THE SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH TO URBAN POVERTY:
AN EXAMINATION OF THEORY AND APPLICATION

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SANDRA A. SOAMES
ADVISOR: DR. WHITNEY GORDON

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
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I. "POVERTY AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT"—AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL ACTION PHILOSOPHY

The social action approach makes certain assumptions about the nature of poverty, the nature of our society, and possibilities for social change. Although action philosophies may differ in the specifics most social actionists agree on these basics.

The social action orientation implies that poverty is fostered by the interaction of internal and external factors—both the individual and his society. In actual practice, however, the emphasis is mainly society's impact on the individual.

This analysis of our social and economic order finds that something is very wrong in the system. Our society's institutional structure and social relations prevent the poor from adequately shaping a fulfilling way of life.

Poverty is seen, then, as more than an economic deficiency, but a social deficiency as well. Some aspects of the "culture of poverty" are used to describe a life style, a way of looking at the world. Social action thought finds the powerlessness and separation of the poor as stemming from faults in the opportunity structure of the society.

The social actionist is optimistic about changing the hostility and indifference characteristic of the poor. He feels

their behavior is not a deeply entrenched life style, only a response to life's realities. He sees social action as a movement working on causes, effecting real change in systems and people.

In this view, a person is considered poor when he is excluded from participation in the decision-making processes of society. The goal becomes "social engagement," with channels open for influence on social policy and procedure.

Almost by definition, social action is oriented to local government. Social actionists argue for change at the local level, emphasizing that the urban environment is the setting in which poverty grows. They see the quality of public services provided the poor to be primarily shaped by the character of the city government.

For accomplishing "social engagement" the target of social action efforts is the adult poor and the orientation is the present. If the adult poor gain a sense of power over their lives through social action, they will not perpetuate the defeatism of the "culture of poverty." They will, themselves, be no longer poor!

To accomplish wider participation of a low-status group requires social change, a shift in the status quo. For institutional structure to thus move, to accept change, requires pressure. Social action thought sees this movement for change as a political problem, requiring power.
Because of the vested economic and political interests that would be threatened by power shifts the social action approach advocates a conflict model of change, rather than a consensus model.

The strategy for accomplishing the goal of "social engagement" is community organization or, as some have termed it, community mobilization. This approach would include organizers going into poverty communities, agitating for change, and helping the poor to form groups to press the local power structure.

In contrast to traditional community organization, based on cooperation and consensus of the total community, the social action approach advocates pressure tactics. Brager says in this vein, "The tendency of social workers to emphasize the amelioration of conflict and the reduction of tension, while often appropriate and helpful, may, in effect, also discourage lower-income participation. With issues flattened rather than sharpened, differences minimized rather than faced, there may be little to arouse the interest of a group that already lacks the predisposition to participate."\(^2\)

The social action approach is essentially a militant one, taking much of its force from the civil rights movement and the present youth revolt. Its direct action tactics, its hostility toward the power structure, its political overtones,

and its belief in equality and participation in American society all are indicative of its origin. 

Within this approach one finds, of course, the roots of the Marxian system and the radical tradition of the 1930's. These influences, although coloring social action philosophy in some measure, stay in the background. Much of Marxian thought is rejected, but the impact is still pervasive and real.

II. THE POOR--A PORTRAIT

The life style of the poor has a direct bearing on the possibilities for social action efforts in urban poverty areas. The characteristics of the poor, the value orientation preferences of the poor, and the concept "culture of poverty" will be considered here as they have real relevance to a social action interpretation of life style.

A. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POOR

Certain characteristics of lower class life that relate to participation by the poor in the larger society have been found by several writers in the field. Frank Riessman, Oscar Lewis, and Albert Cohen, for example, all delineate somewhat

3"Lower class" as used in this paper means the lower-lower class, the poor.
similar traits.  

Cohen's study, "Characteristics of the Lower Blue Collar Class," has a fairly comprehensive list of these characteristics. A preference for the familiar and a reluctance to meet new situations, limited participation in voluntary associations, a lack of planning, a sense of powerlessness and deprivation, cynicism and distrust, and extrapunitiveness all have importance in relation to the poor's lack of social engagement. Cohen sees the lower class person as able to deal with authoritarian relationships either by compliance and obedience or by toughness and refusal to surrender autonomy.

S.M. Miller characterizes lower class life as crisis life, generating a vicious circle. That personal instability may be source as well as consequence of difficulties compounds the problem.

