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The Social Unit Plan (1916–1920): An Experiment in Democracy and Human Services Fails

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Participatory democracy and community development are explored by looking back to the bold experiment undertaken in Cincinnati, Ohio, from 1916 to 1920, called the Social Unit Plan. It is a glimpse into the economic, political, cultural and social consciousness of those who participated in the experiment during that period in American history. The paper suggests that by understanding the cultural and social lives of participants, our awareness of the range of options or possible efforts at addressing human social welfare needs in the past and the present are enhanced.

The Social Unit Plan (1916–1920) was an "experiment" conducted by the National Social Unit Organization intended to implement the concept of democracy and community participation within a large urban center in order to address the effects of urbanization and industrial capitalism ongoing in American life. The experiment was planned as a cooperative effort between recipients and providers of services. The base of this "cooperative commonwealth" was the belief in "making democracy genuine and efficient—providing the machinery through which the people [could] express their desires easily and continuously, and putting at the disposal of all of the people a consensus of expert skills" (Schaffer, 1971, p. 161). From its conception, The National Organization met with great enthusiasm from all parts of the country and drew prominent national figures as leaders in its efforts to address the "ills" of the Nation.

In the March 16, 1919, Sunday edition of the New York Times, Dorothy Thompson wrote an extensive article with numerous photographs describing the "adventure in democracy" as the Social Unit plan was called by its founders:

> "A corner grocery, and men and women gathered around a ballot box, discussing candidates for a 'block council'. . . . A narrow street agleam with star and candle light, where groups of children sing sweet tunes and neighbors toss coins for their songs. . . . An immaculate health station crowded with mothers and children—not poor mothers only, but fine looking women with well cared for children. . . . These are glimpses into the life of a unique community, where 15,000 men, women, and children are adventuring in democracy" (Thompson, 1919, p. 5)

Within a year of Dorothy Thompson's enthusiastic description, the "adventure in democracy" experiment in the Mohawk-Brighton district of Cincinnati, Ohio, was to close operations. Less than a year later, the National Social Unit Organization would go into receivership and nationally prominent supporters would abandon any association with this effort toward community participation and democracy. It vanished into a changing society.

The revisiting of social movements, their means for achieving social ends, and the world within which they evolved can provide the distance from which insights can be gained as to the workings of our present society and its people in their attempts to address human needs. This paper will describe the National Social Unit Plan Organization's Mohawk-Brighton demonstration project in Cincinnati, Ohio (1917–1920) and, in particular, its notion of participatory democracy. The author will then address the historical/cultural context within which the Social Unit operated. This brief description of the times and words of the participants will provide only a glimpse into the "forms men, women, and children develop and use in experiencing the world" but a glimpse which expresses history as a lived experience and an expression of a people's culture in time (Susman, 1984, p. 288). Looking back from our present time, I will suggest that the cultural context of the project was a significant factor in its demise and that transformed manifestations of the social consciousness of that moment in history are contributing to our present day attempts at addressing human services.

Wilbur Phillips and Participatory Democracy

Writing in the *Bulletin*, a newspaper published by the Social Unit Organization in Cincinnati, Ohio, Wilbur Phillips (1940),

founder of the National Social Unit Organization and director of the Cincinnati demonstration project, responded to questions of why the organization's money was used to organize a community and not merely given to charitable groups or directly to the disadvantaged. His response expresses the fundamental purpose of the Social Unit concept and the organization's approach to the underlying causes of social problems:

> The Social Unit Plan aims to create a community organization which shall not merely relieve suffering but get at the underlying problems which the community formulates. The backers of the plan believe that money invested in the services of the workers to create such an organization will be paid to the people ten times over in money saved by the prevention of sickness, unemployment, and poverty.
>
> The Social Unit Organization is not a Charity Organization Society. It is not trying to relieve suffering through out-door relief in the Mohawk-Brighton district. That would be like bailing out a boat with a hole in the bottom without stopping to plug up the hole. What the Social Unit Organization is trying to do is to *prove that by organizing after a certain definite plan* the people can find out the true facts about poverty, sickness, needless deaths, and other social ills, and can gradually discover how, with patience and wise effort, those ills may finally be met in a permanently effective way. (P. 203, 205).

