

## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

*Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty*, Daniel P. Moynihan (New York: The Free Press, 1969).

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### Michael Parenti:

In this book Daniel Patrick Moynihan once more shows himself to be the well-publicized social critic who manages never to antagonize those who preside over the corporate, financial, educational, municipal, and political institutions of our nation. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* does not live up to the prepublication attention it received. Written in a hurried, evasive style, it offers a superficial and essentially second-hand account—much of it taken from the *New York Times*—of the origin and outcome of the anti-poverty program. According to the author, the poverty program was confusedly planned and soon became the captive of those who used the “maximum feasible participation” clause to lead the poor into fruitless confrontations with the powers that be. The end result was a defeat for the war on poverty.

It is not always clear where Moynihan stands on issues; his inclination is to touch all bases. One, however, can decipher the outline of an old-fashioned morality drama. The villains in this scenario are the middle-class “liberal-radical reformers” who presume to know what ails

society and who superimpose their own values on the poor. Specifically, their fault is to presume that the poor have the best understanding of "their problems and accordingly should be given the power to make decisions about it [sic]." If I understand Moynihan, reformers who encourage the poor to determine their own destiny are exercising an arrogant elitist directiveness!

It is Moynihan's own view that only the established institutions can properly fight the war on poverty. (Yet he does not thereby consider himself guilty of elitist superimposition.) He believes the poor lack the virtues necessary for proper political participation. Their involvement tends to be a disruptive influence, achieved only at great costs in civility. "It may be," he says, "that the poor are never 'ready' to assume power in an advanced society: the exercise of power in an effective manner is an ability acquired through apprenticeship and seasoning." (Speaking as one who has had direct contact with black communities in Newark, New York, and New Haven, I have been impressed repeatedly by the leadership abilities displayed by various elements among the black poor. If in fact their endeavors and their dramatizations often prove futile, it is not because they lack skills and seasoning but because they lack power.)

Moynihan asserts that the ghetto residents were never particularly interested in the war on poverty; he cites the light turnout for the various community board elections as evidence of apathy. But one striking characteristic of the dispossessed is their understandable suspicion that the ballot box rarely brings changes in their life conditions and that those who accede to office have little regard for their plight. Their electoral nonparticipation then is more often born of defeatism and cynicism than of apathy. Writing in 1968, as if the riots of 1967 had never occurred, Moynihan has yet to learn the difference between apathy and alienation.

At no time in this book do the poor themselves make an appearance. Their views, hopes, and grievances are never once heard, and no attention is given to the problems they face. The impression is inescapable, especially to anyone who knows ghetto residents, that Moynihan possesses, at best, only a limited second-hand understanding of the world of the black poor. He ignores the ample evidence unearthed by investigators like Studs Terkel, who points out that most black families are headed by hard-working, self-respecting, responsible parents who love and care for their children and who are victimized not by a lack of proper "motivation" but by long working hours, substandard wages, underemployment, job discrimination, deteriorating housing conditions,

rent-gouging landlords, urban redevelopment, overpriced shoddy goods, police brutality, a punitive and degrading welfare system, nonexistent recreational facilities, insufficient transportation, and abominable schools and hospitals. In short, the major causes of the poor's misery and low morale can be found in the mistreatment and exploitation accorded them by the socioeconomic system.

Moynihan has nothing to say about systemic injustices; rather he seems to fall back on those fanciful studies which conclude that "the sources of gang delinquency lie in the early socialization of male children in a lower class matriarchal home." He prefers the earlier Mobilization for Youth (MFY) program which was "a promising device" to "solve the private difficulties" of youth. For him, the *victims* of the system need to shape up, not the system.

If trouble comes to the system, it must be because outside agitators, in this case "OEO guerrillas," "ADA intellectuals," and "MFY theorists" arouse the placid poor, hoping to throw America "into the kind of chaos out of which revolutionary situations are made." Sounding a little like George Wallace, he alludes to "the various forms of public disorder either sanctioned, induced or led by middle-class liberal-radicals," a statement that will come as a surprise to the ghetto blacks who had no idea Whitey was behind all the arson and looting.