Miller further says that the low-paid, irregularly employed individual does not develop an image of the world as predictable


5Cohen, pp. 176-179.

or as something with which he can cope. The control and direction of events is seen as almost unattainable. He cites Maslow in this regard, feeling that those who have had a stable past are more able to manage in disastrous circumstances than those having considerable prior deprivation. When the previously deprived person is unemployed for a long time, "bouncing back" becomes quite difficult.

The importance of the self-concept of the poor is emphasized in a study of children. These poor Negro and white children attending the first and fifth grades in New York City were not only handicapped in regard to living conditions and opportunities for learning. They were found to be handicapped psychologically as well. The proportion of unfavorable self-images increased from 55% in the first grade to 65% in the fifth grade. The children drew unfavorable comparisons between themselves and their classmates.

S.M. Miller, recognizing the similarities in lower class life and the many differences, has devised a system of categories that classify various groups of the poor. His four categories—the stable, the strained, the copers, the unstable—

9Miller, Social Research, p. 3-13.
are based on a weighting of cultural, familial, and economic factors. Miller and Riessman, in order to distinguish the lower class (the poor) from the working class, use occupational and familial instability as criteria. Familial stability as utilized in these categories means at least coping with one's problems.

The stable group, in Miller's classification, is somewhat below the poverty line and has a basically stable family unit. The strained poor are those with an unstable family situation but relative economic security. The copers are those who somehow manage to maintain family stability in the face of great economic insecurity. The unstable poor, the most deprived, are in both familial and economic terms unstable and insecure. However, even within this most unstable group, degrees of strain and stability are present, "...not every family is a 'hard-core case' or has a 'multi-agency problem.'"

Miller goes on to make a further division, into three groups—the chronic poor, the pre-chronic poor, and the sub-chronic poor. The chronic poor are defined as long-term dependents, part of whom are "hard-core" cases. The pre-chronic


See also Frances Piven, "Participation of Residents in Neighborhood Community Action Programs," Social Work, XI (January, 1966), 76. She uses the occupational base, the unskilled and irregular worker, in talking about the poor.

11 Miller, Social Research, p. 12.
poor, the high risk group, are seen as moving toward chronic dependency although they have not yet reached it. The sub-chronic poor have, in Miller's view, a greater ability to deal with their problems, although many evidences of dependency exist.

One might note, then, that Miller's last analysis places great weight on evidence of dependency. Perhaps he is saying that dependency as it results from occupational and familial instability is the most significant factor.

B. VALUE ORIENTATION PREFERENCES OF THE POOR

While many have sketched in the characteristics and lifestyle of the poor very little has been done on the basic value orientation preferences of this group. Schneiderman's study is one attempt to learn about this area. 12

His approach was to determine a level of consensus among chronically poor adults on basic values and examine the difference between this and the consensus of the general community. The client group was a group of relief recipients and the professional group, social workers and teachers.

Schneiderman used the analysis of the Kluckhohns in identification of value preferences dominant in U. S. culture. The

dominant value orientations in our total culture they find to be individualism, a future-time orientation, a striving for mastery-over nature, an activist or doing orientation, and an evil-but-perfectable (optimistic) view of human nature.

The preferences of the professional group, the social workers and teachers, coincided with those of the general community; both showed a statistically significant level of consensus on all five value preferences. The client group, the relief recipients, showed a statistically significant level of consensus on three of the five value preferences.

For the client group, on the orientation to nature and super-nature there was an almost equal preference for harmony-with and subjugation-to alternatives. Each was preferred at a significant level to mastery-over nature. There was also a significant preference for present-time orientation rather than future-time. On the focus of life the difference was again statistically significant, the client group choosing the being rather than the doing alternative.

On man's relation to other men the finding for the client group was less strongly inclined toward individualism than the professional group. Individualism was most often chosen, but the other choices combined ran a close second. On the view of human nature there was a failure to find optimism in the client group. The result was a statistically non-significant preference for pessimism over optimism.

Schneiderman concludes from this that the chronically poor
are inclined to subject themselves to or live in harmony with their environment rather than attempting to master it, living then for today and not planning for tomorrow. They focus on free expression of self, a "being" orientation, rather than a success-oriented, "go-getter" style of life.