Wilbur Phillips was the son of a Baptist clergyman in a small town in New York. In his book, *Adventuring for Democracy*, Phillips commented on his father's life in the following passage: "poverty stalked his steps, dragging with heavy hand at his threadbare coat-tails . . . [but] above all else, [he was] a lover of human beings [and] found compensation in the life he led, and particularly in the daily service he rendered his needy flock," (Phillips, 1940, p. 6). He expressed some of the roots of his later work when he wrote of how poor women had "claimed [his] allegiance . . . those women who scrub and cook and wash and mend as [his] own mother did in order to give their children a chance in life" (Phillips, 1940, p. 16).

Wilbur Phillips attended Harvard University where he worked on the *Harvard Crimson* and was consumed by doubts and questions concerning the purpose of life. After graduation, he wandered through Europe. He returned home to an opportunity to work for the New York Milk Committee. It was during this time

that he came to realize that protecting the lives of babies was "a highly complicated social problem in which many factors besides milk stations had a part to play" (Phillips, 1940, p. 59–60). He believed that poverty and its consequences could not be changed through charity.

In 1911 he and his wife were appointed executives of the Milwaukee Child Welfare Commission. Milwaukee had just elected a socialist mayor and there was political support for the development of a comprehensive approach to infant care. The program developed and coordinated the work of doctors, nurses, social workers, and community residents in preventive efforts. Eight women known to the community were recruited to work with local health nurses to contact, educate and organize the mothers to utilize the services at the local community stations (milk, child care, and medical examinations). A new election reverted the political atmosphere to a mainstream political agenda and the program was disbanded in 1912. As if to foretell the future, this successful program, supported by those local community people involved as well as responsible community groups, was disbanded by mainstream political values of the period.

Wilbur Phillips' experiences in New York and Milwaukee had coalesced into his development of the Social Unit Plan. Steeped in the themes of the Progressive era, Phillips went about a "scientific," systematic and pragmatic "engineering" of the relationship of members of a community and the services they used or needed as members of a society. The fundamental purpose of the Social Unit Plan for Phillips was its "method of democratically organizing and educating a whole community so that people [would] be able to plan and carry out any type of program. Any form of activity they wish[ed]. These potentialities [were] boundless" (Phillips, 1940, p. 338). Others, supportive of the Social Unit Plan, described its conceptualization and implementation of participatory democracy as the "most significantly conservative piece of community work going on in America, as the type of community work which will bring about a gradual modernization of industry and government without violent fractures, [and] without civil wars" (Colliers, 1919, p. 2). John Elliot, President of the National Association of Neighborhood Workers, reflected in his talk before the National Social Unit Conference in October 1919, that in the

Mohawk-Brighton district "you find a real organization that takes the people of the neighborhood and makes them care for each other; that makes them work for each other. And in doing that I believe that we are doing the most patriotic kind of work and something that we can all unite in doing" (Elliot, 1919, p. 5). During a discussion session at the conference, Dr. Thomas P. Hart, of Cincinnati, editor of *The Catholic Telegraph* commented:

> Social Unit Plan has made, and is making now, social workers of every man, woman and child in the Mohawk-Brighton District. Not workers to go abroad and, with a patronizing manner, try to tell people how to live, but social workers who will meet together in their own neighborhoods, and confer together, and tell themselves how to live in a better and more intelligent and more progressive manner. That is where the democracy of this plan comes in, exciting the social sense of the people of this community so that they become interested in improving conditions in their neighborhood" (Collier & Elliot, 1919, p. 6–7).

Edward T. Devine, a former President of the National Conference of Social Work and an editor of *The Survey* defined Phillip's experiment in democratic organization as "participation by the whole body of citizens in questions which heretofore, for the most part, had been decided by a small minority" (Devine, 1919, p. 13).

Participatory democracy was for Phillips the central purpose of the experiment taking place in Cincinnati. The primary intent of the Social Unit Plan was "to promote a type of democratic organization through which citizenship as a whole can participate directly in the control of community affairs, while at the same time making constant use of the highest technical skill available" (Devine, 1919, p. 4). Phillips argued with his staff during the later siege of conservative attacks that "the theory is the main point at issue . . . we are not interested in the practical services just as things in themselves, their chief value is a test of the theory" (Phillips, 1940, p. 327).

Organization and Structure of the Social Unit Plan

In 1916, the National Social Unit Organization was established in New York City. The National Organization had on its board of directors such prominent citizens and supporters as Mrs.

J. Borden Harriman, Mrs. Daniel Guggenheim, and Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson. The National Organization was going to provide the organizational expertise and the start up money to support a demonstration project in a major American city for a three-year trial period. It would be up to the citizens to decide if the project had been successful and if they wanted to maintain the organization. There was considerable national publicity given the proposed demonstration project and many cities made efforts to have the project located in their city.

