

"It is, of course, almost impossible to properly define 'citizen participation' or any of its synonyms."

—Fred Powledge, *Model City*

If the hot-button term "community action" came to assume a protean range of meanings, the same could be said of the even fuzzier term "citizen participation." To confuse matters further, the two phrases were sometimes—but not always—treated as synonymous: citizen participation was often understood as the proper denotation of community action, or at least as something essential to the effective implementation of the concept. *The New York Times* accurately, if understatedly, called the "participation" muddle "the most controversial and confusing aspect of the national war on poverty."

"Participation" meant, variously, the ability—or right—of citizens to control their own destiny (a right, Powledge remarked, surely denied all but kings and queens—but indignantly claimed on behalf of the poor). More modestly, the term meant poor people's right to plan and implement, or to participate in planning and implementing, antipoverty programs in their own community. More modestly still, "participation" meant their right to advise others, or have their representatives advise others (usually professionals or bureaucrats: "experts," in other words), who in turn would do the real decision-making. As with "community action," the content of "citizen participation," observed Powledge, was "in the eye of the beholder since its first mention."

Then again, the concept was specifically *not* in the eye of some beholders—or on their radar screen, as we would say today—at all. "As originally envisioned, the Gray Areas program did not include an emphasis on resident participation in shaping and defining the program as a whole," or in implementing specific services, wrote Robert Halpern in *Rebuilding the Inner City*. Indeed, "[n]o specific mention was made [in 'Opening Opportunities'] of involving the poor, or their bona fide 'representatives,'" in the planning at all, notes Powledge. And the omission was seemingly more a matter of conviction than oversight. The directors of Community Progress, Inc., Halpern suggests, "seemed not to have faith in poor people themselves." Halpern quotes Howard Hallman, CPI's deputy director, principal architect, and Mitchell Sviridoff's chief lieutenant, as observing "[f]or the vast majority of the poor, poverty is a disability that precludes meaningful participation in planning."

According to this understanding, argues Russell Murphy in *Political Entrepreneurs and Urban Poverty*, "the poor lacked the political motivation and the political skill needed for sustained action: for defining, selecting, and articulating program alternatives and program priorities, and for seeing these through to completion." "Citizen participation was fine," as Powledge sums up this stance, "but...there were limits to it

... imposed by [these] citizens' lack of technical competence to deal with complicated problems."

That technical competence, rather, could be reliably located (according to Hallman, in the same memo quoted by Halpern above) in a "democratic elite," a "group of individuals with superior talent who have achieved their positions on the basis of ability and achievements." And running his agency by enlisting a corps of "individuals with superior talent"—or by employing, in his preferred locution, an "executive-centered strategy"—was exactly what Sviridoff had in mind. The growing clamor for "community control," and the agenda he saw underlying it, *threatened* what Sviridoff had in mind. It would undo the work—which was what mattered—of alleviating poverty.

Additionally, Sviridoff distrusted the credentials and motives of the "empowerment" militants. Russell Murphy wrote that "many on the CPI staff seem to have objected as much, if not more, to the *source* of the demand [that is, coming from what was beginning to be called the New Left] as they did to the demand itself." Sviridoff found them "more raucous than representative," observed Murphy, and considered their demands for participation as a ploy, a means of hijacking a service (or programmatic) agenda to serve their own ideological (or political) ends. Worse, in his view, these demands gratified the militants' own needs for power, their desire to grab "a piece of the action."

"They were making a fetish of the issue of who was in control," was how Sviridoff saw it, and in the process (indeed, in their obsession *with* process), short-changing their own communities. CPI insisted (on good evidence) that the residents of those communities cared more about jobs and schools—tangible services—than about who was in charge of *delivering* more jobs and better schools, which was a relatively abstract issue.