C. THE "CULTURE OF POVERTY"

Various attempts have been made to move from a delineation of characteristics and value preferences of the poor to a concept that would give order and, more importantly, explain why these characteristics and value preferences exist. The concept "culture of poverty" has significance here, as a way of thinking about poverty. Further, there are implications for the social action approach to the "culture of poverty."

Lewis in his book Five Families first introduced the idea of a "culture of poverty." He says, "Poverty becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a subculture of its own. One can speak of the culture of the poor, for it has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members." 13

In The Children of Sanchez Lewis looks at the concept more closely. 14 As an anthropologist he considers the term "culture" appropriate because, in his view, poverty is a way of life passed down from generation to generation. Not only is it a lack of economic resources or a state of general deprivation and disorganization, but to Lewis it is something positive, too. He sees 13Lewis, Five Families, p. 2.

its defense mechanisms and structure as making for persistence and, perhaps more important, for stability-producing factors in its members. Lewis limits his "culture of poverty" to modern urban nations, those with a class stratified society and technology.

Gladwin, another anthropologist, also deals with the "culture of poverty." He limits his usage, however, to the multi-problem family and considers it a sub-culture. His basis for argument is that patterns of thought and behavior deviate in some manner from those of the larger culture. He finds two attributes to be shared by multi-problem families—a sense of powerlessness about events (a lack of control in regard to the social environment) and a feeling of pessimism about the future.

Schneiderman, from his study on value orientation preferences of the poor, finds supporting evidence for a "culture of poverty." He defines a cultural or subcultural group in this connection as "...one whose behavior is patterned in accordance with either a completely or partially different ordering of value orientation preferences from that of the dominant group." 16

Lewis argues that poverty is passed on from generation to generation because of its adaptation and need-fulfilling functions. Orshansky substantiates this view, noting that the single factor most conducive to the growth of poverty and dependency is poverty itself. She cites here a recently released report. 15

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17 Lewis, The Children of Sanchez, p. xxiv.
study of ADC cases from a national sample, "more than 40 percent of the mothers and/or fathers were raised in homes where some form of assistance had been received at some time." 18

Miller and Riessman also support this view by citing studies showing the bulk of individuals with the lower class lifestyle to be the children of lower class people. 19 Schneiderman sees the poverty lifestyle as having important survival value and acculturating youth in a way that psychologically makes moving out of the poverty culture very difficult. 20

Lewis finds a universal poverty culture, one that transcends all national boundaries. Drawing from his Mexican studies he compares the poor of the U.S. and Mexico and finds similar patterns of thought and behavior. He also cites the group of oriental Jews in Israel as one with many similarities to the U.S. and Mexican poor. 21 Schneiderman, in this connection, says his findings suggest that the "culture of poverty" transcends differences in ethnic and national origin. Since all the client group subjects were American born and eighty percent of the total identify with the majority ethnic and national group, this evidence counters the view that only the Negro or Puerto Rican poor


20 Schneiderman, Social Work, p. 16.

21 Lewis, The Children of Sanchez, p. xxv.
live in a "culture of poverty." 22

Harrington in The Other America also develops the "culture of poverty" concept. 23 He sees it as a way of life and a system that produces a certain type of person—an apathetic one. 24 S.M. Miller calls Harrington to task for over-generalizing and extending the term beyond the intent of its originator, Oscar Lewis. 25 Harrington writes, then, as if all the poor are bound by apathy and ineffectiveness. Miller emphasizes the differences among the poor and says, "In particular, what has been taken as typical of the most unstable bottom group has been generalized to apply to all who are poor...." 26

Miller counters this view of a passive poor by citing instances in which they were able to unite for effective action. In all fairness to Harrington, however, one must note his purpose as expressed in the Appendix to his book. He says, "If my interpretation is bleak and grim, and even if it overstates the case slightly, that is intentional. My moral point of departure is a sense of outrage...." 27

Shostak, generalizing from the Philadelphia experience with a poverty program, also challenges the picture Harrington draws of a defeated and disorganized group. He finds a signifi-

22 Schneiderman, Social Work, p. 16.
23 Harrington, The Other America.
25 Miller, Social Research, p. 20.
26 Ibid., p. 22.
27 Harrington, The Other America, p. 171.
cant correlation between youthfulness and distrust, middle age and guarded hope, old age and quiet apathy.\textsuperscript{28}