The Social Unit Plan was appealing in many ways to conservative "reformers." It attempted to implement the basic notions of good citizenship, responsibility, community participation, local neighborhood-level decision making and self-help. It was based on self-help and participation rather than charity. It thus reflected the ideals of individualism. But, it was the collective participation that would come to be a cause for fear and non-support.

The Social Unit Plan was based on a simple organizational plan for the community. The entire district was to be organized into both a geographical Citizen's Council and a Vocational or Occupational Council comprising different vocational groups living or working within the district. The Citizen's Council would represent the consumers of services while the Occupational Council represented the providers of technical and skilled professional help. The Citizen's Council would consist of representatives of "block units" of a set number of families. Each block would have a local resident (who would be paid $4.00 per week) as their "block" worker. The block workers (all women) were to establish close relationships with their neighbors and thus be in a position to collect information about needs and issues which could then be addressed by the technical and skilled experts.

Implementation Through Preventive Medical Services

Negotiations for attracting the National Organization's demonstration project to Cincinnati were carried on by the Municipal Tuberculosis Committee represented by the Chairman, Dr. Landis, City Health Officer, and Courtenay Dinwiddie, Superintendent of the Anti-Tuberculosis League. Efforts were already underway by the committee to establish community health centers to function in prevention efforts. It was, in part, this interest of

the Cincinnati representatives that resulted in the Social Unit's focusing on health services for its demonstration project and for Cincinnati to be chosen as the site of the project by the National Organization. The National Organization had proposed that the initial demonstration focus on public health issues. Lowrie (1920) reported that the Baltimore newspaper, *The Town*, noted that the Social Unit Plan could "radically affect the future alignment of medical practice and social work . . . throughout the country" by creating a collaborative relationship between the experts and the local citizen groups or consumers (1920, p. 557).

The first service established was post-natal care for infants and mothers. Block workers and visiting nurses educated the block members on the importance of registering the birth of children in order that services could be provided immediately. Post-natal examinations were offered by the doctors in the local clinics. The nurses worked with the mothers and provided medical attention in the homes. The block workers provided the bridge between the experts and the members of the neighborhood. They collected information and educated their neighbors about the services. They provided feedback to the service providers concerning any problems with the structure or the need for services. An example of the coordination of services was the handling of the influenza epidemic of 1918. The Social Unit Plan organization was able to have educational and procedural materials printed within a day of the first warnings that an epidemic might be starting. Leaflets were distributed to nearly every household in the district listing the symptoms and giving instructions on how to take care of family members. Emergency examination stations and dispensary services were set up to act quickly to each new case. This rapid and thorough response resulted in the district having the lowest incidence of death from influenza of any district in the city (Chaddock, 1919).

The Social Unit Plan in Historical and Cultural Context

Susman (1984) has commented that history is "an aspect of growing awareness and understanding that enables us to understand the world, function in it, and even change it. . . . history, like culture of which it is a part, is something lived, something

used" (p. 288). The possible confluence of circumstances occurring during the Social Unit's development and demise was something lived out in the consciousness of those who participated as members of an American community and a changing world. A glimpse into the cultural and social lives of those who participated in the civil life of Cincinnati enhances our awareness of what was possible or permissible for consideration as a means for providing services and structuring the civil lives of participants. The significant changes in the consciousness of citizens during the progressive period are with us today and suggest possible limitations for present efforts at addressing human social welfare needs. The following will briefly sketch out American culture as lived out by the white middle-class and working-class communities of Cincinnati and similar communities during this period of change.

The City of Cincinnati and the Start of the Twentieth Century

The Social Unit Plan demonstration project took place in what had been called the Queen City of the West as Cincinnati had been the gate way to the West for the early part of the nineteenth century (Harlow, 1950). Cincinnati grew from a town of six square miles in 1850 to a metropolis of 50.6 square miles in 1910 (Miller, 1981). In 1905, more than $3,000,000 was invested in ten and fifteen-story office buildings, department stores, hotels and restaurants in the new specialized areas that emerged as "function" began to segregate the community into downtown, suburbs, and industrial areas (Miller, 1981). Transportation, electricity, and communications had transformed the physical reality of the citizens and their sense of community. Transportation development had permitted individuals to live away from where they worked and played. These changes were reflected in a growing number of "white-collar" employees and professionals such as "copyists, accountants, salesgirls, stenographers . . . in downtown firms [as well as] teachers, medicine, law, librarians, social workers, managers, [and] clerks" (Miller 1981, p. 15). During the time of the Social Unit Plan experiment in the Mohawk-Brighton district, Cincinnati had the largest percentage of wage earners (14.5%) of comparable sized cities (Lowrie, 1920). Cincinnati was second to Philadelphia in the number of homes "owned

