

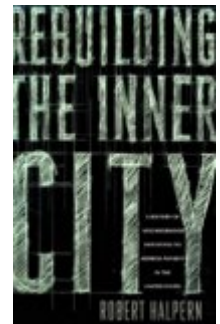
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert Halpern.** *Rebuilding the Inner City: A History of Neighborhood Initiatives to Address Poverty in the United States.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 257 pp. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-08114-6; \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-08115-3.

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Social welfare historian Clarke Chambers argued in a 1992 essay that “crucial elements in the history of social welfare were persistence and continuity, not change and innovation” (Chambers 1992: 499). Central elements of that history are beliefs that provide the lens through which most Americans view disadvantaged citizens of the United States: the American economy has been fundamentally sound, opportunities for economic advancement exist, the poor bear the responsibility for their situation, and localism rather than federalism represents the most useful approach to address poverty. Real innovation in the fight against poverty is rare; reform measures that remain consistent with traditional values and approaches to dealing with the poor are more common. Although in a less than satisfying manner, Robert Halpern of the Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development, affiliated with Loyola University Chicago, illustrates Chambers’ description of the history of social welfare in his discussion of the persistence of neighborhood initiatives as a strategy in the nation’s anti-poverty efforts.

Halpern begins his overview of neighborhood initiatives with an introduction in which he lays out his thesis, scope, and goals. The focus of his study is the use of the neighborhood as a staging ground to combat poverty and related social problems. He wants to explore the ways that each new generation of neighborhood-based reform efforts build upon the legacy of past efforts. In addition, he is interested in the way in which the neighborhood strategy serves as a metaphor for how Americans attack social problems. He argues that neighborhood initiatives have been so central in the war on poverty because of the American belief that poverty is an individual situation and a local concern. However, he contends, such initia-

tives are certain to fail because the causes of poverty are structural and national, not individual and local. And finally, such efforts fail to confront the fact that racism is as much a cause of poverty as the practices of corporate capitalism.

Halpern begins his story with the genesis of the neighborhood initiative. Dramatic social and economic changes and their effect on the nation’s burgeoning urban centers as the nineteenth century drew to a close precipitated a debate about the nature of the poverty. This debate helped generate a host of reform efforts that coalesced into Progressivism. Progressives concerned with cities and the poor, according to Halpern, viewed the neighborhood as a place where the poor could receive necessary services and experience the face-to-face interaction and participatory spirit believed to exist in the nation’s small communities. Settlement houses provided an institutional mechanism to fight poverty, providing services to needy individuals and facilitating the creation of a more cohesive civic community.

Ultimately, Halpern argues, the reform impulse dissipated between 1910 and 1930 and the neighborhood fell out of favor with those concerned with the urban poor. The rise of casework encouraged an individualized than a place-based approach to addressing the needs of the poor. He concludes his analysis of the emergence of the neighborhood initiative with a look at two efforts, the Chicago Area Project and the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, to involve the local community in solving its own problems. He sees these efforts as extensions of the settlement vision and as examples of the survival the neighborhood approach to poverty. The failure of these ventures, he suggests, reveals the limitations of the

neighborhood initiative as an vehicle to combat poverty. Neighborhood programs, even those which attempted to bring the poor into the process of reform, failed because the reasons for poverty were larger than the local community and that it was possible to teach residents how to acquire some power but not how to use it to nurture community development. At the same time, according to Halpern, racism left an increasingly poor black community both outside of and a victim of anti-poverty efforts.

This scenario of interest in a neighborhood-based approach to poverty, discussion of particular programs, and analysis of failure characterize the remainder of Halpern's study. Following a roughly chronological fashion, he discusses the federal approach to public housing, community action and the War on Poverty, community economic development, and current initiatives. This progression is interrupted in two chapters situated midway through his story. He returns to the early twentieth century and traces the challenges that affect neighborhood-based service providers, material which would have been better integrated into other chapters. In the end, what Halpern finds is that each generation of reformers analyzes the contemporary approach to fighting poverty, finds it lacking, and reinvents a neighborhood strategy. At their best, the various initiatives have ameliorated the worst aspects of an area's poverty. Never do the initiatives transform conditions. The reasons for failure are essentially the same ones that characterized the earliest efforts of the neighborhood strategy.