That conclusion was borne out in the voting data when CPI's Board of Directors was enlarged in 1965, at the insistence of the Office of Economic Opportunity, to include seven elected representatives, one each from the designated project neighborhoods. This inclusion was CPI's required obeisance to the incendiary phrase "maximum feasible participation" that Ford's Richard Boone had slipped into the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. (CPI also established in 1965 a Resident Advisory Commission consisting of 21 members, three from each of the seven neighborhoods.) As Russell Murphy reports, "only a minuscule proportion of project neighborhood residents availed themselves of the opportunity to choose board members." Less than one percent of residents voted in 1965; less than 6 percent two years later. The result in such elections, argues Sviridoff, is that "tyranny, not democracy, wins." In other words, power falls into the hands of a tiny, unrepresentative (just louder) minority, intent primarily on getting, and maintaining, control.

The small turnout also seemed to justify CPI's attitude toward resident participation, however much it struck some as paternalistic. "[A] lot of the neighborhood participation at that level is not very active and not that interested," argued Reuben Holden, one of the original incorporators of CPI and for a time, the chair of its board. "They're interested in the *concept* of it, but when it comes down to the capacity to do it, or the time to do it, or the interest really to follow through with

the detail, it's lacking ... I believe in the idea of representation, but I don't believe [neighborhood residents] can be left fully responsible, because they just don't have that background or interest or competence to do it all."

Besides, Sviridoff contends (as did CPI back then), that "participation," or community involvement, could take many forms. Representation on governing boards—*political* involvement—was only one form, and not necessarily the best, precisely because it was so susceptible to domination by a small minority. The agency did consult informally with residents, went this defense; it hired them to run projects at the neighborhood level. Most importantly, it provided programs that involved the community as participants: It generated what Sviridoff calls "citizen *engagement*."

"Perhaps," Powledge reflects, "1962 was too early ... to start thinking about the involvement of the poor in the formulation of the programs of 'human renewal' that would presumably serve them." It is worth recalling, in this context, Russell Murphy's observation: when Gray Areas was launched by Richard Lee and the Ford Foundation, "there had been no organized and explicit demand ... by the poor themselves [or] by their spokesmen [let alone by any outraged public] for social reform." Gray Areas originated, then, as a "top-down" (or "executive-centered"), not indigenously generated, program. Therefore, the program's resistance to a formal administrative role for neighborhood residents—and its executives' defensive, somewhat grudging response once that became an issue—is perhaps understandable when viewed in that light.

The New Haven program "had difficulty making that adjustment," concedes Sviridoff, although it eventually would make it. No doubt, given the larger climate of increasing anger and disillusionment among inner-city blacks, the agency would have incurred less hostility and made more friends if it had adjusted more quickly; such was the view of Milton Brown, a black social worker who started working for CPI in 1962 and became its executive director in 1968.

A less benign viewpoint was, of course, adopted by New Haven militants, for whom CPI was just part of the local "power structure," intent on co-opting—and disempowering—the poor, thereby forestalling more extensive and radical change. But even if one grants (some of) the militants a sincere philosophical basis for their demands—to wit, that political empowerment was a condition of social and economic progress—one must also surely grant a sincerely held contrary belief among CPI's founding fathers: that social and economic progress was a condition of genuine empowerment. Like everything connected with Gray Areas, the role of citizen participation and the concept of empowerment were not either-or questions, and admitted no easy answers.

What seems undeniable is that the conflict—over participation, or empowerment, or whatever one wanted to call it—surely distracted from the work of providing jobs, improving schools, and alleviating poverty. It may even have distracted from what might have been a useful and even necessary critical examination of the premises (perhaps deeply flawed) of the Gray Areas program itself. It is difficult, in any case, to argue with the gloomy assessment of Powledge: "[T]he story of the controversy that followed the introduction of 'maximum feasible participation' into the language of the War on Poverty is the story of America's failure to win that war."

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It is noteworthy, perhaps, that the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 defined a community action program as one that (among other things) gives "promise of progress toward elimination of poverty." It thus hedges its goal with two, or even three, qualifiers. Besides "promise" and "progress," there's "toward"—what psychologist Eric Berne calls a "noncommitment word." To a therapist (of his school, at least), "toward" means "don't get there." Nobody asks, "Does this [flight] go *toward* New York?" ... [The] pilot ... either goes *to* New York or you take another airplane."