free of encumbrances" and the majority of working men lived in homes (Miller, 1981). Many of these homes were acquired by the workers through local building associations and, according to the spokesman for the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, "represented years of their personal savings . . . [as well as] interest in the welfare of their own city" (quoted in Miller, 1981, p. 35).

Cincinnati was considered a conservative community but it had embarked on some innovative efforts as a community. During the turn of the century, the city had constructed one of the largest municipally owned railroads in the country and by 1920 was busy constructing a rapid transit belt line exceeding 20 million dollars. The University of Cincinnati was supported by city taxes and had developed one of the first major cooperative educational programs in the country. There was a strong relationship between the city government, industry, business and the student cooperative program. The Cincinnati City Hospital had been recently constructed at the cost of four million dollars with an annual outlay in operating expenses of more than four hundred thousand dollars. The Taxpayers Association focused its reform on creating a city run as a business for efficiency and economic soundness. The Central Labor Council promoted and gave tips to its members on personal growth, upward mobility, individualism, education and home ownership. Miller (1981) describes the attitudes of the unions and labor as rejecting even contact with the new immigrants from Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia as undesirables without initiative or vocations. His analysis of the attitude of the city power structure showed a very narrow mindedness that was self-serving and defensive, although they considered themselves progressive and reform minded

The growth and development taking place in Cincinnati represented progressive and reform efforts of the powerful groups in the city. The Chamber of Commerce Annual Report, 1913, stated that "the problems that confront us will not be settled by the radical nor by the standpatter, but by the progressive conservative . . . [and that] a new order of things must prevail [but] the knife that will perform the operation must not cut so deeply enough to kill" (quoted in Miller, 1981, p. 121).

The actual residents of the site of the experiment within the city, the Mohawk-Brighton district, represented skilled and semi-

skilled workers, small business owners, and professional and semi-professional wage earners. Wilbur Phillips (1940) described the district as "not unlike a small town, with its schools, [and] its more or less prosperous citizens" (p. 183).

The Progressive Era

The Social Unit Plan expressed the ideals of a period in history generally referred to as the Progressive Era. This appellation has been assumed by many to have represented a monolithic liberal attack on the corruption of "big business" and the conditions of poverty. The historical study of progressivism reveals that there was no specific social/political issue or group of people who could be identified as descriptive of an exclusive progressivism (Rice, 1977; Weibe, 1995). The progressive movement consisted of numerous shifting coalitions around different issues with the specific nature of those coalitions varying from situation to situation (Filene, 1967). Rice (1977) comments that the characteristics of progressive and conservative political leaders were not appreciatively different. What might be taken as a common thread was the intent to approach social and community issues from the perspective of science, engineering and corporate management principles and technology. The belief in creating a more efficient and productive social machinery was a progressive theme. Reformers and muckrakers believed in the ability to create a better society through modern corporate management, organizational efficiency and creativity even as they deplored their consequences. Although looked at as dehumanizing by some social critics, the emerging culture of abundance was also viewed as an opportunity to find "solution[s] to fundamental human and social problems, a new world of fulfillment and even liberation" (Sussman, 1984, p. xxix).

American democracy was forged in the privileges of white land owners who saw themselves as individuals free of European class hierarchies. The popular elections open to white males had a leveling effect on class differences and created a sense of being united as The American People (Weibe, 1995). Reformers saw the growing power of industrial influence and socioeconomic inequity as destroying their notion of American democratic consciousness. Social critics called for a revival of American democ-

racy in the form of citizen participation in government. Phillip's Social Unit Plan expressed these early ideal goals. Yet, the concern for efficiency and effective management was translated into democracy expressed in the "role of the people . . . to elect good leaders but . . . the leaders and their subordinates should . . . then follow the general public interest unfettered by direct influences from the masses" (Chambers, 1992, p. 171). Paradoxically, the reform movement's push for efficiency and skilled management ultimately resulted in an abandonment of the lower-classes and the immigrants who were ill prepared to participate in the new engineered world of progress. Robert Weibe (1995) describes the consequence of progressive concern as not with "getting out the vote but getting things done [which resulted in a shift from] making governments more responsive to people's needs [to resulting in] making them less responsible to people's voices" (p. 165).

