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Movement Television

Early this year, a program aired by PUS sought to tell the story of the 1900s **War on Poverty**. Produced by Blackside, the company famous for making the civil rights documentary "Eyes on the Prize, this five-hour series takes us back to the days when **poverty** was a nationally debated issue.

The principal virtues of "The **War On Poverty**" are that it presents **poverty** with a human face, provides an interesting and lively background to what President Lyndon Johnson told us was "an unconditional **war** on **poverty** in America," and demonstrates in this era of anti-government sentiment that government programs can work for people. Documentary footage from the mid-1940s to the 1970s is balanced by interviews with those who lived and were active then. The voice-over provides arresting data on who the poor were (a majority white; between 30-40 million in number: 13 million children; concentrated in Appalachia, the Deep South and urban ghettos, barrios and Northern enclaves of whites) and how they came to be that way (mechanization of coal and cotton, the loss of unskilled factory jobs in the North, isolation and, for minorities, discrimination).

The role of the "antagonist" in the series is played by people who believe that the best thing government can do for the poor is leave them alone or push them into the marketplace with demands that they act as responsible individuals instead of dependent recipients of government largesse. By its stories and facts, "**War**" demonstrates that, for a time, government did help, and [hat, indeed, the problem often was not that it did too much, but that it didn't do enough.

Another "antagonist," however, is omitted: radical critics of the **War on Poverty** who objected to its use of government-sponsored citizen participation as a substitute for real efforts to create

employment opportunities, develop affordable housing and provide quality education, child care and health care. The government, these critics argued, acted as competition to organizing and **social** movements of the early to mid-'60s.

Whatever the documentary's virtues, they are undermined by this central omission and, I reluctantly say, by the distortions the series presents. "The debate over what happened is as important now as it was then," says "**War's**" narrator in the opening moments. But it presents only one side of what was a hotly contested argument within the **social** movement against **poverty**. As a result "**War's**" omissions invite repetition of central mistakes that contributed to the defeat of the **War On Poverty** and the continuation of America's scandal of **poverty**.

I was intimately involved in the activity and debate of the period: organizing public housing tenants on New York's Lower Eastside when Dick Cloward was conceiving Mobilization for Youth and Michael Harrington was writing *The Other America* — and talking with both of them about the emerging issue of **poverty**; on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee when the battle over the Child Development Group in Mississippi raged; involved in four major urban-renewal battles in neighborhoods of my home town, San Francisco; serving as co-coordinator of the Farm Worker Union's first boycott; directing three organizing projects during the period, in Kansas City, for Saul Alinsky, in San Francisco's Mission District where we won control of the local Model Cities program, and another that won control of a substantial amount of the Law Enforcement Assistance Act's funding for neighborhood involvement in crime control. The period covered is a time I know well.

A Confusing Story

"**War**" selects Mississippi, Newark (NJ), Appalachia, rural California and the National Welfare Rights Organization to tell the story- of various programs that comprised the antipoverty efforts of the time: Head Start, VISTA, Community Action, Legal Assistance and others. In the course of the program, we see and hear from poor people and Presidents, including eloquent statements by Kennedy and Johnson proclaiming that America must end **poverty**. **Poverty** program administrator Sargeant Shriver succumbs to political pressure, but wants to do the right thing. A labor organizer remembers the program as "determined, dramatic and sweeping." It was about economic opportunity, says one Johnson Administration official, "and that says it all." The mellifluous voice-over says the Community Action agencies "...would give the poor the power to run their own anti-**poverty** programs."

Mississippi is one of the scenarios of struggle around the **War On Poverty** described in the documentary. The series recalls how Head Start official Polly Greenberg told educator/psychologist Tom Levin that with her money he could start 15 or 25 early childhood education centers instead of the five he envisioned coming out of the Mississippi Summer Project's Freedom Schools. It recounts how Levin accepted her offer and became director of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). He had doubts, saying some civil rights movement people were worried about being compromised by accepting federal funding. Greenberg's assurances satisfied him. Marian Wright, then a CDGM leader (now Marian Wright Edelman, head of the Children's Defense Fund), reports that "you have to have small

steps of hope," and was for accepting the funds. But CDGM created a reaction in the bastion of segregation.