Herzog, in looking at the concept, finds a lack of basic core giving it an identity as a culture. She says that a sense of belonging to an entity with institutions, behavioral patterns, shared beliefs, and a feeling that this is good are essential for a culture. Sharing and participating, the positive aspects, she finds absent from the concept. Her own feeling is that "sub-culture" might be a better term. She puts it, "...the lifeways of the slum dwellers represent, not a system of culturally evolved patterns, but rather a series of disjointed, pragmatic adjustments to exigencies perceived as unpredictable and uncontrollable."\textsuperscript{29}

Haggstrom finds characteristics of the poor to be situational patterns and beliefs and challenges the assumption that they represent a general way of reacting in all situations.\textsuperscript{30} While he is combatting the idea of a \textit{monolithic} "culture of poverty" he notes a subculture developing when habits of dependency have become internalized over time.\textsuperscript{31}

Schorr says that the attitudes of passivity, cynicism, and an orientation to the present associated with the "culture of


\textsuperscript{29}Elizabeth Herzog, "Some Assumptions About the Poor," \textit{Social Service Review}, XXXVII (December, 1963), 394.


\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p. 217.
poverty" are a realistic response to the facts of poverty. He notes that these attitudes are important to a person's psychic survival. He says that the attitudes attributed to culture may be traced to material deprivation. Schorr's suggestion is that within the "culture of poverty"...there may be negative attitudes that can be turned to constructive uses and affirmative attitudes that are unrecognized.

Some of these writers, then, stress the longevity of the "culture of poverty," its distinctive attitudes, and its functional value for the poor while others emphasize that the lifestyle is basically a response to the reality of the situation. That these two views can, together, illuminate the problem and are not opposed is shown by Bloom et al. In looking at the culturally deprived child, they put it this way, "Such passivity and defeatism (and possibly, hostility) stemming from need deprivation is learned by the child from both (italics mine) the realities of living and from the parents who, through their daily behavior communicate a general attitudinal orientation."

In sum, the significant factor in relation to the social


33 In my own experience with the poor in Kansas City, Missouri, this phenomenon was observed. One woman was always hoping the situation would change, but she was always losing out. As a result, she was doubly unhappy; perhaps it would have been better had she not hoped at all.

34 Schorr, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, p. 221.

action approach is the "culture of poverty" interpreted as response to the reality of the situation. *Poverty in America: A Book of Readings* in considering the concept stresses the theme of adaptation to the present environment. The individual, then, is characterized as being socialized into an environment fraught with uncertainty and deprivation, both economic and otherwise. The socialization is not so much into a certain set of beliefs and assumptions about life, but one of exposure to the realities of a poverty-ridden existence. The implication is that attitudes and value reflect differentials in life chance, differentials in opportunity. If life chance is the issue the suggestion follows that change in the opportunity structure is needed.36

III. POWERLESSNESS, THE POOR, AND SOCIAL ACTION

Central to the social actionist view of poverty is the concept of powerlessness. Social actionists look at the characteristics of the poor, their value orientation preferences, their whole life style and see a lack of power over the conditions of life as the crucial factor, coloring their response to the world. Powerlessness, the psychological phenomenon, is interpreted as nurtured by powerlessness, the political reality.

Psychological powerlessness is discussed by Seeman as one type of alienation. He defines it as, "...the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he

seeks."  

Schorr in "Policy Issues in Fighting Poverty," finds alienation to be the condition of the poor in our society. He emphasizes that in Europe this is not the case and says that alienation need not accompany poverty. A necessity as he sees it is to understand in what circumstances the poor feel and are accepted as a part of society.  

Ohlin, in writing about residents of deprived urban areas, notes that they experience a deep feeling of social isolation and a lack of the knowledge, skill, and power to alter the conditions of their lives. He finds their interests to be largely unexpressed and unmet.  

Ross relates psychological powerlessness among the poor to mental health and its consequences for the person. He quotes Jahoda in this regard as making the first criterion for mental health in our society the "active adjustment or attempts at mastering of his environment, as distinct both from his inability to adjust and from his indiscriminate adjustment through passive acceptance of environmental conditions."  

The Schneiderman

study (p. 9) with its finding on adjustment-to and harmony-with nature as orientations of the poor has relevance here.

