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Ideas of Reform: Like Buddhist Souls

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In 1967 Martin Rein and Peter Marris wrote an important book exploring the projects leading to the development of community action and related programs of the Great Society. In it they describe reform as a diffuse process in which preferences clash and evolve. Purposeful reform rarely has the intended consequences. The selection below is taken from the concluding remarks of their book, The Dilemmas of Social Reform, *copyright University of Chicago Press, and is reprinted here with permission.*

We have tried to interpret the evolution of community action as a particular illustration of the strength and weakness of the American process of reform. This process rests on a faith that the continual interaction of competing interests and principles will sustain a progressive enlargement of the possibilities of their fulfillment. So, confronted by the dilemmas of social choice, reform does not seem most characteristically to search for a balance. Instead, it takes up each of the incompatible principles by turn, and campaigns for it as if no sacrifice of its alternate were entailed. And this seemingly irrational refusal to come to terms with the fundamental dilemma may, after all, be more productive than accommodation. By repudiating whatever balance has been struck, it continually challenges society to explore new ways of meeting the problem. It raises the dilemma to a higher level of sophistication, where there is both more variety of endeavor, and more coherence, though each still inhibits the other. The debate goes round and round, raising the same perennial issues, but the context of argument changes.

This conception of reform presupposes that by giving expression to all the contending purposes of human society, they will stimulate a progressive enlargement of the possibilities of their mutual accommodation. The gravest danger is therefore deadlock and stultification. What began as a response to challenge hardens into complacent temporizing with all manner of urgent and unresolved problems. The task of the reformer is therefore to upset the balance in the best way he can, to set the process moving again, and keep it from once

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more coming to rest. The vitality of progress depends upon imaginative intervention, and to ensure this the right to innovate is diffused throughout society, and new ideas meet with a ready response and are alertly spread.

The innovators within the Ford Foundation, the President's Committee [on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime], the Office of Economic Opportunity . . . had an influence which enabled them to initiate policies [and to innovate new social programs of community action], but not to control their execution. They had, therefore, to shift the emphasis of their intervention as the thrust of any one idea began to lose its momentum. The success of their prescriptions could itself become an obstacle, threatening to petrify the challenge of the moment as a new orthodoxy. This manner of intervention depends on a sense of timing — on a sensitivity to the inarticulate frustrations which can be crystallized as a force for change; and on an imagination which, as the will to seek new solutions droops under the weariness of hackneyed slogans, can find fresh concepts to liberate ideas. It exploits the enthusiasm of fashion to disrupt whatever equilibrium seems to menace the vitality of imbalance. It is deliberately one-sided and inconsistent, because it is consistently manipulating a complex and subtle process to the same end. No one reformer, perhaps, ever manages quite such ruthless disloyalty to his own ideas. But as one or another finds the crucial phrase, and commands the center of attention, the movement of reform as a whole swings with him. And as it takes up each new slogan, it still contains within it all those that went before, never repudiated but only laid aside.

But even if this faith in a creative imbalance is ultimately justified, it can only make progress by exploring new forms of accommodation. Unless a movement of reform can institutionalize its latest purpose, and bargain for the kind of readjustment it believes necessary, it adds nothing to the stock of insight and experience. The process only works so long as the revolutions of fashion leave behind a growing resourcefulness. Ideas of reform, like Buddhist souls, are chained to a wheel of reincarnation, striving at each rebirth to grow towards beatitude. The reformers in the Ford Foundation and the President's Committee [who were engaged in early experiments in community action] did not simply generate an idea one year, and, perceiving its shortcomings, generate another the next. As they took up each aspect of the problem, they tried to establish their innovations within the structure of community life, as a permanent expression of a need. Here they ran into much greater difficulties. For, while they had the resources to propagate new lines of action, they lacked the power to ensure that a viable form of organization would result.

The more widely the freedom to initiate change is spread, the more difficult it becomes to control the outcome. In this lies the complementary weakness of reform in America. All the money, energy, talent, and maneuver that goes into a movement of reform may achieve little more than a glossy prospectus and a distinguished committee. So the inventiveness of community action tended inevitably to dwindle progressively towards its realization. The prospectuses

were mostly less than the imagination which inspired them, the organizations less than their prospectus, the programs less than the organization intended. A vision of opening opportunities for millions of maltreated youngsters might end with a dozen children in a makeshift nursery school, or a class of seamstresses learning a poorly-paid trade for which they were already in demand. The weakness of the movement lay in the impossibility of supervening in the competition of interests among which its innovations had to win their place.