The author of *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* has the unbecoming habit of caricaturing other people's motives, thereby avoiding the necessity of having to confront their arguments. The MFY dedication to lower-class participation is at one point sarcastically dismissed as a product of the "changing fashion in ideas," "the 'thing' for the 1960's." Certain social theorists are treated as such: "Could it be that where the Jewish scholars Cohen and Miller watched the antics of the *goyim* with wonder and detachment, the Protestants Cloward and Ohlin, suffering servants of the Lord, had to perceive in the whole miserable business the morally autonomous individual struggling for salvation?"

In one curious outburst, Moynihan charges:

Social scientists love poor people. They also get along fine with rich people. (Not a few are wealthy themselves, or married to heiresses . . .) But alas, they do not have much time for the people in between [and] little sympathy with the desire for order, and anxiety about change, that are commonly enough encountered among working-class and lower-middle-class persons.

As if this were not enough, he claims there exists a rich-poor conspiracy against the virtuous lower-middle strata, an "elite-proletarian

axis" with elite journalists controlling the mass media and propagating "the romanticization of the proletariat."

The only substantive programmatic suggestion he proffers in this book betrays his own maximum misunderstanding of ghetto sentiments: Why, he asks with all apparent seriousness, were poverty funds not used to "support and expand the activities of the small fundamentalist churches of the Negro community and the Pentacostal sects of the Puerto Ricans?" After all, these are the only truly indigenous slum institutions. Is it that "hymn-shouting and bible-thumping somehow does [sic] not elicit in the fancies of the white radical quite the same fascinations as does the black demi-monde?" Mmm, yes, Pat, that must be it.

Moynihan cannot understand why anyone might think that the established political organizations "were somehow not meeting the needs of the people." He does not realize that slum dwellers do not share his highly romanticized and largely inaccurate picture of the beneficence of Tammany Hall. He points out that machine politicians like Daley of Chicago and Addonizio of Newark used every pressure at their command to prevent the poor from controlling community programs. But he never urges, that the political bosses exercise some of the seasoned flexibility and restraint which he demands of the poor. Once more his sympathies are with the victimizers rather than the victims. If city hall acted with self-interested, power-hungry, hostile, bullying intent toward the protestors, well, that's the name of the game. One should "not complain when bashed," and the agitators had only themselves to blame "when the animal defended itself." "The Left has much to answer for in American life," he admonishes, "and not least for having brought about a too ready rejection by men of the center of any assertion of proletarian cohesion and purpose." Less agile minds would think that the men of the center might occasionally be made to answer for their own behavior. Indeed, the poor can be held accountable because they are weak, but how do we hold the established institutional power-wielders responsible for *their* actions?

Among the other questions Moynihan evades are: How do the powerless effect changes in a system that responds only to power? And how do they achieve power when they are denied access to the resources which determine power? Moynihan seems to imply that there is a nonpolitical, noncontroversial, technocratic way of reallocating resources and bringing about substantive changes, but he does not reveal what it is or how it might be effected. His real concern seems to be that others be kept from causing conflict within the system.

In a recent article Marilyn Mercer noted that the educated money in Washington thinks that fighting-liberal-intellectual Pat Moynihan will not last more than six months with the Nixon Administration. My money says Dick and Pat will get along beautifully.

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### Dale Marshall:

Participation is a panacea—or so the rhetoric of the day might have us believe. Emphasis on participation comes not just from students, blacks, browns, and the poor, but from innumerable special task forces composed of prominent citizens studying problems of poverty, education, health, planning, law enforcement, housing, and urban renewal. And much of the federal legislation in these fields institutionalizes participation by requiring that consumers be made members of advisory groups traditionally composed only of the providers of services. This concern for participation is a response to the serious urban problems of our time.

The current importance and popularity of the subject of participation makes Daniel P. Moynihan's latest book, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, particularly relevant. It chronicles the translation of an idea into a government program; the idea of community action with citizen participation became an important part of the war on poverty. The book raises questions about citizen participation which are worthy of serious consideration, but it also presents difficulties. The latter will be discussed first.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *John Bollens, Fracine Rabinovitz, John C. Ries, and Ruth Roemer provided helpful suggestions for this review.*

Moynihan's polemic on the community action program will infuriate many. (He seems to be establishing some kinds of record as the author of works that insult a wide variety of minorities.) The book joins the burgeoning ranks of tattle-tale literature, exhibiting parallels with the memoirs of other members of the Democratic administrations, such as Clark Clifford and even Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' former secretary, Mary Gallagher. Like the other insiders, Moynihan tells the private side of events, emphasizing the mistakes and quirks and implying that he was aware of the problems and should not be held accountable. But the book presents other problems besides the ethical one of under what conditions it is proper for participants to try to vindicate themselves by telling the mistakes others made.