Haggstrom in "The Power of the Poor," points out that people tend either to attack or to retreat from forces controlling their lives which they cannot affect or escape. He thus interprets the hostility and suspicion as well as the indifference of the poor. Being powerless and having unmet needs the poor are dependent on those who can meet their needs. The feeling of dependency and powerlessness leads to a pervasive hopelessness. He expresses it this way, "If extent of self-realization is a measure of personality development, then dependency, which erodes self-realization with the loss of self-responsibility, is a measure of personality inadequacy."41

Haggstrom, finding psychological powerlessness to be rooted in the social structure, goes on to stress the lack of scope for action open to the poor. Society usually furnishes this scope to a person by childhood socialization and by social standing. Childhood socialization should give him confidence and hope; his social standing should make it possible for him to act. Lower class socialization and social standing, however, do not do this.42

One social actionist calls political powerlessness the "deeper" issue, behind the dependency and the structural defects in our society that produce and maintain the "culture of poverty." 41 Haggstrom, "The Power of the Poor," Mental Health, p. 212; 42 Ibid., p. 212-214.
Anderson, thus, sees the objective lack of power as a basic cause of the motivational problems of the inner city.\(^43\)

W. Astor Kirk phrases it, "To be powerless is to be unable effectively to participate in shaping the social policies of the community, private as well as public."\(^44\) Kirk, then, as well as Haggstrom and Anderson, finds powerlessness in the social situation to be the basic cause of psychological alienation and dependency.

Objective evidence of change in the social situation (the opportunity structure) would be the solution as these social actionists see it. The reality of life for the poor would be much different since participation in shaping city decisions would be possible. As a result, the poor would not be prey to those who would exploit them—whether city government, landlord, or storekeeper. They would have power to effect change in the injustices that are part of life for them.

The presence of power for the poor, brought about by this change in the social situation, would have behavioral and, eventually attitudinal, consequences. Clark supports this view in saying, "The data reveal that desired changes in the behavior of individuals and groups can be brought about by a change in the social situation in which they are required to function."\(^45\)

\(^44\) W. Astor Kirk, "Poverty, Powerlessness, the Church," Concern, VII(May 1, 1965), 10.
The result would be the demise of the damaging psychological consequences of the "culture of poverty." Haggstrom notes, supporting this point, that when a poor person becomes involved in successful social action feelings of helplessness lessen.46

In relation to involving the poor in social action the characteristics of the poor and the various groups of the poor have implications. Piven, in this vein, sees social action as tailor-made for the poor. She points out that, because it is a simple and dramatic method, protest requires less personal and economic stability than sustained participation in an organization.47 Perhaps, then, the more stable would provide the lasting leadership for the organization, with the less stable swelling the ranks when aroused on a particular issue.

S.M. Miller, looking at the groups of the poor—the stable, the strained, the copers, the unstable—stresses the crucial role of interaction among them. He suggests that political mobilization can happen where an unstable group lives with a more stable group. The more stable, then, would provide strength and control; the spur would come from the stable, the strained, and the copers and spread to the unstable.48

Miller observes, also, the advantage of the merging of economic (class) factors with ethnic (racial) factors. The clout

47 Piven, Social Work, p. 78.
48 Miller, Social Research, p. 18.
of the civil rights movement and its effect on the average Negro makes this segment of the poor more accessible to a social action approach.49

IV. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION—ALINSKY AND THE NEW LEFT

The social action approach in practice can best be evaluated by looking at the orientation of two action models (that of Alinsky and the New Left). The differences and common points of these community organization methods can provide us much insight into the goals and achievements of social action.

Frank Riessman, in looking at social action groups, characterizes the tenor of an Alinsky-style and a New Left-style approach.50 He finds implications for action in the basic philosophy of the two.

For differences he sees the moral and uncompromising orientation of the New Left set against the pragmatic, "hard-nosed" tactics-focus of Alinsky. The New Left, being oriented toward an idealistic position, is inclined to support its position even though it is sometimes tactically unwise. While Alinsky stresses power and organization the New Left seems to repudiate power and what it calls "bureaucratic" organization.

For points in common both action styles function outside the governmental and professional system; both appeal to the ali-

enated poor, stress citizen rights and participation, and are neighborhood-based. Both feel the poor need an outside organizational force. Both emphasize a conflict model of change and stress direct action techniques.

In the group he terms the "New Left" Riessman includes Students for a Democratic Society, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and Northern Student Movement as having the characteristics he describes. In the Alinsky-style group he would have to include not only those communities organized by Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, but those groups that follow his philosophy.