The dilemmas of community action illustrate, not only the problems of reform in America, but also, perhaps, a universal aspect of the process of deliberate change. Since every society is informed by a great variety of ideals and interests competing for expression, it compromises them all and can fully satisfy none. And since the means to resolve any social issue cannot be divorced from the ends they serve, this fundamental incompatibility reappears at every level of discussion. Any policy implies the reasons by which it could be refuted. In appealing to the values that justify it, it must disparage others that are also valid, and whatever balance it strikes enjoys only a grudging and provisional acquiescence. To overcome inertia, and dramatize its own necessity, reform seems to proceed most characteristically by polarizing the issue, and insisting upon the side of the debate least honored in the prevailing order. It disrupts the equilibrium between ideals which, at their extremes, are mutually irreconcilable. Because of this, the movement of reform tends to be circular, continually redressing the balance by returning to preoccupations against which the last reform was itself a reaction. But although its insight is deliberately partial, its purpose is not simply disruptive, but to provoke a new accommodation. Only revolutions aim to disallow finally the interests and values which oppose them — and even then, since they cannot abolish the complexity of human society, the change is usually less absolute than they proclaim.

Where it is successful, each reform institutionalizes new interpretations of a need, enlarging the possibilities of reconciling social purposes in an upward spiral. And the whole process can also regress — as in a grossly unjust society, where a privileged minority initiates a cycle of repression and counteraction, by which the chances of any reconciliation are more and more narrowly confined. We do not mean to suggest that no issues are ever finally resolved. Changes in technology or advances of knowledge can revise the context of argument so radically that an issue becomes irrelevant. The claims of some interests or values dwindle into insignificance, or are finally repudiated. But the process we have tried to distinguish seems to characterize reform in every society, wherever the possibility of change is accepted.

Societies differ, not in the need to revise progressively their social arrangement, but in their emphasis upon the complementary aspects of the process — disruption and reintegration. Totalitarian societies tend to guard jealously the power to enforce their periodic reconstructions of a workable compromise, and persecute between whiles any criticisms of their arrangements. When they

stultify, it is for lack of courage or means to challenge the existing order. The heretics, driven underground, only recover their influence when frustration and gross inefficiency become so obvious that orthodoxy is no longer tenable, and government startles its citizens by a sudden change of direction. American society, so liberal in its tolerance of criticism and innovation, suffers from a corresponding impotence to enforce any reintegration. It tends to stultify in statement, which can be as frustrating and grossly inefficient as community orthodoxy. The hundred flowers flourish, but they do not make a garden. Each ideology represents an extreme choice between competing principles. One ensures the power to determine how the aims of society are to be reconciles, at the cost of preempting all initiative of reform, and so inhibiting the creative energy of its people. The other gives this energy full play at the cost of leaving it to expend itself in muddled, abortive effort. As de Tocqueville observed "Democratic liberty is far from accomplishing all its projects with the skill of an adroit despotism . . . but it produces what the ablest governments are frequently unable to create: namely an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it and which may, however unfavorable circumstances may be, produce wonders."

The most difficult task of an American reformer is somehow to make the circumstances more favorable, without inhibiting this diffuse and restless energy. He is misled when he mistakes the show of activity for the progress it should stimulate; or when, impatient with his frustrations, he attempts to capture the process itself, and confine it within his own rationalization. When Saul Alinsky accused community action of "political pornography" — a spurious pretence of intervention — or the Cahns accused CPI of seeking to monopolize all initiative, they pointed at the failings to which American reform is most vulnerable, even if they were in too much of a hurry to suppose the worst.

Can the process of reform we studied, however skillfully it is manipulated, ever radically improve the chances of the poor? And if it cannot, will Americans prefer to hold to their conception of the way issues must be resolved, even at the cost of ineradicable injustice? Is there a better way? It seems at times that equally liberal but more centralized societies like Britain achieve a less frustrating compromise between diffuseness of innovation, and the power to make it effective. And yet there are long years when Britain seems to possess neither the adroitness of a despotic regime nor the abundant energy of America: the government cannot master event, yet it preempts too much of the initiative to leave any independent reform much scope to innovate. Is the necessity of continual adaptation drawing all societies toward a similar conception of authoritative but self-critical planning?

But these questions lead beyond the scope of our analysis. Here we have tried only to illustrate . . . something of the nature of reform in American, in the hope that it may help those who seek a more humane society to discriminate their strategies.

MASSCAP and the CAA Role in Advocating for Change

Joseph Diamond

The Massachusetts Association for Community Action, Inc. (MASSCAP) and its twenty-five member agencies act as advocates for change to meet the purpose articulated in the legislation creating them, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964: "It is therefore the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening, to everyone, the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity." This language synthesizes the notion of equal opportunity with the goals of self-sufficiency by asserting, for the first time in law that poverty exists and that it is possible to eliminate it.

Today there are over 1,000 community action agencies in the United States and state community action agency associations in almost every state. Here in Massachusetts, our community action agencies serve approximately 400,000 people through advocacy and a variety of programs including, but not limited to, workforce development and education, IT access and training, small business creation, early child care and education programs, , nutrition programs, senior services and youth programs, emergency food assistance, health services, homelessness prevention, affordable housing creation; home heating assistance, and weatherization assistance.

