activities. The lucky members of the local "planning committee" become involved in overwhelming and prestigious rites and mysteries, which often absorb them even while action for their neighborhood is going forward without them. In effect, those few selected leaders are drawn away from their base in the community into a lengthy educational program, the end product of which, if all goes well, may be a neighborhood plan. Once produced, that plan is easily stalled by the city, negotiated beyond recognition or accepted only to be undermined in implementation. In the meantime, the local "planning process" has diverted and confused, and perhaps divided, the community, and surely has not advanced it toward effective political mobilization.

Although the language is new, this kind of advocacy follows a long tradition of neighborhood councils in the slums, through which local residents were encouraged to "participate" in the elaborate rituals of parliamentary procedure as if that were the path of political influence for the very poor. In the past such participation absorbed slum leadership and rendered it ineffective. That may well be the chief result of current planning advocacy. It deflects conflict by preoccupying newcomers to city politics with procedures that pose little threat to entrenched interests. It is a strategy which thus promotes political stability in the city. But if the force of the poor depends on the threat of instability, planning advocacy does little to promote equity.

Sumner M. Rosen Comments:

Frances Piven's critique of advocacy planning is consistent with her distrust of politically integrating techniques as co-optative as well as her preference for direct group action as a

At the time of this debate, Sumner M. Rosen was an economist at the Institute of Public Administration, specializing in problems of manpower and social policy.

route to political effectiveness. She grudgingly concedes that some efforts—by lawyers, social workers, etc.—have gained limited benefits for individual clients, but nothing more. She ignores the recent extension of legal advocacy to the level of class actions, directly challenging fundamental patterns of injustice and discrimination in the law. This new level of action is the further development of a practice of social intervention which logically began with the individual client and moved beyond the individual to the group or class as experience taught the advocates the necessary political lessons. The advocates' maturity and growing effectiveness are attested to by recent efforts in California to kill the OEO-funded system of legal services to the poor. In short, the Establishment has been hurt, and the judicial system moved, by advocacy.

More important is the question of where, in Piven's scheme of things, substantive issues ought to be discussed and programmatic choices clarified. Health advocacy is fairly new. Its practitioners believe that community-based groups need to know the implications of the choices to be made in the use of resources, as between, for example, new hospital facilities, more ambulatory-care facilities, more group-practice centers, more public-health expenditures, etc. The answers are not self-evident, but each plausible pattern of response, besides exerting important influence on the quality, cost and accessibility of health care, will benefit one group of providers, increase the influence and power of one point of view, advance or retard the achievement of a decent, humane and effective health-care system. Community groups need to participate in these decisions, to understand the stakes and to decide what is in their own best interest. Good advocacy will help them to the necessary understanding.

New York's Health Policy Advisory Center exemplifies this approach. Health-PAC's experience to date indicates that this infusion of expertise is not politically debilitating; on the contrary, by demythologizing the planning process it serves to energize local groups by showing them the direct connection between the planning process and the quality of their own lives. It also connects local insurgency with other levels of decision-making and overall resource allocation. Neither Health-PAC nor ARCH (Architects Renewal Committee for Harlem) was founded with federal funds, nor does Health-PAC receive any

today. No one who has followed health-planning controversies in New York City in recent years can seriously question either Health-PAC's independence or its ability to increase the pressure of the community on the political establishment without reducing the level of militance. Sophistication is no enemy of effective political action, provided always that the experts are kept "on tap, not on top."

Piven apparently believes that programs which governments adopt in response to political needs are thereby tarnished and rendered suspect. But any political system survives because those who run it understand and respond to the expression of needs, whether these take organized or disorganized form, whether they are made manifest through normal channels or through the mobilization of people in the street. There is a difference between response and co-optation.

The political task of the insurgent, and the advocate who seeks to serve insurgency, is to preserve the independence and freedom of action of those who are demanding change. The secret of success is not perpetual militance but earning and keeping the support of one's primary constituency. Integrating new groups into the social and political structure is not inherently bad; what matters is the terms on which such integration occurs. Groups that acquire more power, and thus can more effectively serve the needs of their members, gain from the process of political integration. To bring new groups into the "mainstream" does not automatically mean that the older mainstream elements will control, dominate or manipulate them. Good advocacy will help people to move with maximum effectiveness and minimum loss of freedom of action, option or ally. An alternative plan may, in the short run, move leaders off the streets, as Piven says (does she want them always there?); the real issue is what they bring with them when they return to the streets.

