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if this mixture of custard and trifle were not soggy enough, he later adds a topping of whipped cream in the form of "lived experience". Fortunately, most of these overblown and underbaked concoctions are in the first chapter, which can be passed over. The bulk of the book is much sharper in its handling of the material.

In fact, it's a little too sharp. Despite Rowse's appeal that the "lived experiences" of his subjects be taken into account, this does not happen, because he does not really know very much about their lives. Thus, he notes that after the Great War, Justice Higgins spent his time looking for an international rather than a national consensus. "The lived experience" of Higgins's grief at the death of his son in the war is not mentioned. We could do with fewer grand phrases and with more substance. Similarly there's a long discussion of the eccentric position adopted by Lloyd Ross, yet no mention is made of Ross's socialist childhood or of his years in the Communist Party.

The explanation for these missing parts brings us to a further weakness in Rowse's approach. Rowse is not very interested in the author as producer. Instead he emphasizes the consumption of ideas. This means that he does not bother with the lives of authors, but rather with the careers of books. As a result, he has not used any of the sets of private correspondence which, for instance, document the links between Hancock's *Australia* and the Palmers. What is needed is an approach which locates the author, the book and the audience in a working relationship where the production and consumption (re-production) of ideas are united, but never blurred.

Fortunately, Rowse usually gets close to this in his writing, so that his book is much better than he would have us believe.

## reviews

### Power Handout at the Family Centre?

John Wiseman

Recent issues of *Arena* have included a continuing discussion on the "common sense" view of the welfare state as a progressive, humanizing force leading to the elimination of poverty and inequality. As Rob Watts ironically comments: "The description of the history of welfare is a paean of praise to all of the "hooray" words of our times; welfare is a response to "evils", it provides "care" and its history is a history of "reforms".<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to continue this critique by looking more closely at a specific anti-poverty project often regarded in welfare circles as an innovating challenge to traditional welfare approaches. It was prompted by the publication of *Power For The Poor*, the first generally available account of the Family Centre — an "experimental demonstration project" of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence.<sup>2</sup>

Since its inception in 1972 the Family Centre has had an increasing influence in welfare and governmental circles. The various Brotherhood publications on the Centre have been widely read<sup>3</sup> and, under its current name of the Action Resource Centre, it maintains its reputation as a signpost to the future of welfare in Australia. This significance is emphasized by the approving reviews that Liffman's book has received and the eulogistic introduction by a leading British welfare academic with a liberal and "progressive" reputation.

Since Liffman condemns those anti-poverty programmes guilty of a-theoretical trendiness he is consistent in seeking to introduce his account of the Family Centre by way of a theoretical introduction. This provides a disappointing point of departure; it is

1 Watts R., "Social Amnesia and Welfare History", *Arena*, vol. 47/48, p. 141.

2. Liffman M., *Power For The Poor*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1978.

3. Three "Overviews", six "Progress Reports" and various research papers are all available from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence.

little more than a short summary of prevailing welfare perspectives. Individualist views stressing the moral responsibility of the poor for their own situation are rejected as are socialization accounts — sometimes currently termed “cultural” — which stress the role of parents and upbringing. But Liffman offers no developed alternatives. Broadly, the position he advocates is a relatively conventional situationism — with a somewhat novel twist at the level of the ways and means by engagement of “the poor” themselves in action around the problem of poverty.

Poverty for him is largely due to “economic and social circumstances” but each “circumstance” is viewed in relative isolation. What emerges is a rather woolly pluralism in which such problems as poor housing, low income and bad health are discussed as segments of the whole picture. Segmentary situationism in this mode was scarcely avoidable given Liffman’s determination to avoid theories of ultimate causation (read vulgar marxism) and his failure to develop a theoretical account of his own which adopts a comprehensive standpoint.

A significant consequence of situational pluralism at the level of “theory” is the way in which it dovetails with policies of symptomatic reform which, in practice, never question the limits of welfare capitalism. Reforms are to occur through benevolent and rational planning by welfare agencies and sympathetic political parties. Yet, as suggested above, Liffman’s approach while remaining essentially conventional does have a novel twist: he acknowledges that conflict is intrinsic to the processes of change. Political action by “poor people” and their allies is a necessary component of social reforms within the framework provided by the given social system.