Moynihan is commendably explicit about the nature of the book. He calls it a personal essay rather than a rigorous evaluation of the community action program. In it he elaborates on a college lecture he gave in the spring of 1967. Based both on his personal observations and on secondhand information, the book brings together and develops themes he had treated in previous articles and speeches. The author calls attention to his own involvement in the war on poverty, admitting that he opposed making community action the sole feature of a war on poverty and felt an intellectual stake in bringing the internal contradictions of the program into the open.

Although what Moynihan is trying to say in this book is not quite clear, his main argument appears to be the following: The community action program failed to bring about desirable social change and instead engendered self-defeating conflict and violence. This failure is due to the radicalization of the people responsible for the program; they shifted from trying to help people enter the social system to organizing outsiders to attack the system. In other words, their concern with anomie changed to a concern with powerlessness.

This thesis underlies the first seven chapters of the book, chapters which are somewhat repetitious and really a series of separate essays rather than steps in a unified argument. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the cultural setting; the quest for community grew out of disillusionment with classical liberalism and the emergence of the professional reformers.<sup>1</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 describe the Ford Foundation's grey areas program, Mobilization for Youth, and the programs of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime. These were the models on which the Office of Economic Opportunity's program was based. The most interesting descriptive chapters are 5, 6, and 7, which trace the formulation of the

community action legislation and then the parallel declines of Mobilization for Youth and of community action programs. Here Moynihan's perceptions of the people involved add to the literature on the subject, whereas his earlier chapters seem thin compared with Marris and Rein's admirable treatment of the same topics.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 8, however, Moynihan changes his argument about why community action failed. In this concluding chapter he attempts to link his analysis of community action's failure with a more general thesis about the proper role of social scientists in the formulation of public policy. The failure is no longer blamed on radicalization but on misunderstanding. In a clever passage Moynihan criticizes the lack of clarity about the meaning of community action. "If administrators and politicians are going to play God with other people's lives (and still other persons' money), they ought at least to get what the divine intention is to be" (p. 168). He quickly qualifies this by saying that no one meaning had to be agreed upon, but the President's advisors ought to have been aware of the four distinct meanings attached to the community action idea (organizing the power structure, expanding it, confronting it, and assisting it) and made these meanings clear to others.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, Moynihan, too, is guilty of lack of clarity. He is not clear as to whether radicalization or misunderstanding is the cause of the failure of community action programs. Nor is he clear about whom he blames for the conflict and violence associated with the program. His general position on the latter issue is that some of the people connected with the formulation and implementation of community action radicalized it (or watched while it was radicalized)<sup>4</sup> in a way others never intended. But whom does Moynihan put in these categories? In one place he talks about the radicalization of the sponsors of community action, referring to Cloward and the members of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, such as Boone and Kravitz, who joined the Urban Areas Task Force. But later he seems to be thinking of the Shriver Task Force as the drafter and sponsor of community action when he says that the Urban Areas Task Force, with Jack Conway from the AFL-CIO as one of its co-chairmen, implemented community action in a way that "neither those who drafted it, those who sponsored it, nor those who enacted it ever in any way intended" (p. 98). The implication is that the Shriver Task Force, Congress, and the President were double-crossed.

Moynihan simplifies the intention of the Shriver Task Force in order to support his position that it was duped. He associates the Shriver group with the view that community action was a coordinating device. Yet he

fails to mention that Boone and Kravitz, whom he links with the conflict view of community action, were on the Shriver Task Force (Bibby and Davidson, 1967: 231-232). Other sources indicate that the members of the Shriver Task Force from the President's Committee wanted to involve the poor not just as therapy, but as a strategy for changing institutions. These sources further contradict Moynihan's assertion that maximum feasible participation was designed solely to insure that Southern Negroes would participate in the benefits of the program (Moynihan, 1969: 236; Marris and Rein, 1967: 210, 215; Kravitz, 1968). There are inconsistencies, then, in Moynihan's treatment of why the program failed, and who is to blame, as well as misrepresentation of intentions. Many of the arguments seem weak and based on Moynihan's biases without sufficient support.