Shriver, responding to congressional pressure -particularly from Senator John Stennis — demanded that CDGM move its headquarters from Mt. Beulah — a civil rights center in Mississippi. Wright accepted Shriver's demand while Tom Levin led the staff fight against it. Though cut buck, CDGM survived, but later was undone when moderate Blacks and whites in Mississippi formed a rival organization and obtained federal recognition.

What are we to make of this story? The civil rights movement people and those who wanted to accept the federal money were both right and wrong. The CDGM did help thousands of children, and provided good jobs for hundreds of lower-income Blacks who became its teachers and other employees. But it was not a substitute for the civil rights movement -and when activists tried to make it that, they invited the disaster that was to follow. This confusion of program and power was pervasive at the time, but "**The War on Poverty**" does nothing to clarify it.

From Mississippi, "**War**" goes to Newark. A resident remembers. "I believed that program was going to solve our problems." The narrator says, "By 1965, Johnson's **War On Poverty** seemed to be winning." But she's talking about two things, neither of which was directly related to the **poverty** program. Economic expansion was providing new employment opportunities, and aid was coming from Head Start. Medicare, Medicaid and other health and education programs -most of which were not run by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the official **War On Poverty** agency.

Soon thereafter, the narration resumes, "Under Community Action the poor would design and run local anti-**poverty** programs." Certainly not Medicare or other large Great Society programs. Much smaller amounts of money were available for the local Community Action Program (CAP) agencies — the ones that embodied "maximum feasible citizen-participation." In the series, residents say that there was "real hope in our community," and the "federal government was saying you can have as much responsibility as you want." The politics of the CAP agencies is revealed by a Johnson Administration official, who describes the strategy of the time: "This is how we'll get these people engaged in politics...[to] put heat on local officials who aren't doing anything..." and later, "We were bypassing the mayors, and they didn't like that."

Missing Questions

Should "poor people" have relied for their power on a strategy designed in Washington, without their participation, to bypass elected local officials who were overwhelmingly from the political party that adopted this strategy in the first place? This question is not asked. (Had it been asked in the 1960s, much could have been learned from the experience of Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s Farm Security Administration — which was friendly to farm workers, small farmers, and rural Blacks in the South, and was killed by the onslaught of agribusiness and the Dixiecrats.)

The series goes on to document how, as the political realities surrounding the **War on Poverty** came to the fore, "Black power," "community control," and "economic development" strategies began to emerge. Adam Clayton Powell, condemning the realities, says, "They don't want poor people to have the right to fight city hall." More exactly, what "they" (typically white "ethnic" mayors and local politicians) didn't want was for the Feds to bypass them with patronage money that Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Appalachian poor whites and others might use to challenge the local patronage machines. The series does little to point out that rights and the power to effectively exercise them are two different things. Powell shared in the illusion of government-sponsored citizen participation. What the **War on Poverty** sought to do was create for inner-city minorities a functional equivalent of what urban machines had done for white ethnics in earlier generations. But the earlier experience was in a context of an expanding economy with many jobs for the unskilled and formally uneducated. Even at that, real economic gains in many cases only came as a result of union organizing and progressive legislation. Patronage and the urban machines were as much about containing change as they were about facilitating it.

The Newark story ends with the election of Ken Gibson, among the first of what became a generation of Black mayors. The political machine that elected him was the one funded by the **War On Poverty**: the United Community Corporation (UCC). This "victory," like its counterparts across the country, allowed Black mayors to preside over the continuous withdrawal of blue-collar jobs, investment money and the middle class from major cities. Further, it contributed to the polarization of white ethnics and people of color, since they were fighting over an ever-shrinking pie. Neither these consequences nor any alternative approaches are examined in the series.