To learn the methods by which the established planning forces use technique and "objectivity" as smoke screens is important in the struggle to move the issue to the political plane, where—as Piven correctly says—it belongs. But how will the militants bring their constituents to wage an effective long-run struggle unless they can show what the stakes are, who and where the real allies and opponents are, what steps are involved

in an effective struggle? And how will they go outside the base of their own direct support, when it is too narrow to win unaided, to get the allies they need over the long haul, unless the decisions at issue are politically linked to the interests and welfare of those who may not appear to be directly involved?

Uninstructed militance can be self-defeating. At the 1969 Health Forum, Piven's and my own favorite example of organized militance, the National Welfare Rights Organization, seized the microphone at the closing session to demand that every welfare family be provided *access to a family doctor!* At this level of sophistication, the Establishment need have no fears. Such slogans leave wholly untouched all of the basic problems of the American health system, particularly its domination by the organized free-standing practitioners. In this as in many other cases, a little advocacy would have gone a long way.

Frances Fox Piven Replies:

I am puzzled by Sumner Rosen's response. He fails to deal with the main issue I raised: Do the poor benefit from planning advocacy?

Let me first clear away a few of Rosen's assertions which answer points I did not make. Since I regard political integration as inevitable, I do not worry whether to be for it or against it. I also regard integration as necessarily co-optative, as I understand the meaning of that word. The questions I addressed follow from my assumption that the process of integration is natural to government: First, what kind of force will precipitate governmental efforts to integrate the poor, and do planning advocates escalate or curb that force? Second, what are the terms of integration—that is, do the poor get anything from the process—and do planning advocates help them get more?

Rosen does not discuss planning advocacy (except to assert, incorrectly, that ARCH did not receive federal funds). Instead he discusses legal advocates, whom I also commented upon favorably, though with a less sweeping enthusiasm. The poor got those legal advocates through OEO, a government program launched in response to the increasing volatility of urban blacks at the ballot box and in the streets. In other words, it was the turbulence of the poor, not their sophistication about legal in-

equities, that produced the legal gains—the integrative concessions—that Rosen and I agree upon. It is precisely because such concessions make some difference in the life conditions of the poor that I am for "direct group action as a route to political effectiveness."

As for Health-PAC, it is a group I admire. It generates a steady stream of information and critical analysis of health systems, and sometimes manages to draw some public attention to health issues. But that said, why is Health-PAC being raised up as an example to defend advocate planners?

Health-PAC's kind of radical analysis of public programs is all to the good (and writing analyses is usually all we can think to do). But that is not to say that information and analysis will turn the world around; it is not the correctness of the slogans which makes the Establishment tremble. When the National Welfare Rights Organization seizes the mike, their militancy over health issues may be more important than whether they demand "More Ambulatory Care Facilities" or "A Family Doctor for Every Welfare Family." The slogan will not determine government's health-care responses any more than NWRO's "demands" for a $5500 guaranteed income determined government's welfare responses. It was not NWRO's "demands" which led to rising welfare expenditures and proposals for welfare reform. But trouble in the cities did, and the turmoil NWRO created in welfare centers compounded that trouble.

No one would quarrel with Rosen's ideal that "community groups need to participate in these decisions, to understand the stakes and to decide what is in their own best interest." But ideals aside, the reality is that the poor get responses from government mainly through disruption, and the question to ask about any radical analysis we contribute is whether it stimulates action or mutes it. If instead of agitating in welfare centers NWRO groups had devoted the last few years to studying guaranteed-income plans to decide "their own best interest," they still would not have gotten a guaranteed income, or the welfare dollars they did get.

But it is into such intellectual exercises that advocate planners are leading community groups who are aroused by bad housing or the threat of redevelopment, and the planners generally lack even the virtue of a radical outlook. Study and analysis, of course, are only the first step, a step to be followed by endless meetings and lengthy negotiations with innumerable bureaucrats. Years later, there may be a plan, but, as sad experience shows, one that will probably never be implemented. Meanwhile, no housing is built and no mass-transit facilities are added, and with leaders absorbed in bureaucratic minuets there may be no force left in the community to press for them. That is my argument, and Sumner Rosen did not answer it.