Moynihan argues that the people responsible for community action—the social scientists, the foundation executives, and the government officials—misused social science by failing to stress the tentative nature of the hypothesis underlying the program. But he does not present evidence that the people responsible thought the idea of community action was anything more than an unproved hypothesis. This misrepresentation undoubtedly results from his negative feelings about social scientists. His bias is revealed in his explanation of the radicalization of the people responsible for community action programs. Moynihan argues that their passionate commitment to social change overrode social scientists' concern with the search for objective truth. He says that they have a desire to prove a case against middle-class society and contempt for the "working class, lower-middle class bureaucratic and political cadres" that run the cities (p. 111). They are unsympathetic to the "desire for order, and anxiety about change" characteristic of large segments of the population (p. 178). Equating the blindness of the intellectuals to the threat of violence in the 1960s with their blindness to the threat of subversion in the 1950s, Moynihan charges that during both periods the intellectuals had an interest in the political turmoil and misused their position to advance their interest. Moynihan assumes that the emotional attachment of social scientists to social reform makes inevitable the misuse of social science, which he says occurred in community action programs.

Moynihan's comments relating the misuse of social science by radical proponents to subsequent violence are weak. He links the radicalization of professional reformers with the violence of community action programs and implies that the reformers are largely responsible for the emergence

of the issue of participation and the turmoil of the 1960s. In some passages, he does acknowledge that other factors such as the reform tradition, the increasing size of cities, and the rise of Negro militancy contributed to these results. But Moynihan's emphasis on the radicalization of the proponents suggests a unicausal interpretation. Yet in an age characterized by popular rebellion against large bureaucratic organizations on the parts of students, teachers, and the right, as well as of minorities and the poor, the implication that professional reformers involved in community action programs brought all this about is fantastic. It surely attributes inordinate power to these reformers.

One can also challenge the implication that conflict and violence are always associated with community action programs. Even though the popular impression equates community action programs with violence, evidence is mounting that this impression is incorrect. Studies undertaken for the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty reveal that with very few exceptions community action programs have been characterized by service rather than confrontations (see Hallman, 1968). A major study of community action has also been carried out by the School of Social Welfare at Brandeis, for the Office of Economic Opportunity. The findings stress the substantial variation among community action agencies in the structure and content of participation, due largely to diverse local conditions. In only one-third of the agencies was an adversary or conflict strategy in evidence, mainly in large cities with large black populations. The study specifies patterns in the relationship between community action agencies and protests:

Where the mobilization of black protest had just begun the CAA became an important part of the development of an organizational base for protest. Where black protest had not emerged and where it had already become a fullfledged political movement, the CAA . . . had little or no significance for protest organization in the black community [Florence Heller School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare, 1969: 61].

Because of the importance of local forces in community action programs these protest patterns would have emerged "regardless of the language of the legislation or the preferences of federal administrators" (Florence Heller School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare, 1969). If these conclusions are supported by further research, they undermine Moynihan's stress on violence and the causal role of social theorists in community action programs.

Moynihan's concluding argument about the role of social scientists in the formulation of public policy is unconvincing. He says "the role of social science lies not in the formulation of social policy, but in the measurement of its results." This position fails to acknowledge that the evaluation of what works is fraught with value elements. Focusing on evaluation rather than on prescription does not avoid the problem of conflict among social scientists or misuse of social science.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the argument is deceptive. Is it significant to say that social scientists should be concerned with evaluation rather than formulation of policy when Moynihan acknowledges that evaluation contributes to the development of policy? And Moynihan does not object to social scientists as citizens being directly involved in the formulation of policy where action must be taken without sufficient information. If Moynihan is simply saying social scientists ought not to talk as if they know something for certain when they do not, we can all agree (and perhaps this professional canon needs periodic emphasis). But when he says social scientists ought not to offer theories of behavior that "raise the possibility . . . of bringing about mass behavioral change" (p. 191), then many of us would object vigorously.

Underlying Moynihan's view of the role of social science is his assumption about effective social change. Because this assumption helps explain his attitude toward the idea of community action, it is worthy of more explicit development and analysis than Moynihan provides. He assumes opportunities for desirable social change are scarce; therefore, those interested in change must be careful that the limited options which do appear are used wisely. Since it is not possible to foresee with certainty major social developments, Moynihan says engineers of social change must be moderate in their projections of the future and restrained in their courses of action to avoid exacerbating the emerging trends in society.