"**War**" then shows a Newark resident describing how an occupying white National Guardsman (the Guard was called in to quell the "riot" or "rebellion" — which word you used depended on your view of it) shook in fear as some small Black children stood around him. "I knew then that we had the power." she says. Are we to conclude that some poor, white week-end National Guardsman is "the enemy?"

"What We Should Learn from the '60s..."

From cities to rural America, the series continues its theme. Shriver and the Appalachian Volunteers are heroes in the struggle against strip mining, "[VISTA's] partnership with local people led to laws regulating strip mining." California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) is presented as a strategic arm of the Farm Workers Union — without a word about the often bitter conflict between Cesar Chavez's union and the lawyers. Nor is there any mention of the fact that Chavez turned down a government grant to run a health-care center for farm workers because he understood the dangers it represented to the growing union. When he later sought to get the grant because the union was deep enough in its leadership not to be smothered by it, he was denied funding. An annoying comment suggests that the film's producers think the lawyers were more important than the union. "The grape boycott," the narrator tells us, "cost growers thousands of dollars." Actually, it cost them millions — which is why it ultimately beat

them. A CRLA lawyer says they were "seeking to empower the poor...[and that they] empowered hundreds of thousands of people." He concludes with the political lesson the series wants us to get: "What we should learn from the '60s is that we should do it again..." That is a serious mistake. What we should learn from the '60s is that no one is "empowered"; rather, power must be independently asserted through autonomous people's organizations.

In its last hour, "The **War On Poverty**" traces the rise and fall of the Welfare Rights Organization (WRO), a membership organization made up mostly of AFDC recipients and their allies. Even this independent organization is cast in the language of "participation in government," as if the WRO leaders who are interviewed are themselves part of the government's **War On Poverty**. WRO's fight with Nixon's welfare plan is ably told, but why is it in this series? Had the producers wanted to contrast independent organization and the government-sponsored variety, WRO could have served as the vehicle to do this. But the presence of the WRO story only serves to further confuse "**War On Poverty**" and the **war on poverty**. For other reasons, principally that the constituency was too narrow and the fight too big, WRO never had a chance, though the struggle it waged is even more relevant today than it was then.

Other Voices

Who does the documentary exclude? Some Black militants and radicals argued against involvement in the participation schemes of the **poverty** program, calling those on its payroll "**poverty** pimps." In Lowndes County, Alabama, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers developed the independent Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and it later took over the county. But none of its organizers or leaders are interviewed about that experience. There is nothing about the Philadelphia African-American clergy-led organization, headed by Rev. Leon Sullivan, that used the boycott to win jobs for unskilled and other unemployed Blacks in that city. Unfortunately, its dramatic energy was later contained in the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) — a funded program.

The Black Panthers represented yet another approach to ending **poverty**, but nothing is said about them. In San Francisco, an independent, largely Latino, community group, the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO), with a budget of \$40,000, stopped urban renewal, then variously called "Negro removal" or "poor removal" by those who fought its bulldozer approach to ending slums. In Newark, the **Poverty** Program's UCC had a budget of seven-and-a-half million dollars. The Chicano movement (such as La Raza Unida, Crusade for Justice, The Alianza and the Brown Berets) is invisible. So are others such as the Black Lung and Brown Lung Associations and Miners for Democracy. Even when the Welfare Rights Organization story is told, there is no mention of organizer Wade Rathke who left WRO to start the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Rathke thought it important to try to organize interracial "majority constituency" organizations of the poor and working class. While the **poverty** program faded, ACORN survived and grew — yet it gets no mention in this film. What was loosely called "The Movement" (with the exception of WRO), and the point of view it represented, are simply absent from "**War**."