The architects of the War on Poverty—vilified decades later as crypto-revolutionaries and firebrands—were in fact cautious and tentative in their expectations, building on what they regarded as a successful, but hardly radical, community action effort in New Haven. (It was a wise, if short-lived, restraint; Gray Areas and the whole antipoverty program were haunted, soon enough, by the grandiose expectations they aroused.) In any case, while it lasted, the ambivalence of the poverty warriors was surely appropriate to the multi-faceted, resistant, and some thought immutable condition on which they had just declared war. If the millennialists' favorite scriptures could not decide whether poverty would ever be eliminated (Deuteronomy takes both positions in a single chapter), how dare mere government bureaucrats?

Still, granted those reasonable cautions, the toilers in the antipoverty vineyards were, for the most part, an optimistic bunch. They were confident of a rich harvest and buoyed by the near-religious faith that they could successfully counter urban *degeneration* with *regeneration*. In the terms of the day, theirs was a "liberal" creed—opposed not so much to "conservative," which in many respects it was, but to "radical." What defined it as liberal was a profound, and in its own way idealistic, belief in progress, even if progress was to be measured in incremental steps. An all-or-nothing apocalyptic politics, with its fatalistic acceptance of destruction as both a means and an end, was uncalled for in this sort of thinking. The creed was also shaped by faith in "the system": faith in governing institutions and their capacity to catalyze change,

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CHAPTER EIGHT

SOMETHING SHORT OF SALVATION

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and in government itself as a positive force in human affairs. Finally, liberals of this school relied on the sturdy conviction that activist intellectuals (or intellectual activists) could in time solve any of the world's, let alone the country's, problems.

All these tenets were standards in the antipoverty, as in the liberal, hymnal. Institutions were basically benign and needed intelligent reform, not revolutionary upheaval. This meant that even the milder forms of confrontational politics were unnecessary and, indeed, counterproductive. It was institutions, not the poor themselves, that were in need of change. (The poor just needed expanded *opportunity*.) The core belief, according to Alice O'Connor, was "that an essentially unaltered society and economy would be capable of assimilating those it had hitherto relegated to the very bottom."

But all this confident incrementalism couldn't help leading, step by step, to ultimate aspirations that seem almost rapturous—certainly anything but modest—in retrospect. The real goal was not merely a reconfiguration of service delivery in the inner city, not just a revamped model of interagency coordination, but a new and higher social order—"a salvational civic regime for uplifting the impoverished," as Lou Winnick summed up an appraisal by Gordon Harrison. It was to be a society not merely improved, but fundamentally good—indeed, officially Great—a land free from want.

'Did we succeed?'

In civic regimes, unlike spiritual ones, salvation can be usefully defined only in terms of visible and stated goals. But what were Gray Areas' goals in New Haven? They were, as we have seen, far from crisply or rigorously defined.

At its most ambitious, Gray Areas, like the Federal antipoverty program it modeled, was represented as nothing short of a total, frontal assault on poverty and its causes. Presumably, the end goal was that poverty would be eradicated. More modestly, and more realistically, Community Progress, Inc., wanted to improve the life prospects of the culturally and economically disadvantaged, breaking the grinding cycle of poverty by acculturating a new generation of poor people into the mores of the middle class. CPI was clearly not an income-redistribution program like the proposed guaranteed minimum income and negative income tax embodied in Patrick Moynihan's Family Assistance Plan. Instead, funds were to be *indirectly* allotted to the poor, in the form of programs and services. But the agency surely wanted, at least, to secure "a *better* distribution of income and jobs" [emphasis added], as a guiding document in Boston's Gray Areas program (called ABCD) put it.