The weakness of some of Moynihan's arguments and his lack of clarity do not negate the book's value for those interested in participation and strategies of social change. Three questions raised by *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* are worthy of careful thought.

(1) What is the goal of participation?

Moynihan illustrates the diverse purpose behind demands for participation. Participation may be a means of obtaining power to promote social change or a scheme for individual therapy, for adapting individuals to society.

(2) Is participation an effective strategy for obtaining social change or individual therapy?

Moynihan's answer is no. He suggests that the poor may never be ready to exercise effective power in a complex society (p. 136-137; <sup>6</sup>see also Bloomberg and Schmandt, 1968). To support this position he points to the minimal social change and maximum opposition to change resulting from community action programs (Moynihan, 1969: xiii, 138). Moynihan also challenges the view that participation is therapeutic. Participation, in his opinion, does not decrease deviant behavior (p. 188). Moynihan does cite examples of both social and individual changes brought about by community participation (pp. 129-130). But, according to his evaluation, the negative results of this participation outweigh the positive ones. The alternative he prefers is revealed in his answer to another important question raised by the book.

(3) Is participation an effect of economic change or a cause of economic change?

Moynihan adheres to the former view. Until there have been major economic changes in the life of the poor, he feels that participation can only be achieved by means of conflict (p. 163). Moynihan does half-heartedly suggest some government strategies for integrating minorities into the community without conflict, such as trade union and church organizations of minorities. But he actually sides with Alinsky's position that rancorous conflict is a necessary precondition for participation by the poor.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even though Moynihan qualifies his attack on community action with numerous references to the power of the idea of increasing democratic participation, he opposed participation as a government strategy because "participatory democracy can mean the end of both participation and democracy" (p. 164).

Moynihan sees economic measures such as fixed full employment and income maintenance as more desirable alternatives. They do not entail conflict and thus are more compatible with his view of the limited opportunities for social change. Once economic change has been achieved, Moynihan feels, participation will be possible without conflict. But how can such economic changes be brought about? What forces will push for them if the poor aren't organized and participating? Moynihan says such changes could have been achieved in the Johnson administration even without the participation of the poor, but the opportunity was lost (p. 193). One wonders how effective these economic measures would be even if they could be implemented. Does higher income automatically increase effect for the system if relative economic position is unchanged and level of aspiration is not met?

These questions about participation and social change and other questions about the role of social scientists in the policy process, posed

by Moynihan's book, need to be raised. They make a contribution to a field where the literature is relatively sparse and impressionistic. And they provide a needed warning that no matter what else it is, participation is not a panacea.

Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of this book has a special fascination because Moynihan is the public's idea of the reigning urban expert. As such he is considered a fair target for the rest of us who are taking sides in our own professional great debates as to whether or not the public creature called Daniel Patrick Moynihan is simply an articulate fraud. And the professional jealousy toward Moynihan is heightened by the pleasure he takes in criticizing the liberals' sacred cows. Yet Moynihan persists, well aware that his criticism creates enemies for him among those who feel that "any criticism of liberal programs is illiberal, because everything is so precarious that any criticism is just going to give the enemy ammunition (Evening Star, 1968).

If the response to this latest Moynihan foray into the arena of liberal shibboleths eschews name-calling in favor of analysis, we can be grateful to Moynihan for dramatizing important problems. If the response matches Moynihan's style we are in for a decline in the moderation he professes and an increase in misunderstanding. In any case, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan finishes serving in the Nixon administration, the postscript he could write would be an interesting addition to an already provocative book.

## NOTES

1. This term is also used by Peter Marris and Martin Rein (1967).
2. Moynihan does acknowledge his debt to Marris and Rein (1967).
3. Studies of the legislative process suggest lack of clarity is not atypical. See, for example, Bailey and Mosher (1968: 188-189).
4. Moynihan never names the "high-level staff aides" he implicates in the deception (p. 170).
5. Moynihan cites the Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, to illustrate the contribution evaluation can make, but fails to mention that this study has spawned a series of scholarly challenges and reinterpretations. See Bailey and Mosher (1968: 178).
6. Cloward and Piven seem to agree now.
7. See the articles by Gamson and by Rosenthal and Crain on relations between participation and conflict, in Clark (1968).

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