The question of just why action for the poor and by the poor should emerge in this particular period is not an issue on which this study sheds any light. This cannot occur because there is no larger framework of interpretation in which the changing historical role of the welfare state as a facet of modern capitalism is itself discussed. One can only be dismayed by the manner in which Liffman bypasses the literature<sup>4</sup> detailing the changes which led to a shift away from a view of “the poor” as unproductive social lepers and towards the more humanistic perspective representing them as “victims of circumstance”. In an earlier period the “reserve army of labour”<sup>5</sup> worked in conjunction with stress on the moral deficiency of the poor to provide the economic conditions and the moral mystifications for the development of

4. For example, Ryan W., *Blaming The Victim*, New York, Free Press, 1973.

5. That is, the need for the capitalist economy to have a source of labour which can be employed as the situation demands and which serves to discourage unrest and absenteeism in the bulk of the workforce.

capitalist society. Under current conditions the state plays an increasingly technical and social engineering function in relation to planning: this function entails the appeasement of those who do not reap the full economic benefits of the system and the management of those who demonstrate their “deviance” by not accepting that appeasement. Seen in this light new ideologies relating to “the poor” are complementary to the changed demands upon a state which must intervene more actively in and provide basic support for the processes of social reproduction as well as ensuring capital formation and adequate levels of consumption.

Going beyond these considerations we would need also to understand the way in which “the poor” serve the function of justifying the status of those who “have made it” and set this within the context of consumerist and individualist ideology. We could then see the way in which poverty is embedded not only in the economic system but also in a culture of perpetual scarcity where new needs are continually produced and status is directly related to the unequal hierarchy of commodity ownership. The individualist ethic of the marketplace is also logically connected with the new “hooray” words of welfare such as “self determination” and “equal opportunity”.

Given the absence of any discussion of the historical context and cultural meaning of poverty, Liffman’s account floats in an ideological void; it neither locates the Brotherhood and the Family Centre historically nor reflects upon the way in which the Brotherhood developed during the Depression as an organization providing the poor with resources on an individual, charitable basis. As the Australian economy and the meaning of “the poor” changed, the reliance first on material aid, and then on casework as well, became less tenable. By the late sixties social workers were ready to accept a more situational view of poverty. The rise to power of the ALP under Whitlam, with its commitment to social reform through the provision of resources, was part of the same broad shift in social consciousness. All were to compete on an equal basis. New concepts like participation and social planning became acceptable and the perceived economic affluence of the period made possible new social “experiments”. Particular groups — migrants, Aborigines, single mothers — who became segments of “the poor”, due to external and isolated circumstances, might now begin to act for themselves: within the terms of the newer requirements for the stability of a whole social system now passing through a phase of change and re-adjustment.

Social workers at the Brotherhood responded more quickly than most to their felt frustration at the inability of traditional casework to change what they saw as the underlying root of poverty — lack of power. Their initial aim was to establish an

experimental project demonstrating that, by giving "power to the poor" those in poverty would be able to change both themselves and society, learn to handle the welfare system and act in a collective way to provide mutual support and social change. To this end sixty families were selected from the caseload at the time and the Family Centre was "created".

The concept of power was divided into four parts — power over: resources, relationships, information and decision-making. These were linked by a "developmental model" which meant that each family would work out its own method of utilizing the available resources.

Power over resources centred on an income supplement,<sup>6</sup> on housing subsidies and on access to facilities. Power over relationships involved the symbolic avoidance of the word "client" and its professional associations and the development of advocacy services. Power over information stressed open files, reports and meetings; and power over decision-making involved a gradual takeover by the families of all political structures in the Centre.<sup>7</sup>

The process by which the families gained power within the Centre was not always without conflict and Liffman describes graphically the strain that this threatening change in status and role definitions placed on the professional workers. It is at this descriptive level that Liffman's book is most useful, providing evidence of the dynamics involved in organizing "the poor" into a community capable of making its own decisions and running its own activities. He describes the improved living conditions of the families at the end of the three year period, although this was largely limited to the women, and (as Liffman notes), may have had as much to do with external political factors (i.e. the Labor government), as with the Centre. He also discusses implications for the redefinition of professional roles, the tactics of participation and, more briefly, the vexed question of the existence of a "culture of poverty". The problem is that these implications are treated too much within the isolated context of "welfare" to be of much use in an analysis of the Family Centre and the lessons to be learnt from that experience.

The most common criticisms of the Family Centre are that it was both too narrow and too broad. Too narrow in that it affected only sixty families, too broad in that it was pretentious and tried to do too much. Project workers may counter these criticisms by pointing to the experimental nature of the project. The more crucial questions relate to the wider implications for the general situation of poverty in Australian society.

6. A type of guaranteed minimum income scheme.

7. These principles have been extended in the Action Resource Centre with its stress on indigenous workers, deprofessionalization and various forms of social action and community education in the welfare field.

Liffman is effectively prevented from dealing with these issues by the "control" which his own "theoretical" position imposes but the questions are worth asking not only because of the influence of the project but also because it contained certain features which, given a different and more reflective setting, might have transcended the limits of welfare reform.