Redistributing power was something else again. The organization of the poor as a new political force—a core goal of Saul Alinsky's protest organizing in Chicago, and of Mobilization for Youth militants in New York—was decidedly not on CPI's agenda. Mitchell Sviridoff, in fact, still regards any such emphasis on political power as a distortion of the New Haven program and a distraction from its substantive agenda. What Gray Areas sought above all, Sviridoff recalls, was "to redistribute *opportunity*"—to alter the opportunity structure, in the sociologists' lingo—and to enhance the capacity of the poor to seize opportunity when it was offered. The result, it was hoped, would be "to reduce the level of poverty in these areas, to

reduce the amount of deviancy and pathology, and to make [the target areas] safer and more desirable places to live."

If defining success in an antipoverty program (success in terms more precise than the complete eradication of poverty) was difficult, *evaluating* success proved even more elusive. "We didn't have any clear benchmarks of how to measure success," recalls Sviridoff, "no evidence through an evaluation process that would help us determine whether we succeeded or failed." This gap may have existed in part because "[t]he idea of community action was still so new," Nicholas Lemann observed, "that it was completely unclear whether it did in fact work as a way of reducing poverty." But the New Haven agency also contributed to its own short-sightedness. "CPI ... followed the virtually universal social reform practice of not building into its operation what social scientists would consider adequate evaluation procedures," notes Russell Murphy. "[T]here was an effort to do so early in the agency's history ... [when] the agency established a Research Division and staffed it principally with social scientists, especially sociologists. But throughout its brief history ... the division was a marginal part of the agency. More to the point, ... the division's major research undertaking, a systematic evaluation of CPI's youth development programs, *was never completed*" [emphasis in original].

So answers were hard to come by—but the questions were clear enough, whether posed from inside or outside the agency, during its run or afterwards. "[W]ould the proposed programs make any discernible difference," Murphy asked, retrospectively, in 1971, "in dealing with the chronic and stubborn problems of poverty?" Would they improve the educational and occupational status and prospects of community residents? Could systems reform and improved services together suffice, in the absence of more radical change, to "alter economic opportunities in any lasting way?" asked O'Connor.

"Did Gray Areas succeed?" asked Sviridoff, 35 years after launching it. His first, off-the-cuff answer was "No. We failed." Others, closer to the event, had concluded much the same thing. "[I]n spite of the expenditure of millions of dollars and the presence of dozens of new educational and social services," Robert Halpern reports, "community leaders in the target neighborhoods" contended that nothing really had changed. Sviridoff himself was fond of quoting an observer who, after studying the CPI program, remarked, "If you had a scale of 0 to 100 to measure how far along they are in New Haven, they'd be at about the '20' mark, with 80 points to go." Whether conditions may in fact have worsened during the period of CPI's activity in New Haven (broader economic and demographic trends were largely hostile), or whether there was some decline in poverty that reflected a national decline in the 1960s, is hard to assess. But it seems clear, to those once involved in the program as well as to outside observers, that whatever contribution Gray Areas did make to alleviating poverty in New Haven—if it made any at all—was marginal.

An honest report card for CPI, however, could hardly consist of a simple failing grade. Nor can the criteria for judgment be limited to just the program's effect on poverty during a relatively short and turbulent period. Reflecting on his quick, blunt answer to the question of CPI's success or failure, Sviridoff had more nuanced second thoughts:

If the goal was to increase educational and employment opportunities and reduce poverty and the level of pathology for some significant portion of that population, the answer is that we don't really know. ... Some informed observers suspect, however, that a significant number of inner-city residents benefited sufficiently from these antipoverty initiatives to enable them to escape their inner-city environments. Alas, we'll never know for certain who is right, and to what extent either, or both, may be partly right.

[An] important secondary effect of CPI and the Gray Areas program is the impact they had on the Ford Foundation and the institution of philanthropy generally. In the period prior to Gray Areas, rarely did a major foundation venture forth in the wilderness of the inner-city ghetto with experimental and demonstration programs. Nor did many foundations recognize the overriding significance of the urban crisis, never mind the ticking time bomb of race. Gray Areas literally electrified these staid institutions and, for better or worse, life for this community has never been the same. Gray Areas broke the mold.