Kopkind, in writing of SDS attempts at organizing the poor, agrees with Riessman's analysis. He finds SDS organizing as not so much political action as psychological process. With the stress on spontaneity and group decision-making the result is something like a showcase "grass roots" democracy, reflecting their idealistic position. 51

A significant note of this idealism is that "They hate the system of manipulation and authoritarianism more than they dislike the injustices it produces." 52 Thus, because of their distrust of any program and their anti-leadership and anti-strategy attitudes they have difficulty in building a movement that will endure.

51 Andrew Kopkind, "Of, By and For the Poor," The New Republic, CLII(June 19, 1965), 17-18.
52 Ibid., p. 18.

For contrast, I add my departure from this group. I would emphasize the injustice, the hurt in the lives of people, more than the system.
Schechter, a former organizer for NSM, shows these characteristics in writing a critique of Alinsky. He finds the Alinsky-style organization to be basically one of social control. He sees it as control because spontaneity is inhibited through its formal structure and because its "bureaucracy" reinforces dependency on the organizer.53

The difference in approach is evident in the relation of the block clubs or neighborhood councils to other groups. Alinsky's goal is to set up a larger organization with representation from the neighborhood groups and other organizations in the community. This larger group he sees as more effective, wielding more influence as a "voice" for the people of the inner city.54 SDS organizing, however, would reject this "organization of organizations." It would put emphasis on the autonomy of the smaller unit, the block group.

Alinsky sees these organizations as filling the important function of tying the alienated poor to the community and the city, in effect bringing them back into identification and participation in American life.55 SDS efforts, by contrast, do not seem quite so concerned with bringing the poor back into identification and participation in American life. As alienated from society themselves, they do not present an image of being part of the mainstream.

55 Ibid., p. 211-212.
SDS shows its own alienation from middle class society by rejecting liberal allies. Liberals are seen as having as much stake in the status quo as conservatives and equally as biased against change. Gans in "A Rational Approach to Radicalism" takes SDS and SNCC to task for "cutting down" those politically closest to them. He feels that they take pride in being "illegitimate" in a sense and outside the major society.

In contrast to the New Left's rejection of liberals, Alinsky gets much of his support from them. In several communities where he works church groups have sponsored him, e.g., Rochester and Kansas City. In an article in the Methodist magazine Together Alinsky says, "The only major institutions fighting for justice, decency, and equality in America are the churches. The labor unions are no longer doing it." He makes such statements as this, attempting to play to the groups that can give him the support he needs.

One advantage of Alinsky over SDS organizing is this liberal support. Although Alinsky has been called "Marxist" and a "troublemaker" the very fact that churches support him helps the image. SDS, however, lacking this support, finds itself vulnerable. The witch hunt in Cleveland which forced SDS to with-

58 Fred Kiewit, "Alinsky To Lead Poor In Drive Here," Kansas City Star (August 1, 1965).

draw support from the tenants' council it organized is one ex-
ample of this.\textsuperscript{60} Alinsky insists on a broad base of support by
various organizations in any community before he will consider
coming in. In this way he is able to defend himself against
any such charges.\textsuperscript{61}

Another difference of an Alinsky-style organization is
that of personnel. Men, organizers backed by a heavily finan-
ced organization, are able to wield more influence than students
with little experience and little organizational support. When
financial support and organizational backing are present, how-
ever, experience may well be the decisive factor. I observed
this in Kansas City organizing, in which as students we were to
do the preliminary work before the Alinsky organization came in.
The reception we received by the poor was colored by the inex-
perience of our group. In their eyes we were "just students,"
even though we had had training and had the necessary organiza-
tional and financial support.

In looking at the Alinsky experience in organizing, over
the past thirty years and involving more than two million people
in forty-four communities, Riessman finds two major objectives.
In contrast to the SDS "psychological process" Kopkind talks a-
bout, Riessman sees the eradication of local grievances and the
development of independence and dignity on the part of the pow-
erless and dependent poor.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60}Kopkind, \textit{The New Republic}, p. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{61}Kiewit, \textit{Kansas City Star}.
\textsuperscript{62}Frank Riessman, "Self-Help Among the Poor: New Styles of So-
cial Action," \textit{Trans-action}, VI (September-October, 1965), 34.
The Alinsky-style organizing effort concentrates on issues and attempts to organize around them. Alinsky puts it this way, "The community organizer digs into a morass of resignation, hopelessness, and despair and works with the local people in articulating (or 'rubbing raw') their resentments." He "...agitates to the point of conflict." 63

