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## Challenging the Policy Establishment

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# Challenging the Policy Establishment

*Alice O'Connor*

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*Among the many challenges community action faces after four decades, none cuts more deeply into its central mission than the political and ideological transformation reflected in the rise of the conservative right. Based on a potent combination of grass roots and institutional organizing, coalition-building, ideological mobilization, and inter/intra party politics, the right-wing takeover has empowered a political and policy establishment that is hostile not only to the ideas that animated the War on Poverty but to the very idea of public action against social and economic inequality. While this transformation has kept community action on the defensive, confronting the challenge will require reanimating—and realizing—the vision of community action as a vital force in progressive movement building and politics.*

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**F**rom its very beginnings in the 1960s, the federal Community Action Program was the cause of great fanfare: first as the most exciting and innovative, soon thereafter as the most controversial of the many programs launched by the Office of Economic Opportunity as part of the War on Poverty. With federal officials variously keying to its role as a “change agent” in service delivery, local governance, and—in inevitably—political mobilization, CAP was also beset by competing visions of what the program was, and should be, all about. Was it to be, as longtime community activists were insisting, about organizing poor people to change the way political power and economic opportunities were distributed? Or was it to be about reorganizing the institutions society had already established for integrating poor people into the existing opportunity structure?<sup>1</sup>

In practice, to be sure, this was rarely a clear cut, either/or proposition, as “systems change” advocates encountered fierce political resistance to their efforts to reform local service bureaucracies, and political organizers built coalitions around the demand for better and more responsive services in poor

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communities. Nevertheless, the competing visions of community action were based on very different ideas about the nature of “the poverty problem” and the role of poor people in solving it. The tensions between them were played out in deep divisions among poverty warriors in the Johnson administration and within the OEO. They surfaced, too, in the frequent tug-of-war between community-based activists and federal administrators over just how much local autonomy would be entailed in “maximum feasible participation.” And those tensions are replayed today, in what are often seen as competing demands for scarce funding resources as well as in historical retrospectives that fault CAP for having been either too radical in its challenge to the status quo, or not radical enough.<sup>2</sup>

But from the perspective of our current-day policy and political climate, what is truly notable about the vision animating the Community Action Program forty years ago is less its unresolved tensions than something its advocates shared: the confidence to position CAP as a kind of internal good to a policy establishment that was fundamentally *liberal* in its core commitments, to civil rights, to expanded opportunities, to ending poverty in their lifetimes, and especially to using the resources of the federal government to complete, as Lyndon B. Johnson acknowledged, what remained the “unfinished business” of New Deal liberalism. Whether by shaking up resistant, often racist, local administrators or organizing welfare mothers to march on city hall, local community action agencies — with OEO funding — would push the too-often politically cautious and tentative liberalism of what then constituted the mainstream to live up to its own hard-won, yet-to-be-realized commitments.

### *A Spirit of Confidence*

Although clearer in retrospect than at the time, it was this spirit of confidence in and challenge to a more expansive liberalism, far more than any internal disputes about how to end poverty (such disputes were, after all, about an extraordinary goal, *ending poverty in the U.S.*), that captured the essence of Community Action and that ultimately determined its political fate. During the early years of the War on Poverty, that fate took the form of administrative action to rein in the more overtly political, confrontational activities of local agencies along with various experiments in self-governance that threatened to upset existing power structures. Soon thereafter, however, it took a more dramatic turn. For of all the economic and social transformations that have made the work of community action more of an uphill battle over the past four decades, none has been more devastating than the demise, if not outright reversal, of even the War on Poverty’s incomplete embrace of social and economic justice as the legitimate, achievable goals of collective *public* action and *public* policy.

The reasons for that demise are many; not least among them the failure of the Johnson administration to devote adequate resources in the first place, or to anticipate the devastating consequences of its other war, in Vietnam. But

even more significant over the long term has been the rise to power of a political and policy establishment that is based on altogether different, ideologically conservative premises, that is openly contemptuous of the very idea that glaring inequalities can, or should, be redressed through purposeful economic and social intervention, and that is bent on repealing not only the expansive liberalism of the Great Society but the entire twentieth century of progressive and liberal social policy.

### *The Market as Moral Agent*

Having gained considerable political leverage by positioning itself as a counterweight to “big government” liberalism, this right-wing conservative policy establishment soon revealed itself to be far more than a merely reactive force. Indeed, as has become breathtakingly evident during the administration of President George W. Bush, it brings to the table a proactive, not to mention radical, agenda that aims — with little regard for internal consistency — at once to *reconstruct* social policy on an ideological foundation of “free-market” individualism and property rights, and to *remoralize* social policy through heavy-handed, government-sanctioned interventions promoting “traditional” values. Over the past three decades it has built an extensive network of philanthropic, research, and media organizations devoted to a reform program based on the equally inconsistent combination of privatization, deregulation, and “devolution” on the one hand, and law and order authoritarianism on the other. While in power, it has proved quite willing to use the instruments of “big” government to achieve its economic as well as its moral ends. And within these venues of government and civil society, the conservative policy establishment has devoted itself to continuous, and crucial, ideological work. Thus, beneath the apparent inconsistencies within conservative social policy lies an overriding idea that links cultural to political economic transformation by treating “the market” not simply as an unquestionable force of nature but as itself a moralizing agent. In such a world view, income and wealth disparities are reflections of individual merit, separating the deserving rich from the undeserving poor. Personal redemption — through enforced work in the low-wage labor market — is the corrective to social disadvantage. And the role of government is not so much to step aside as it is to attend to the market’s needs — or, more precisely, to the needs of those who stand to gain most from a political economy restructured to serve the now-unquestioned “free market” imperatives of ever-lower wages and ever-higher corporate profits.