The central aim of the project was transfer of power but, as with the concept of "poverty", the meaning of "power" remains vague and its determinants segmented. There are unanswered questions in the "four power" scheme. For example, can power be "given" and was anything required in return? How much is this new "power" dependant on the Brotherhood or on external political and economic factors? Is this transfer of power directed at individuals or is it at a collective level? Was it limited to status conflicts within the centre or did it challenge wider cultural and economic systems? If the concept of power is not placed within the historically specific context of the Centre then these questions remain unanswerable and this central focus of the project obscure and meaningless.

Arguably the most radical feature of the project was the income supplement which endeavoured to ensure that all the families had access to an income well above the "poverty line". If extended to the whole society such a scheme would involve a guaranteed minimum income (GMI). Much of the research done in the Family Centre led to reports to the poverty enquiry and other governmental bodies arguing the merit of this scheme on the basis of both economic rationality and social justice.

A genuine and adequate GMI would involve major economic restructuring and would tend to do away with the criterion of deserving or undeserving.<sup>8</sup> If the scheme would undermine cultural values like "the deserving poor", "rewards for success and initiative", and the work ethic why then do both Liberal and Labor parties consider the proposal so seriously, particularly as the costing, while complex appears likely to increase the welfare budget considerably. The answer may perhaps be found in the instrumental nature of the scheme, perceived as a way of rationalizing the welfare system in an attractively technical way, and the increased consumption potential. There are contradictions within the implications of the GMI particularly in relation to the categorization of "the poor" and the work ethic but to see it as a truly revolutionary reform would be to have a naive faith in the benevolence of a rationalized welfare state, an over-estimation of the limits of welfare reform and an under-estimation of entrenched perceptions and consciousness.

Liffman places great stress on participation and decision-making power, showing the way in which the families gained (or

8. Anarchist writers like Theobald have argued this position strongly.

took) such rights and began to participate in external welfare organizations like the Australian Council of Social Services. "Power through participation" assumes that changing external political factors will change the general reproduction of social relations and ignores the role of internal structures and the forces of cultural hegemony in this process.

It is hard to assess the actual influence of the families within the Centre or outside it without getting involved in the old debate about the exclusion of certain types of issues from the agenda. Although participation by the families was more than tokenistic the Brotherhood and professional workers influenced the process, if only by not raising certain questions. The families involved learnt some valuable political lessons but, by accepting participation on welfare committees as the definition of power, they tended to be incorporated into the system and so could not develop alternative perspectives or strategies.

Liffman also emphasizes the way in which the Centre challenged professional roles and led to a new role for indigenous workers. Although advances were made in developing a deprofessionalized organization with some genuinely unique features there has been some tendency for workers to become resocialized into a new form of professionalism. This may not have happened if there had been more reflection on the formation of professionals and the location of welfare workers in a technocratic society dependent on specialized knowledge.

Most of the professionals in the Centre used an advocate model of social work which the indigenous workers tended to accept. Advocacy makes it clear which side welfare workers are on but it can turn into a simplistic game of "us" against "the system". Loophole finding and dramatic personalized confrontations defend the survival of individuals and families but they do little to develop a more sophisticated analysis of what "the system" entails. There is an uncritical acceptance of the old dichotomy of the person against society and the ethic of individual self determination. Advocacy also tends to become separated into separate "problems of poverty" (housing, employment, income and so on) leading into difficulties in developing collective awareness of a total picture of the context of "poverty".

The social action strategies of the Family Centre were oriented towards welfare and "community" issues rather than those of the workplace. Writers like Gorz and Castells<sup>9</sup> have argued the validity of struggles relating to the living conditions of the working class and the distribution/consumption sector but they

9. See for example Cowley J. et. al., *Community or Class Struggle*, London, Whitslabe, 1977.

have also pointed to the dangers of separating such movements from the arena of class struggle. The Family Centre achieved a number of reforms in relation to housing conditions, tenancy law and benefit eligibility but this action rarely transcended "welfarism" or was linked to the unions and other working class organizations. Liffman also notes that only about twenty out of one hundred and fifteen adult members became involved in political activity. By comparison with other anti-poverty programs this is a relatively good figure but, although some attempts at "consciousness raising" were made, there was little reflection on the "isolation, apathy and political illiteracy" described by Liffman.

Nevertheless the ability of a group of previously isolated individuals to obtain a sense of collective feeling and some level of political awareness should not be ignored. The problem is that involvement was largely dependent on the perception of individual benefits and the protective setting of a social club. The Family Centre could have been a valuable venue for experiments in alternative forms of collective self-management but the failure of projects like the child care collective and the food co-operative suggests that the creation of new social relationships within the existing system requires considerable awareness of economic constraints and the way in which individuals are locked into an anti-collective cultural world of individual ownership.