This shift was supported, in part, by the human devastation of World War I, which left many social critics and reformers disenchanted. Pell (1984) notes that they lost faith in the masses who were now viewed as "naive and even dangerous" (p. 11). In terms of the shift in the thoughts of social critics and progressive reformers, Phillips' faith in people to participate directly in democracy was fast becoming an anachronism. Meanwhile, the masses were changing how they viewed their lives and their futures.

The Changing Cultural Context of Daily Life and the Social Unit Plan

Looking at a society's culture is not meant to imply that culture exists as a specific normative condition equally experienced and lived by all during a period of time. The "culture" described here influenced everyone in contact with its many forms of expression but had no exact form for all. Differences in socioeconomic status and ethnicity provided just two of the innumerable variables affecting lived cultural contexts in this changing world out of which the Social Unit Plan emerged. The dominant culture reflected white, native born, male privileges and the following descriptions must be understood from that point of view.

The times of the progressive period saw the changing consciousness of persons as members of a growing mass culture which was creating a desire for material things. This was a shift in the expression of the Puritan metaphors, hard work, sacrifice,

self-denial, and selfsufficiency to the metaphors of self-expression through the corporate generated demand for goods, spending, buying, materialism and consumerism. What is suggested here is that the world was changing not only in its physicality but in its meaning and the way people lived and dreamed their lives. This was a period of transformation, one in which ideas and values are transformed and variations on cultural themes emerge and change in the consciousness of people. For example, the beliefs of the Puritan world were not replaced by the changes but were transformed in terms of understanding and expression yet maintaining an ethos of American democracy, individualism, and personal responsibility. The Social Unit Plan took place within the cultural context of this changing consciousness which impacted its reception as an alternative social structure.

As evidence of the changing cultural context of the times, Susman (1984) lists the appearance of such words in the vocabulary of the period as "plenty, play, leisure, recreation, self-fulfillment, dreams, pleasure, immediate gratification, personality, public relations, publicity, [and] celebrity" (p. xxiv). Words are indicators of how people are constructing meaning. They act as metaphorical constructs or the lens through which a "culture" interprets, understands and acts in the world (Lackoff and Johnson, 1980). These new words reflected the change in consciousness.

The start of the twentieth century saw a search for individuality in terms of self-fulfillment and self-expression in the form of success and achievement, and their symbolic material markers such as an automobile, clothing, radios, and private homes in suburbia. Freud had come to give a series of lectures at Clark University in 1909. By 1915, *Good Housekeeping* magazine was running a series of popularized versions of psychoanalysis (Heller & Rudnick, 1991). The "self-help" and "self-improvement" movements were of growing interest with enormous sales in books on the subject. Susman (1984) describes these changing experiences through emerging institutions such as "department stores ("places of plenty"), restaurants, hotels, [as well as] amusement parks, . . . planned suburbs and the new profession of interior decorating . . . the comics, [and the] moving pictures" (p. xxvi). The world was changing and the ideas of whom they, the citizens of Cincinnati, were and what was important in their lives was

swiftly changing too. Individualism was becoming a private affair of material success and pleasure. As noted above, this changing world view was most available in the growing white middle-class and skilled working class.

The Changing Face of Individualism

Pell suggests that it is the very notion of the importance of the "individual" that distinguishes this country from similar democracies but which have a history of collectivity. John Chambers (1992) describes the American perspective as "unlike their British counterparts, [in that Americans] tended to assume that the principles of individualism, competition, and governmental inefficiency were laws of God" (p. 6). Although there was never a time when American government did not engage in some form of support or promotion of the needs of business, the *ethos* was a belief in the "self-regulation" of the marketplace or non-interference with individual effort and achievement. Robert Weibe's (1995) cultural history of American democracy contends that beyond the notion of popular self-government, at the heart of the American belief in democracy is a belief in individual self-determination. The industrialization, urbanization, corporatism of American life resulted in individuals acquiring "what were in effect property rights over themselves . . . this personalized understanding of property made industriousness central to the meaning of modern individuals" (Weibe, 1995, p. 13). The American myth of "rags to riches" was a theme which ran deep in the American consciousness. It was expressed with many variations and accommodations as the context of life changed within American society.