CPI did, as Sviridoff points out, reach a lot of people with interesting, attractive programs that seemed to do some good. The significance of several of these programs is surely greater than their short-term impact, no matter how that is measured. Much of the conceptual apparatus, the *modus operandi*, and the specific program models initiated by CPI became prototypes for the War on Poverty and mainstays of antipoverty work in the decades thereafter.

And for all the upheaval since then in the national thinking about poverty, the legacy of many of those programs remains formidable. Head Start, which originated in New Haven in 1963, continues to this day, and has influenced the defining aspects of similar remediation programs ever since: parental involvement, individualized curricula, and the importance of a Federal role. The remarkable use of "community schools" as updated quasi-settlement houses may have inspired subsequent after-school and summer enrichment programs—just as New Haven's adult literacy programs gave rise to "adult basic education." CPI's job training programs were a successful innovation that especially helped the hard-to-employ enter the labor market, many for the first time. Its experiments in classroom vs. on-the-job training prompted tactical debates in employment policy that continue to the present.

The community health centers and legal services programs provided important templates for many other urban areas. Indeed, the very notion of a community-based program—however disputed the role of the community was in Gray Areas—proved an indispensable archetype for almost all subsequent antipoverty organizing, and for the community development corporation in particular.

CPI broke ground, too, as a training ground for antipoverty workers and administrators (especially African Americans, whom it liberally employed as social service professionals and para-professionals); half a dozen "graduates" of CPI became directors of other antipoverty programs. A grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1965 helped establish the Community Action Institute, a training resource for other communities. Out-of-town personnel would come to New Haven for on-the-job training in antipoverty work, while local staff would conduct

field courses in other cities. The Institute meant that the city was a source of expertise as well as manpower.

Battling the 'tsunami'

Still, if "salvation" meant ending poverty, Gray Areas and CPI did not save New Haven. Sviridoff, at least, is clear about why. "Because we underestimated the importance of the negative things that were happening around us and underneath us—things that were shifting around in the economy and in the society and in the culture, that we were not sufficiently aware of." He cites, among other things, the virtual extinction of industrial jobs in the city; "the perverse effects of the welfare system" in encouraging dependency; the phenomenal increase in the number of households headed by a single parent (to as much as 90 percent of the population in Gray Areas' target communities) and out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and finally, the major expansion of the drug problem. "We were not sufficiently aware," avers Sviridoff, "how threatening these emerging negatives would turn out to be. And these negatives—he refers to them as cumulatively exerting a "tsunami effect"—"overwhelmed everything that we achieved in New Haven."

The sources of these "tectonic shifts" (another favorite Sviridoff metaphor), "the roots of many of the problems addressed by the Gray Areas programs," notes Robert Halpern, were "located outside the target neighborhoods in a receding labor market, an eroding tax base for urban schools, housing policies that intensified ghetto isolation, an historic pattern of racial discrimination"—and, it must be added, a pervasive denial of opportunity to the poor, especially to African Americans and other minorities. These were "national problems," concurs Sviridoff, "that only national policy can cope with." All seem to agree with Nicholas Lemann's assessment, offered a quarter-century after the program concluded: "[T]he Gray Areas project conceived of and addressed poverty as a localized and quasi-cultural phenomenon, rather than as a systemic and economic one."

The assumption that more effective, better-coordinated, or more comprehensive service delivery would suffice to solve these fundamental problems—and address these deeply rooted sources of poverty—was, as Sviridoff is the first to concede, "misguided and naïve." "[N]o American city," observes Gregory Farrell, "has within its boundaries the financial resources it needs to combat poverty and its causes." This was perhaps the single most important lesson to be learned from the Gray Areas experiment. (New Haven aggressively obtained more than 90 percent of the money it spent between 1962 and 1966 from outside donors—and then, ironically, was criticized for failing to develop sources of regular local support.) "[U]rban renewal—physical, economic, and human—is not an enterprise," wrote John Bebout, then Director of Rutgers University's Urban Studies Center, in his introduction to Farrell's report, "that a single city can be expected to undertake on its own resources."