This raises the most important question relating to the Family Centre — can the welfare sector (the "lumpenproletariat") act as effective and conscious allies of the working class? For Marx this was, at best, unlikely but current conditions in Australia may require a different analysis. Given an employment situation where job opportunities are scarce or intermittent and where an increasing number of working class families are finding themselves reliant on the welfare system an understanding of the position of those directly dependent on the State becomes vital.

Evidence of class consciousness is hard to find in *Power For The Poor* which is not written in class terms and rejects a cultural approach to poverty. The commitment to deprofessionalization meant that the families had to rely largely on their own resources to develop an understanding of their situation. The expectation of spontaneous changes in cultural values was not based on an understanding of the way in which oppressive and individualized social relations are obscured and reproduced. The difference between professional domination and educative, co-operative leadership seems also to have been poorly understood.

Those who developed and worked at the Family Centre may claim that the above analysis is irrelevant or impractical in the light of the demands of day to day action. Yet pragmatism

without reflection, an understandable reaction to the pressures of welfare work, can only be self defeating.

The central problem of *Power For The Poor* and the Family Centre was that concepts such as "poverty", "participation", and "power", were never located in a historical setting nor were they related to the totality of economic and cultural meaning structures. Thus Liffman's book remains only a descriptive account of a project whose implications were largely restricted to uncritical welfare reform. For it to have transcended this field a totally different interpretative approach and radically different praxis would have been necessary.

## Law and Capitalism

The relationship and connection between the development and change in the law and the wider changes in society at large has been made the subject of an interesting study in a recently released book.\* More specifically, the authors, Michael Tigar and Madeleine Levy have studied these relationships and connection as they apply to the rise of capitalism. Their book, *Law and the Rise of Capitalism*, is a useful exposition of how the revolutionary bourgeoisie attacked the commercial feudal laws before they emerged as a class to consolidate their existence and to become, in the nineteenth century, the new ruling class.

The authors trace the bourgeois revolt against feudal legal institutions right back to the tenth century — eight hundred years of revolutionary activity before the bourgeois achieved final victory. They clearly show in their detailed study the relationship between the mode of production, the interest of a particular class, and the law. The marxist perspective is that political power has its source in economic control, consequently it is the economic, the commercial laws, that must be attacked, undermined and changed to pave the way for revolution.

It was the attack on feudal commercial legalism that produced "The single, most important legal idea to come out of the

\* Michael E. Tigar and Madeleine R. Levy., *Law and the Rise of Capitalism* New York & London, Monthly Review Press, 1977.

period, that of contract . . .". (p. 66). The authors go on to state that the "legal institution of contract was the motive force of the bourgeois revolution". (p. 211). It was in the recasting of the law of property that the difference between feudal and bourgeois notions of property could be seen. The feudal lords saw property in terms of land ownership, something that was by its very nature static and fixed. The bourgeois saw property to be more embracing, to include commodities, bills of securities, even abstract things like a contractual promise. Anything that had an exchange value was encompassed within the bourgeois notions of property. At the centre of capitalist economics is the circulation of movables, the continuous exchange of commodities. Bourgeois legal doctrines were therefore compelled to reflect this inter-change of valuables in their notions of property. The *person* and the *thing* became joined into a legal norm. The revolutionary bourgeoisie succeeded by combining both legal and illegal methods, particularly in their commercial activities.

The legal doctrines of capitalism have a single ultimate source, that of property rights. The bourgeois legal source is summed up by the cliché, "freedom of property". The foundation stone of the whole bourgeois jurisprudential system is the private ownership of property, and the key to ensuring its movability is that of contract law. Tigar and Levy acknowledge the importance of contract law and its part in the rise of power of the bourgeois, but argue correctly that it is analytically false to "assert that bourgeois social relations will come into being regardless of material conditions, whenever the legal idea of free bargain is sufficiently developed". (p. 212). If the authors here are acknowledging that it is *not* humans' ideas that determine their social being, but their social being that determines their ideas, then one would agree. Law is not simply the product of someone's mind, but more correctly, the reflection of social reality reproduced in a way that it serves the interests of the ruling class. However, this basic marxist premise is obscured by an over-emphasis on the merchant bourgeoisie's own trading activities and their legal theories. One is given the impression that the expansion of trade routes and the introduction of banking by the bourgeoisie were the motivating factors in changing feudal economic relations. These changes could only have occurred after more fundamental changes in the means of production. The message by Tigar and Levy for today's revolutionaries is that law is not something that is to be changed after the revolution, after the capture of State power, but rather it must be worked on and changed now as a necessary prerequisite for revolutionary change. Tigar and Levy conclude their study with an appeal for the development of a "jurisprudence of insurgency". That is jurisprudential activity aimed not just at reforming the law, but at challenging its basis and the social relations that the system is founded upon. The law is not a single monolith that is tight and able to resist all acts