Halpern concludes that the legacy of neighborhood-based initiatives is a mixed one. On the one hand, these efforts have softened the edges of life in the nation's poor communities. On the other hand, they contribute to separatism and fragmentation within the nation's urban centers, further isolating the poor. At the very end of his analysis, after he has stated categorically that as a problem solving strategy, the neighborhood initiative was not transforming, he indicates that he has been struck by its tenacity in spite of all the odds against it and wonders if he was wrong. "There is," he writes, "a certain transformative value in mobilization and collective action themselves ... More than any other social reform strategy, neighborhood initiative has struggled to fuse the visionary with the actual and translate the result into action. That in part is why neighborhood initiative seems so new each time, even though it follows well-worn paths and faces long-standing obstacles" (p. 233).

Halpern's study would have been better if he had infused his story with his final insight. His treatment of the

neighborhood initiative strategy falls squarely within a social work perspective. Agencies and bureaucracies are central to this approach to social welfare history. Emphasis is on providers who operate as enablers, coordinators, planners, and/or mediators. Given this perspective's heavily top down approach, the members of the target population are generally little more than recipients. Halpern's poor are passive; they possess no agency. Had Halpern examined material on social movements and the history of community organization, he would not have been so surprised at the strength of the initiative's potential to infuse a sense of agency within poor communities. This literature, as well as that of social historians who have examined groups segmented from the larger society for one reason or another, suggests that what is remarkable in the history of these groups is the ability to devise strategies of resistance or to use institutions imposed on them by outsiders for their own agendas. These efforts at empowerment are not always successful, but they represent important efforts for disadvantaged communities to foster a sense of local power and stewardship.

An absence of recent historical scholarship also characterizes this monograph. Since it purports to be a "history," Halpern should have updated and expanded his range of sources. Robert Fisher's *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (1984/1994) is a serious omission since his volume represents one of the very few of the history of neighborhood organizing. More recent work on the settlement house movement would have provided useful insights: Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk* (1990); Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighborhoods: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945* (1993); and Rivlen Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (1989). Other areas of weakness exist, but these omissions provide a flavor of the material that would have deepened Halpern's insights.

A final problem worth mentioning is Halpern's failure to carry through with one of his goals—the way in which the neighborhood strategy serves as a metaphor for how Americans attack social problems. He incorporates this interest only into his discussion of the emergence of the neighborhood initiative. Although his argument here would have been stronger if he had deepened his discussion of the persistence of beliefs about the small town, participation and civic cohesion, and individual responsibility for poverty. For example, he could have examined Jean B. Quandt, *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals* (1970) and Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*

*in America 1920-1920* (1978). Along these same lines, he could have benefited as well from a clearer discussion of the way in which beliefs about the neighborhood are related to the way society conceptualizes the city. He dabbles with this in the “emergence” section but does not carry it through the rest of his study.

Despite these weaknesses, Halpern’s work possesses three particular strengths. First, more intuitively than explicitly, he illustrates how the nation’s social, racial, and physical landscape represents essentially very tangible autobiography of the way Americans have viewed the poor and their “place” in the nation’s cityscapes. Second, he provides a nice discussion of the way in which local mobilization can possess both integrative and separatist tendencies. The separatist tendencies can, as he suggests, further isolate the disadvantaged. And finally, unlike many analysts of the neighborhood movement, most particularly Milton Kotler (Kotler 1979), Halpern understands that neighborhood-based initiatives, as well as the neighborhood itself, were not an outgrowth of the activities of the 1960s.

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