Imaginative Federal intervention, then—and Federal resources and money—is deemed indispensable to current antipoverty policy, although Sviridoff hastens to qualify this recommendation by stating that Federal programs require competent local implementation to be successful. But both Federal resources and local implementation require *political* support and a political constituency. Whatever was accom-

plished in New Haven, Sviridoff emphasizes, was “a product of the political system... This is the significance of New Haven. This is its uniqueness.” Sviridoff encourages the current generation of activists to “overcome a disdain, if not abhorrence, for the political process” and learn to understand its workings. “Politics,” he chides (perhaps with Robert Kennedy’s words in mind), “ought to be considered an honorable profession.”

The architects of Gray Areas may have erred in naïvely (and in their own way, idealistically) believing that they could zero in on one urban area and screen out its national context. However, its conceptualization of the problem of poverty suffered, in some eyes, from a deeper, ideological narrowness, a conceptual constriction. To its more radical critics, Gray Areas’ essentially (1960s) liberal philosophy ensured that it would focus on symptoms, by providing social *services*, rather than structural causes, by seeking systemic social *change*. The constraints imposed by liberal ideology demanded, as Alice O’Connor saw it, that there be no attempt to interfere directly in the economy and oppose inequalities of wealth, or challenge the power structure, or confront inequalities of power. These things, of course, were exactly what CPI did *not* believe in doing. To O’Connor, Gray Areas was conceptually narrow in scope even if it was “comprehensive” in its approach to services. “Liberals insistently adhered to a course designed to assimilate the new migrants without altering existing social and economic arrangements. ... Instead, they focused on what they saw as flaws in urban governing systems and in the culture of the urban poor.”

O’Connor expected a lot from a program that enjoyed the sponsorship and support of a good part of the political and civic establishment (including the mayor) of New Haven. But then, Gray Areas was afflicted generally by inflated expectations from the outside (“New Haven was the greatest success story in the history of the world,” gushed Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz) even when it was not burdened by having to live up to its own homegrown hype. In raising expectations it could not possibly fulfill, CPI may have ensured that it would be regarded as a failure. Yet a more modest yardstick, in more patient hands, might well have measured real achievements in New Haven that were simply too small or particular to be noticed in the 1960s, by the inflated standards of the time.

‘A sense of what’s possible’

That lesson was not lost on astute observers, even at the time. It may, in fact, be among the most remarkable contributions of Gray Areas, or at least of CPI, as seen from the end of the 20th Century. Viewing the wreckage of the community action experience of their own day, a group of more pragmatic reformers would conclude that, despite the overreaching and the political missteps of the War on Poverty, there were in fact problems that could be addressed in one city or neighborhood, even in the face of unfavorable national trends. Poverty need not be obliterated in order for individual poor people to find better opportunities in their communities, to better their own lives, upgrade their neighborhoods, improve their children’s education, and keep their cities from spiraling into decay. What CPI might very well have achieved—but no one bothered to measure—was a way of using resources better for individual poor people, and combating isolation and hopelessness in their neighbor-

hoods. Those things could be accomplished in a single place, and real people would be the better for it. Without waging a national “war” on something as vast as poverty, it might be possible to mount a significant battle against conditions of local misery and neglect.

Gray Areas’ greatest legacy in New Haven may have been to “serve as a point of departure for other cities,” exactly as Howard Hallman foresaw in an early proposal to the Ford Foundation. It did this by conveying “a new sense of what is possible,” as Wirtz put it in a less giddy moment.

And, we might add, of what was necessary, and right. Together with Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, Gray Areas helped make poverty *visible* to America. At its best, basking in the glow of some early successes, the program persuaded America that something could be done about it, and that the something would take both a more manageable sense of goals and a substantial commitment of national resources. Now the cause needed someone who would not simply look at what had failed and ask why, but who would dream new dreams, imagine new avenues of progress, and ask why not.

Enter Robert Kennedy.