One of the principal critics of the **War on Poverty's** citizen-participation scheme was Saul Alinsky, whose article, "The **War On Poverty**: Political Pornography," enraged what Alinsky called "welfare colonialists." (He accused Shriver of having a "zoo-keeper mentality" — in reference to his attitude toward the poor.) Alinsky was a radical critic, not a conservative one. By 1964, he had demonstrated the capacity of independent community organizing to develop Black power, though he never favored or used the term. The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) was widely commented on at the time. The FIGHT organization, in Rochester, NY, brought national attention to the discriminatory hiring practices of Kodak -and won a job training and placement agreement from the company. An attempt in Syracuse at the University's **social-work** school to use **poverty**-program funds to pay for an Alinsky organizing program was grounded as Shriver capitulated to local political pressures.

Alinsky had a running verbal battle with many of the characters in this film, including staff of the Ford Foundation (one of the television series' major sponsors). Alinsky's disputants ranged from whites in The Establishment to Blacks outside the power structure, some of whom he called "Uncle Talk-Toughs." By the mid-1960s, Alinsky was receiving support from almost every major mainline Protestant denomination, as well as from Catholic Dioceses across the country. In 1970, Catholics acting through the Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry (CCUM), many of them influenced by Alinsky's work, persuaded the US Catholic Conference to establish the Campaign for Human Development. Twenty-five years later, it is America's most effective "**war on poverty**," providing grants typically of \$30,000-\$60,000 to independent, grassroots, community-organizing efforts that have won billions of dollars in resources from government, banking and corporate reforms. These organizations also create a sense of self-determination for their communities, train and develop the gifts and talents of tens of thousands of people and serve as permanent mechanisms to hold institutions accountable to the interests of their low-to middle-income members and constituents.

Why aren't these other soldiers in "**War**"? Whether they were right or wrong is not the main point. It is as if they didn't exist. How are we to learn from the past if we cannot hear, see and evaluate the debate that then went on?

Power

Dick Boone, then director of the Citizens Crusade Against **Poverty** (a community-laborliberal-religious-civil rights movement advocacy group), says, "people had been led to believe they would be given resources... they were going to be given power... and power is not given" (emphasis added). Boone, the consummate insider who also served as a Bobby Kennedy aide, recognized that his own effectiveness on the inside of the Establishment was directly related to the power of the independent, autonomous movements and organizations that developed outside the framework of government programs. Resources can be given. Power cannot. It is asserted, claimed, contested, demanded hut never given.

The illusion of "empowerment" is based on the belief that power can be given. The labor organizer who was so impressed with the **War On Poverty** unwittingly tells us more about the problem of a labor movement that became dependent on its allies in the Democratic Party

instead of relying on its capacity to mobilize its membership for political and economic action. When "**War's**" narrator tells us the program would let poor people plan their own destiny, she ignores her earlier observation that the program couldn't be about jobs because that would be too expensive — requiring a politically unacceptable tax hike. This exception wasn't decided by the poor, it was decided by the politicians.

In discussing CDGM's relationship with Shriver, Marian Wright says that CDGM was scrapped by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) because it wasn't "controllable... [but was] responsive to the needs of the poor." What poor people needed then and now is a voice they control — one that is theirs, not simply "responsive to them." The government could not, cannot and should not be expected to provide that. That is what autonomous, independent organizations, not administered or controlled citizen-participation "components," do. The former operate within the framework of the First Amendment. The latter operate in the framework of "guidelines" — whether set by government, foundations or anyone else.

Another way to view "**War**" is as a narrative of the problems that arise from participation in a program someone else designs for you -though that is hardly the intent of the program's producers. As was painfully learned, what can be given can be taken away. Most destructive about paid citizen participation was that it undermined the real thing — just as company unions and management-run employee participation schemes undermine real unions. Whether that was its intent or not is, again, beside the point. Organizer Fred Ross, who Cesar Chavez called his "secret weapon," described the problem of organizing in the **War On Poverty** climate. "People would ask me how much they were going to be paid to go to a hoard meeting," he once lamented to me.