Our role in advocating for change is also based, in part, on the purpose of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), the source of our current core federal funding: "to provide assistance to States and local communities, working through a network of community action agencies and other neighborhood-based organizations, for the reduction of poverty, the revitalization of low-income communities, and the empowerment of low-income families and individuals in rural and urban areas to become fully self-sufficient." Each MASSCAP member agency brings a set of beliefs, relationships, talents, and experiences as we, together, marshal our collective resources to work for changes in state and federal policies to help vulnerable people, to strengthen

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families, to build communities, and to foster economic self-sufficiency. We speak for the people we serve as we empower them to make their own way in the world. As Joseph Berry, reminds us in *A Voice for Nonprofits*, like legislators, nonprofit agencies "speak for, act for" and "look after the interests" of those who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to carry out many of the tasks of advocacy, such as appearing at legislative hearings.

While many of our advocacy efforts are focused on state policies and administrative regulations, in our efforts in the federal arena we are joined by our fellow organizations in other states. As the head of the Minnesota Community Action Association put it, "associations play a fundamental role in advocating for change. It is our role to put the 'action' back into community action." The Executive Director of the Washington State Community Action Partnership, himself a leader of a recent initiative petition that tied the state's minimum wage to the cost of living, pointed out "we learn about the effectiveness of our programs, which allows us to be even better advocates — to speak for the people we serve. We should be the kind of advocates that can make it so that people who work full time do not have to live in poverty, and that we in community action, over time, have less and less to do as more and more people become self-sufficient." This perspective takes into account the creative tension between administering programs and advocating: one informs the other.

The programs we administer are based on those detailed in the CSBG Act: emergency services; employment and education services; housing search; income management; nutrition services. All programs and services are directed toward achieving self-sufficiency. In recent years our member agencies have expanded their activities in new and exciting directions, but always with the goal of improving the lives of those we serve. (In the article that follows, Canavan details some of these new directions.) Our advocacy efforts, then, are informed by our ability to document the outcome of our work, one client at a time. Each community action agency is required to report on the outcomes of its programs. With these data, MASSCAP and the other state associations can assess how they have changed lives, how their approaches may need to be changed, and how federal and state policies as well may need adjustment.

The changes MASSCAP has advocated for are united by a common goal: to improve the lives of low-income and working people. Often collaborating with allied organizations, we have developed and/or supported several initiatives in the past several years. A partial list includes the following:

- Working with several allied organizations and electric utilities, MASSCAP advocated successfully to include protections and savings for low-income and working people in the law that deregulates the supply of electricity;
- MASSCAP identified a flaw in the method of distribution of the Workforce Training Fund that restricted the flow of these resources to community based organizations: after MASSCAP developed legislation and met with

the state board that manages the fund, Workforce Training Fund resource distribution began to include small community based organizations;

- Working with allied early care and education groups, MASSCAP has advocated for additional resources for early care and education programs that help low-income and working families;
- As part of its overall workforce development effort, which includes policy work and research, MASSCAP is part of a Small Business Advisory Council set up as part of the 2003 economic stimulus package;
- Recently, MASSCAP, working with several state legislators, successfully advocated for state resources to be allocated for fuel assistance.

In addition to these actions, we support the adoption of the Massachusetts Self-Sufficiency Standard, issued by the Women's Union, which would change the way we think about income and what it takes to get by in Massachusetts today. Our support for this standard, like our other advocacy efforts, resonates with our role as agents of change and is based on our knowledge of the lives of the people we serve, an understanding of what programs and approaches work, and our obligation and ability to speak for our clients.

The following vignette is an example of MASSCAP's advocacy efforts:

> It was close to midnight and the Massachusetts House of Representatives was about to finish debate on the governor's vetoes of some amendments in the FY2000 budget. The last veto to be considered was a provision supported by MASSCAP that would help thousands of low-income and working people cover the cost of heating their homes.
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> With only ten minutes to go before midnight, an unanimous House override restored the provision that allows households earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level to receive federal fuel assistance, also known as the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program. This action was immediately followed by the Senate vote overriding the governor's veto.
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> The override followed weeks of lobbying by MASSCAP's legislative agent, its executive director, and members. The overall goal of the amendment to raise the eligibility level for fuel assistance, was to bring the program to more people, recognizing that as the cost of commodities like fuel increases, households with limited incomes are less and less able to cover that cost. The underlying conviction was that the federal poverty level no longer reflects the income it takes to get by.

The change in that specific policy has helped thousands of people across the Commonwealth, and our support for it speaks to the comprehensive nature of our role in advocating for change. Based on our unique understanding of the people and communities we serve, we develop and advocate for, often working with allied organizations, changes in broad social policies or in discrete elements of programs that will either directly help the people we serve achieve self-sufficiency or help us to better serve them.

The origin of community action agencies rests in their role as advocates. We are committed to that mission and to that role — fighting for vulnerable people across the Commonwealth, speaking for them, representing their hopes and dreams until the time that they realize those dreams.