In my opinion, Alinsky's orientation is a strange mixture of tough-minded realism and moderate idealism. On the one hand, he stresses power--the power of money and people, and especially that of a group of people. He stresses the self-interest and resentment of the poor, feeling that these factors can motivate them to attack the power structure. He feels one must be "hard" when fighting social evils. 64

On the other hand, he talks about the attainment of human dignity and strength as his goals for the poor. He considers the community organizations he establishes purposeful tools in education, understanding, and attitude-change. He emphasizes what community organization can mean for the poor themselves, not just what issues they can win. He demonstrates great faith in people and in the democratic process. 65

Riessman feels the Alinsky model has demonstrated its effectiveness in practice. 66 That social action and community organ-

63 Riessman, Trans-action, p. 34.
64 H. Black, "This is War," Saturday Evening Post, CCXXXVII (January 25, 1964), 60.
65 Alinsky, Reveille.
66 Riessman, Trans-action, p. 37.
ization can be accomplished in a low-income community shows that, given an alternative, the poor are not apathetic. That it is relatively easy to find indigenous leadership in poor communities is significant also from the standpoint of effecting change.

V. SOCIAL ACTION, PRESSURE GROUP POLITICS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In the social action view if there is to be any impact on society, gaining power for the poor is essential. Through use of this power, then, change in the opportunity structure can be effected. An examination of the role of social action methods in relation to pressure group politics and social change can be insightful here.

Social action philosophy sees present in our society two groups, two communities--the affluent and the poor. Haggstrom expresses it, "The stronger of the two communities has traditionally acted to alleviate the results perceived to be undesirable without changing the relationship of the two communities or ending the division into two communities." Miller and Rein find that the war on poverty is only perpetuating this division of communities. "The primary thrust of the war on poverty is to improve the opportunities of the poor by changing them rather than the institutions which shape them." 67

Social actionists thus advocate changing this relationship between the two communities--the affluent and the poor. The emphasis is on power for the poor, to help them alter their own lot rather than plans and programs imposed on them.

In thinking about power Haggstrom says that added power is usually secured only by persons and institutions who at present hold power. As he interprets it, the amount of power tends to increase in a modern industrial society. Because of this he sees hope for the poor gaining power, although they are at a great disadvantage. The implication here, then, is that those already in power would have to share it. 69

The social action instrument for gaining power for the poor is that of organization of the poverty community. As to the stance of these community groups Cloward says, "...strategies of conciliation and coalition will not bring the poor into the mainstream of American life." 70 He sees it as necessary for minority groups to win acceptance by the majority by a militant approach.

Taking militance (a conflict model) as a "given" for social actionists in gaining power, the question arises as to the role of the social action group. Is its role to be that of a political group or that of a pressure group? The divergent elements of these two role conceptions here have wide and pervasive implications for strategy, for how a social action group performs:

Schechter, in referring to Alinsky-style organizing, says, "In most cases, power means the ability to be recognized or have the organization's ideas taken into consideration. It usually

70 Cloward, The Nation, p. 58.
does not mean the ability to be the decisive force in developing, controlling and carrying out programs. It usually does not mean electing organization members into public office or being the actual decision-maker within the community." 71 Schechter finds pressure group activity as not enough. He calls for the community organization to be the "decisive force," the power in the larger community. In essence, he advocates a political group, with its members taking over "the system" rather than working outside it. The end-product would be revolutionary social change. One might note the idealism of this approach, that the community organization is to override other interests and become the force in the total community, even though it represents a minority.

Riessman, on the contrary, sees the role of social action as an important element, a motor force in social change within the present political structure. He stresses the change in equilibrium that it brings about, as a crisis or opening around which other elements in the change process can operate. He relates this function to our total society, finding that the demands of other social movements in American history have been absorbed into the mainstream of politics. His point is that social action does not possess long-term properties. 72 Elsewhere Riessman points to the valuable role that both Alinsky and the New Left serve. 73 As critics of poverty program developments and as outsiders demanding more for the poor,
such groups can force the political center to move further to the left and provide those working within "the system," e.g., in the government poverty program, with more leverage. He considers social action, then, as a pressure group. Concurring with Riessman, Miller and Rein also speak of the effectiveness of social action as a pressure group.\textsuperscript{74}

Riessman notes that social actionists, being outside "the system," can deal with more touchy areas than can governmental sponsored projects.\textsuperscript{75} In this connection, one should note the experience of Mobilization for Youth and the Syracuse School of Social Work, both attempts to use governmental funds to subsidize a militant social action approach.\textsuperscript{76} Because federal money was used to help the poor gain power, that development ran headlong into conflict with the local power structure in each case. The result was a disbanding of the program.