Reform, Corporatism, Individualism and Democracy

With the rapid changes to mass production, advertisement, the creation of materialism and consumerism, and the development of larger corporations, the robber baron was replaced by oligopoly and management looking for expansion and control. It was this "corporate revolution" that spurred the battle against the trusts. As corporations combined and consolidated, their success threatened the very ethos of individualism which made this expansion possible. Smaller companies, merchants, craftsmen, businessmen and unions of the period joined in confronting what they

perceived as a threat to their own chances of individual success. Individualism represented a personal challenge in a new form. Frederick Turner had proclaimed the "West" closed and settled. The new opportunities for success lie in business and work. This was the new frontier for the "rugged individual." Unions did not strike to eliminate the wage labor market but to improve working conditions, wages, and protect skilled workers against immigrants within the economic system that was providing an increasing standard of living for its members.

Wage labor had increased and America was quickly becoming a "nation of employees" (Chambers, 1992). The American myth of "rages to riches" was an important incentive for the employee to "make it" in the corporate world as a part of management or as labor. Individualism was a state of mind, the belief that you are independent and "self-sufficient" by the "sweat of your own brow" and can obtain material things which signify this personal achievement. Corporate capitalism and consumerism had become the new "West" and it was by means of corporate capitalism that the individual could express "his" (this was a white male world) individual achievements.

This description does not purposefully hide the fact that 40% of the population of the United States lived in abject poverty. The muckrakers' stories and photography were brought into the homes of increasing numbers of middle and upper-class homes in part by means of the new consumerism and technological advances of corporate capitalism. But the resulting reforms were, for the most part, to protect the American beliefs of individualism and democracy expressed in terms of a changing meaning and context of American life. Importantly, those with political power could not see a world any different from this natural order expressed in the American rhetoric of individualism and democracy. The intentions of many involved in reform was to protect democracy and individual rights by means of the "scientific engineering" of the system to make it as efficient and productive as corporations. Despite muckraking and reform efforts, individualism and limited collectivity or government was sustained and transformed during the Progressive era. Democracy was understood to mean personal control of one's own life and limited control of the institutions of government or collectivity that

insure persons their individual rights. Barry Shain (1994) describes American individualism as a state of consciousness which is "suspicious of societal, congregational, local governmental, and possibly even familial intrusions into the private realm of the individual, and usually condemns communal oversight and restrictions as illegitimately invasive" (p. 87). Individualism transformed and conformed to the new mass culture and corporate politics. The American ethos evolved and transformed the manifestation of individuality and democracy and thus retained the belief in the rights of the "individual as against the collectivity" (Pell, 1968, p.6).

The progressive white middle-class and skilled labor of Cincinnati reflected this shift in consciousness to a realm of private lives. In contrast, the Social Unit Plan was founded on a belief in community and a utopian dream of the people working intimately in directing the civil and social structures effecting their lives. Thus, the Social Unit Plan was not only becoming an anachronism in terms of social critics and progressive thought but was becoming out of step with the swiftly changing consciousness of the people themselves.

The Demise of The Social Unit Experiment and the National Organization

At the height of the National Social Unit Organization's success, Franklin K. Lane, the Secretary of the Interior in President Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, was made honorary Executive of the national organization. On Wednesday, March 30, 1921, a brief article tucked into the financial section of the *New York Times* noted that an application had been made to the New York State Supreme Court for appointment of a receiver for the National Social Unit Organization. The complainant asserted that the National Organization owed him $362.00. The Social Unit Plan experiment in the Mohawk-Brighton District of Cincinnati had closed its doors in November 1920. The National Organization went into receivership and the idea was abandoned as a movement.

In October 1919, Dr. Devine's report on the Social Unit Plan to the National Conference focused the community debate over the Social Unit Plan on a key issue. He noted that "the Social