Of course, the ascendancy of the conservative policy establishment is by no means due to ideas and ideology alone. It represents the culmination of a long-term process of right-wing movement- and coalition-building, through which corporate and social conservatives have made common cause — first in their common opposition to an overweening, overtaxing, social engineering “liberal elite,” but more importantly in their common commitment to the bedrock principles conservatives have claimed as their own. It rests on the work of

organizers targeting issues at the local and state as well as national level, and reframing them as referenda on such presumably conservative values as self-reliance, family responsibility, and Christian morality. It cynically plays on the bundle of cultural anxieties and, especially, racial animosities that are often folded within the term “backlash” — even as it exacerbates the economic insecurities that fuel such anxiety and animosity.<sup>3</sup> It relies on a sense of perpetual embattlement, and a demonology that has crystallized into a tightly-wound, historically inaccurate narrative of cultural dissolution that, though often dated from the 1960s, has in some tellings been pushed back to the Progressive era and thence to the Enlightenment itself. At the same time, the conservative policy ascendancy is nowadays stoked by an equally inaccurate story of budding redemption and free-market triumph.<sup>4</sup>

### *A New “Debate”*

That the right has made considerable progress in its crusade to reconstruct and remoralize social policy is nowhere more evident than in the utter transformation of what now passes as the poverty debate, which at this point has not even the pretense of being about getting people out of poverty — let alone about social and economic rights, entitlements, or justice — and turns instead on how to get more poor women off welfare, into the labor market, and married to the fathers of their children. It is evident in the ongoing transformation of what, after the “end of welfare,” the evisceration of labor rights, the abandonment of public or affordable housing, and the creeping privatization of income and health protections for the elderly, remains of the New Deal/ Great Society system of social protections. It is evident in the near-complete erosion of the progressive income tax — in reality and as an idea — along with a dramatic upward redistribution of wealth. It is evident in the parallel derision of public education, available to all on an equal basis, as a democratic ideal. And it is evident in the effectiveness with which conservatives have been able to rewrite the War on Poverty as a narrative of abject failure, even as they misappropriate the language, even the concepts of community action — “empowerment,” local self-determination — for their own purposes of devolution and faith-based privatization.

But the progress of the conservative social policy agenda is equally evident in the extraordinary degree to which all of these transformations have been accommodated by a nominally neutral, or nonpartisan, or centrist political and policy establishment that now willfully eschews the term “liberal” and all that is associated with it, and that in the process has capitulated to the ideological premises of the right. Here again the so-called debate over poverty and welfare is case in point number one. It is a debate in which poverty has ceased to be the issue altogether and in which the twin evils of “dependency” and single-parenthood are the targets of attack. It is a debate in which the more “progressive” position is to resist the imposition of even more stringent work requirements on already overextended welfare mothers and in which the

elimination of millions of eligible people from public assistance is celebrated as a major policy achievement. And it is a debate in which critical voices have been marginalized if not effectively silenced by self-styled centrists who deem them unrealistic or irrelevant.

It is thus within a profoundly transformed, basically regressive policy environment that community action, forty years later, finds itself constantly having to backtrack and to refight political and ideological battles its original architects thought (however fleetingly) had been won. And it is thus that moving ahead with community action's core anti-poverty agenda will require first breaking the stranglehold and then, more importantly, constructing an alternative to what the conservative policy establishment has wrought. That project of reconstruction is formidable, requiring as it does a broad-based mobilization of political and ideological resources to reframe and recapture the poverty debate. But it is also a project to which community action brings critical attributes and experience.

Among them is a perspective on poverty that, grounded as it need be in both lived experience and policy analysis, is positioned to frame the issues in a far more compelling and realistic way, and in particular to shift the focus from individual failings to the conditions of extreme economic insecurity, political disfranchisement, and skewed prosperity that poor people, along with increasingly broad segments of the once-stable working- and middle-classes, struggle against in their everyday lives.<sup>5</sup> It is also that perspective from which community action challenges the cultural mythology of free enterprising self-reliance and moral redemption with which the right has imbued the end of welfare and the experience of working in the low-wage, low-benefit labor market.

### ***Community Action as Political Agent***

Especially important, though, community action is situated to move beyond the ultimately self-limiting, if necessary, politics of opposition to recapture that part of its own historical legacy that the shift to the right has effectively submerged. That legacy is embodied in the vision of community action as a political agent, acting locally but connected nationally and globally, to forge the multi-racial and cross-class coalitions that can generate and mobilize around positive change agendas. It has been reinvigorated in recent years in community-based campaigns for living wages, affordable housing, environmental justice, adequate health care, and immigrant and labor rights. And now, more than ever, it continues to insist and act on the reality that fighting poverty is about the painstaking work of building and sustaining democratic movements for social and economic justice. This, throughout forty years of profound transformation, has remained community action's most important, enduring challenge to the reigning policy establishment.✿

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## Notes

1. For further discussion of the roots of and tensions within community action, see Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Noel A. Cazenave, "Chicago Influences on the War on Poverty," *Journal of Policy History* 5 (1993): 25–50.
2. The classic, still influential, rant against community action for being too radical is Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Macmillan, 1970). See also Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Perennial, 1985). For a diametrically opposed view of community action, its limitations as well as its possibilities, see Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977); and Jennifer Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
3. For important iterations of the "backlash" theme, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Thomas Byrne Edsell and Mary D. Edsell, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Anchor, 1992). For the book that many consider the original backlash blueprint, see Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969).
4. The most widely known and circulated attack on the War on Poverty remains Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). For examples of narratives that begin the declension earlier, see Joel Schwartz, *Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825–2000* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
5. For an important recent analysis of the widespread experience of poverty and economic insecurity, see Mark Robert Rank, *One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).