In this connection, Riessman points out that Alinsky, although tactics-oriented, shows little understanding of how a social action group can relate to "the system."\textsuperscript{77} Alinsky in


\textsuperscript{75}Frank Riessman, "Mobilizing the Poor," \textit{Commonweal}, LXXXII(May 21, 1965), 285-289.

\textsuperscript{76}George Brager, "Organizing the Unaffiliated in a Low-Income Area," \textit{Social Work}, VIII(April, 1963), 34-40.


Edwin Knoll and Jules Witcover, "Fighting Poverty and City Hall(Syracuse)," \textit{The Reporter}, XXXIII(June 3, 1965), 19-22.

\textsuperscript{77}Frank Riessman, in Letters to the Editor, \textit{Trans-action}, III (November-December, 1965), 2.
"Behind the Mask," seems to assume that the government can take a direction far from the mainstream of public opinion. He says the federal government should grant money to independent social action groups for organizing the poor along militant lines.\(^7\)\(^8\)

The limits of governmental support are very real one, depending on compromise and majority will. Cohen characterizes the need for consensus in a federally-financed community action program, "Even as it seeks to involve the poor, it must not jettison other groups and institutions whose support and involvement are essential if the society is to sustain a massive program."\(^7\)\(^9\)

In contrast, social action efforts can be somewhat more independent. They can avoid a compromised stance in some measure by getting their support from churches, foundations, unions, and other private interests and organizations. Here, too, though, policy is influenced.

Brager points up the necessity for financing and support for lower-class action groups. Spontaneous formation of these groups is not seen as a live possibility considering the characteristic lack of organizational participation by the poor. The result is that established, middle class organizations must provide the necessary impetus. The pervasive influence of the sponsoring group is thus an inevitable limiting factor to independence. Ohlin says, "Whenever existing organizations are used \(^8\)\(^0\) Saul D. Alinsky, "Behind the Mask," XLVII (November, 1965), 7-9. \(^7\)\(^9\) Henry Cohen, "Community Action: Instrument of Change," American Child, XLVII (November, 1965), 20. \(^8\)\(^0\) Brager, Social Work, p. 40.
to sponsor indigenous social movements the primary interests of
the sponsoring organization tend to affect the selection of mem-
bers, the form of the organization, the specification of objec-
tives, and determination and control of the implementing activ-
ities." 81

The presence of conservative groups within these private
organizations and the division that can result shows the basic
problem in attempting to function as a pressure group. To be
"outside the system" is partially a vain hope, because finan-
cial and moral support is always needed. The withdrawal of sup-
port from Rochester and Kansas City churches financing Alinsky
indicates the dilemma of any group attempting to move out in
this area. 82 The result may well be fragmentation of effort,
some organizations willing to risk loss of support and others
not willing. A concentrated nation-wide program on the part of
any private organization would be fraught with many problems.

Pressure group tactics, however fragmented and on a small
scale, may be the only way social action can attempt to move for
change. Gans, in considering this, says that this is the meth-
od American society has used in the past to effect social change.
He says that minority interests have influenced policy in the
past and that the poor can also do this. In his view, exploit-
ing the majority's desire for order by threatening it and by
playing to its moral sentiments can force necessary reform. 83

81 Ohlin, "Issues," The Slums: Challenge and Response, p. 185
82 Ridgeway, The New Republic, p. 16.
83 Alinsky, Together, p. 45.
The approach Gans feels best for social action would emphasize short-range change. His reason is that basic or system-wide change would be unrealistic, considering the many interest groups in our society.

VI. CONCLUSION

In regard to social action theory four critical dichotomies have been discussed in this paper: the "culture of poverty" as a persistent, internalized life style and as a response to the realities of poverty, the tenor of the Alinsky and the New Left approaches, the question of a political group or a pressure group effecting change (from inside or outside the system), and the question of system-wide or short-range social change.

The social action approach has been interpreted here basically in regard to its philosophy. In those instances where social action practice has been examined, it has been done in relation to that philosophy.

A fruitful area of inquiry would be that of social action in practice. At the present time, however, the evidence in this area is fragmentary and, more important, quite partisan.

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