Unit concept goes deeper than particular political institutions or reforms of government. It penetrates to the very heart of the social order and raises the challenge as to whether the people are or are not capable of deciding, with stimulated and socially controlled expert assistance, what their needs are and how they shall be met" (Devine, 1919, p. 7). Was the community willing to accept in fact that definition of democracy, the rhetorical definition used by ordinary citizens, orators and politicians? Edward Devine then put forth the central question by asking "if the social unit plan succeeds, to what does it logically lead?" and responded that it is, in other words, a potential substitute for existing government . . . not only for existing municipal departments and government, but also for voluntary social agencies . . . and the founders of the Social Unit have not denied this" (Devine, 1919, p. 8). It was this potential for fundamental change in American individualism and democracy that contributed to the disavowing of the project in Cincinnati and nationally. The Reverend J. Howard Melish, a national figure of the time and a member of the National Organization, acknowledged the fears of those opposing the experiment: "It is not that these men are villains, individually. Most of them are fine fellows. But they think [the] unit threatens the whole order for which they stand, the order that not only supports their personal interests, as they see them, but the order which most of them believe is best for everyone" (Phillips, 1940, p. 325). Wilbur Phillips posited the American consciousness of the time as he saw it in similar tones. He argued that to believe in democracy meant that one had to allow for participation of citizens in the organization and control of production and distribution of resources. Phillips saw no compromise, democracy and participation were the same. He characterized his opponents at the time as thinking: "I regret to say this, but I'm a practical man and don't believe you are going to change human nature. Men have always fought for all they can get—and always will. The idea of a cooperative—a democratic—society is a beautiful one, I'll admit. But it won't work. If anyone tries to put that over, I'll fight" (Phillips, 1940, p. 367).

Technically, the Social Unit experiment was disbanded because of lack of funding support from the city of Cincinnati. Although two independent commissions had found "a sincere

and active attempt . . . to introduce [democratic control]" with no evidence of "preaching of any political or economic program," the Council of Social Agencies had refused to jeopardize their fund raising by continuing to support the Social Unit project (Norton, 1919, p. 186). The Council of Social Agencies considered the fact that "the Cincinnati War Chest has been made possible by the gifts of all the people, many of whom at the present time would be unwilling to contribute to the Social Unit experiment," thus funding would end after completing their contractual agreements with the National Organization (Council of Social Agencies, 1919, p. 34).

Although it has been asserted by other authors that fear of Bolshevism or failure in community organizing efforts resulted in the Mohawk-Brighton experiment's demise, it must be remembered that both the demonstration project and the national organization vanished as a social movement at about the same time and as the progressive movement was ending (Shaffer, 1971; Betten, & Austin 1990). Even though the "Red Scare" and Attorney General Palmer's raids were taking place in 1919, the "purges" were disappearing by early 1920. From June of 1919, employment and prosperity were exceeding those during the war (Coben, 1972). By the time the Social Unit experiment and the National Organization were disbanded, those "proclaiming the need for one hundred percent Americanism [were speaking] to an audience which no longer urgently cared" (Coben, 1972, p. 157). What remained was the fundamental American consciousness that could not conceive of their own society in any other form. Both the consciousness of the growing middle class of Cincinnati and the nation were not compatible with the idea of true participatory democracy in the production and distribution of services at the grass roots level. What had brought about this swift end in progressive thought was, in part, a transformed consciousness of a nation and its people.

Arthur Link (1973) describes the contributing factor in the changing consciousness and the demise of the progressive movement as a "widespread, almost wholesale, defection from [progressivism and social concern's] ranks of the middle-classes" (p. 113). This new and expanding middle-class was both a sign and a signifier of the changing cultural order based upon corporate

capitalism and personal enhancement. Link (1973) described this new consciousness as a manifestation of a new:

> "business civilization based not on monopoly and restriction but upon a whole new set of business values: mass production and consumption, short hours and high wages, full employment, welfare capitalism, and what was more important, virtually the entire country acknowledges that the nation's destiny was in good hands. It was little wonder, therefore, that the whole complex of groups constituting the middle classes . . . had little interest in rebellion or even mild reform proposals that seemed to imperil their leadership and control (p. 113).

Social welfare and the provision of human services are obviously complex undertakings and our understanding requires consideration of many confluences of power and resources. Yet, more fundamental than these influences, the very sense or consciousness of what needs to be done and what options are available circumscribes the possibilities available for deliberation. Parenti (1970) contends that a fundamental component of what constitutes power within a social context is "not to prevail in a struggle but to predetermine the agenda of the struggle—to determine whether certain questions ever reach the competition stage" (p. 502). In this light, the cultural values or meanings expressed within the American ethos of individualism, democracy, and corporate capitalism did constrain and inhibit the possibilities available to the influential citizens in determining Cincinnati's approach to social changes brought on by industrialization, science, technology, and urbanization. These physical changes and intellectual advances resulted in a redefinition of American democracy and its corollary, individualism that moved away from collective participation toward a modern, transformed version of individual achievement, expression, and responsibility.

Implications for Community Participation in Social Welfare

American society has evolved at its heart the ethos of free democratic-based citizenry as well as a belief in market capitalism. In a fundamental way the consequences of the juxtaposition of these basic ideas are an ongoing conflict of interests and values.