Teddy Roosevelt's aphorism about the use of power, "walk softly and carry a big stick," was turned in the **War** on Poverty days into "talk loudly and carry a toothpick." The media were a willing accomplice. The more outrageous militant rhetoric became, the more it made the evening TV news — fitting the stereotypes of reporters, and feeding the stereotypes of viewers. That the loudest talkers also had almost no base in the poor communities for which they claimed to speak was conveniently ignored. To pay attention to this lack of credibility would have meant a real analysis of the fact that "participation" in the **War On Poverty** was a cruel hoax. Most poor people knew it: participation rates in local anti-**poverty** board elections were sometimes as low as one percent and rarely reached 10 percent.

"**War**" confuses "resources" — job training for the unemployed, Head Start for children, affordable housing for low-income families and the elderly, education programs for students, health care for those who otherwise wouldn't have it and economic-development projects, as well as the jobs for those who delivered these programs — with the people-power vehicle needed to bring the pressure necessary to get such programs in the first place, and to press for more. Administered or controlled participation within programs may enhance their effectiveness. It may train public administrators who may later become elected officials. Head Start and OEO-funded childcare-center parent boards clearly demonstrated this. But these are not the kind of independent or autonomous participation that represents real power.

Many activists of the time failed to make or knowingly ignored the distinction. The result was that they were absorbed. Those with integrity quit when they realized what was going on or, as people working "inside the system," sought to support and strengthen those on the outside. But there were too few on the outside to make a significant difference. The questions raised here were heatedly discussed at the time — but one has to look someplace other than at "**War**" to find that out. Fortunately, today's new generation of local independent organizations and the regional and national organizing networks of which they are a part are far stronger than anything existing in the 1960s.

Why?

Could the makers of "**War**" be unaware of these other voices? No serious research of the period could fail to reveal the debate.

How are we to understand what is going on here? One way is to socially locate the producers in the context of liberal and moderate foundation money, the moderate PBS and the desire to respond to conservative critics. Faced with the daunting task of satisfying these institutions, it would be very difficult to deal also with radical critics of the **War on Poverty**. The Blackside solution was to simply ignore them.

The effect is to make the unsophisticated viewer think the choice is between the welfare state and the marketplace. The series' advisers, sponsors and supporters seem to be part of a moderate/liberal elite who think that something they call "activist government," which operates independent of **social** forces putting pressure on it, needs to work in behalf of the poor who are, in this view, unable to initiate work in their own behalf. They can "participate" in the work (that's what it means to say that organizations should involve them, empower them, be "responsive" to them), but they and their leaders cannot be expected to design and run their own organizations or hire their own organizers to assist them in doing it.

What qualitatively separated Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a host of others less well known from the government's **War On Poverty** was that those leaders and the people with whom they worked acted to bring pressure to bear on governmental and business institutions from an independent base of power — not as an administrative and of the government. In the days of the **War On Poverty**, a Washington, DC-group of liberal program planners and administrators (some of them even called themselves "radicals") moved from government agency to government agency (President's Commission on Juvenile Delinquency, National Institute on Mental Health, Office of Economic Opportunity, Model Cities, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and so on), writing what they thought would be the magical guidelines that would "empower the poor." They always lost, moved on to another agency and began the process again. They were playing the wrong game in the wrong place at the wrong time. It didn't work then; it won't work now.

Instead of telling the full story and providing us with the debates of its time. "The **War on Poverty**" series is, at best, a reminder to the country that public **policy** once did respond to

the problems of the poor by doing more than just blaming them. Unfortunately, this piece's point of view is so limited that it is better understood as part of what the liberal government-in-waiting hoped would help push Clinton and the Congress to replicate the earlier effort. Its timing couldn't have been worse. The present Congress is not likely to approve any bill from the President that tinkers with **poverty** by offering administered or controlled participation.

Were that all the Republican majority did, I would commend them. They are doing more, much more. Their punitive attitude toward the poor, imitated by too many Democrats, has been and is now being written into public **policy** in state legislatures across the country, and adopted in an increasing number of court decisions. The Congress is now following suit. But what we should learn from all this is not what "The **War On Poverty**" seeks to teach us. We should learn that the work of building a strong and independent labor and community organizing movement is the best shot we have at slowing and ultimately reversing the present trends that reward the rich and punish everyone else.

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