Fainstein and Fainstein (1993) have proposed that when the egalitarian values that are the foundation of our democratic ideals of citizen participation results in a push for "social protection from the inequalities generated by capitalist mechanisms and regulation of industries, they threaten to destroy the self-regulating markets at the core of capitalism," there is an inherent conflict in interest and values.

If the intent of participatory democracy or developing access to decision making to address the consequences of socioeconomic inequalities are the goals of community practitioners in human services, then the outlook is bleak for community practice theory and practice. If the examples of the Social Unit Plan and the history of community participation (mobilization for Youth, Community Action Councils of the War on Poverty, and Model Cities for example) in this country are any indicators, efforts at community participation in order to address human social service needs must take a serious look at the limitations imposed by the form of individualism and democracy within American market capitalism. The American consciousness is not one conducive to this utopian notion of a collectivity of citizens actively engaged in the running of their institutions.

These limitations are particularly significant when considering the professional community practitioner who advocates for community participation as the solution to redress the present inequitable distribution of economic resources and participation in political decision making (Weil, 1994; Faulkner, Roberts-DeGennaro & Weil, 1994; Rivera & Erlich, 1992; Reisch & Wenocur, 1986). Reisch and Wenocur (1986) proposed that one means for obtaining democratization would be through the development of "neighborhood governments to foster greater participation in decision making . . . [and] the formation of community cooperatives in the area of energy, housing, and food distribution" (p. 87). Although small efforts at instituting "democratic" neighborhood participation may have local success stories to tell, it is unlikely that any serious threat to existing economic or political power distribution will ever come from these efforts.

There are several reasons that would account for the improbability of success in democratization. First, most individuals within American communities share a common cultural heritage

imbued in the American ethos and are thus of a consciousness that works against cooperative efforts and centralized authority. Unless a particular issue is viewed as an immediate threat to their economic or esthetic interest [such as NIMBY grass roots efforts], establishing an ongoing participatory effort is extremely difficult at best. Second, if the power structure perceives that resistance to proposals is high, they usually institute a participatory mechanism giving the appearance of input or minimal input from community members into the final structure of an already conceived and developed proposal. Acceptable accommodations might then be added to the basic proposal to appease opposition. In a study or organized citizen participation in Dayton, Ohio, McNamee and Swisher (1985) found no significant democratic challenge to the existing power structure and its politics. Their findings suggest that as the citizen groups were accommodated and institutionalized into a participatory body they became less effective in determining fundamental and long term policy for their community. Citizens themselves came to recognize that they lacked any long term influence and participation dropped off dramatically. Third, privatization of services is a serious threat to community participation. For example, in health care the rapid movement to for-profit, corporate ownership of hospitals, health maintenance organizations, and insurance coverage has resulted in a distancing accountability between consumers of services and the remote (literally, in a physical sense in most cases) corporate offices and investors who are interested in profits. Services are viewed as a commodities and consumers are not seen as participants in deter nining health care policy. In this growing set of circumstances, community participation or democratization, as called for by community practitioners, is not remotely possible. There are powerful American values concerning individualism and democracy being played out on an individual and corporate level constricting collective consumer participation in policy formulation and operation of services.

The Social Unit Plan is an ideal model for the development of "neighborhood government" and democratization of the oppressed. It was a conservative effort in which users and providers joined together and cooperated in the provision of services. It successfully incorporated participatory principles into providing

increased health care services to nearly 15,000 people. Yet, it could not be sustained in the atmosphere of the American consciousness. It did not fail for lack of organizational efforts, structure, and powerful supporters. It failed because it represented a threat to basic cultural beliefs (even though myths) about individual freedom and the chance to "make it." Present efforts to gain access to the decision making power for community members will face the same American values but expressed in present day ideological language—big government, liberalism, work-ethic, family values, and the American way. A significant effort to organize the disenfranchised into truly democratic cooperative structure cannot be considered as a possible alternative in today's world. Community practitioners calling for "neighborhood governments" or democratic participation in order to make fundamental, long term changes must recognize these limitations. Otherwise, they are failing to recognize the deep context of meanings that make up the fabric of the American culture and its impact on how people organize their lives. Importantly, they are perpetuating a myth of participation with their constituents. Given the context of community practice in America, practitioners, planners, and administrators must either address the ethos directly in a social movement or acknowledge the limitations and learn to work within the potential accommodations that can be gained through community action and organization.

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