

KETTERING
REVIEW

Summer 1996

Reweaving the Social Fabric

by Ernesto Cortés, Jr.

“The politics that builds real community by reorganizing networks of relationships and institutions.”

The quality of urban life has deteriorated sharply over the last 20 years. The problems — hunger, homelessness, unemployment, violence — are overwhelming, and many well-intentioned people have tried to address them in isolation. Such piecemeal approaches, though, cannot get at the mutually reinforcing and cumulative impact of these problems. Instead, they contribute to our political incompetence and lack of political imagination. Because our political system has failed to address urban decay seriously and effectively, much of our adult population is convinced that politics is largely irrelevant to their lives. And this alienation has impoverished public discourse itself.

At first glance, a discussion about the decline of our political institutions and public discourse may seem out of place in a description of more tangible social and economic decay. Yet one of the most significant causes of American poverty is the inability of working people to absorb the costs of contemporary economic and political change. A dynamic economy always imposes such costs, and those who are the least political — the least articulate, least connected, least well organized — invariably bear an inordinate share of the burden. While the free market has an important place in society, it must be kept in its place by civic institutions. When those institutions fail to buffer citizens from the market, the effects show up at the bottom line: real income in the United States has been declining since 1973, with the most serious effects visited on the incomes of the less well educated. The purchasing power of the minimum wage has plummeted, too, falling

from its 1968 peak of \$6.13/hour (in 1993 dollars) to today's \$4.25/hour. This development has pushed more people below the poverty line, and left those above it without time or energy for their children or families, let alone their communities.

So the distribution of the costs of change is a matter of politics, not simply economics. Political and social renewal, however, are rarely discussed as means for alleviating these costs. We focus on results rather than causes. But while the resolution of broader crises does require attention to immediate issues, short-term solutions will have only limited success without corresponding long-term changes in our social and political institutions.

More than 50 years ago, Saul Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), now the center of a national network of broad-based, multiethnic, interfaith organizations in primarily poor and moderate income communities. These organizations are renewing their local democracies: fostering the competence and confidence of ordinary citizens so that they can reorganize the relationships of power and politics and restructure the physical and civic infrastructure of their communities. The IAF approach to institutional change recognizes that problems such as poverty and unemployment are not simply matters of income. They are a crushing burden on the soul, and people who suffer under their weight often view themselves as incapable of participating in the civic culture and political community. This sense of self makes broad-based institutions extraordinarily difficult to create. But no transformation of the human spirit can proceed without

the development of practical wisdom and meaningful collective action through the practice of collaborative politics.

True politics is not about polls, focus groups, and television ads. It is about en-

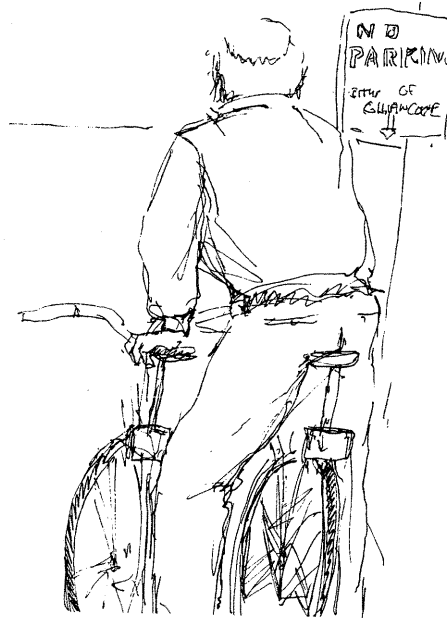
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gaging public discourse and initiating collective action guided by that discourse. In politics it is not enough to be right, or to have a coherent position; one also must be reasonable, willing to make concessions, exercise judgment, and find terms that others can accept as well. So politics is about relationships that enable people to disagree, argue, interrupt, confront, and negotiate and, through this process of conversation and debate, to forge consensus or compromise that makes it possible for them to act. The practical wisdom revealed in politics is equivalent to good judgment and *praxis* — action which is both intentional and reflective. In *praxis*, the most important part of the action is the reflection and evaluation afterward. IAF organizations hold “actions” — public dramas, with masses of ordinary people moving together on a particular issue, with a particular focus, and sometimes producing an unanticipated reaction. This reaction, in turn, provides the grist for the real teaching of politics and interpretation — how to appreciate the ensuing negotiations, challenge, argument, and political conversations.

In *The Presence of the Past*, Sheldon

Wolin describes our birthright as our political identity. Echoing Aristotle's idea that we are political beings — that a part of us emerges only through participation in public life — Wolin emphasizes our capacity to initiate action in collaboration with other human beings. Such action often has an element of public drama. But in the IAF, political action is more than drama. It combines the symbolism of active citizenship with real political efficacy, creating the opportunity to restructure schools, revitalize neighborhoods, create job training programs, increase access to health care, or initiate flood control programs.

In addition to tangible improvements in public services, such politics recreates and reorganizes the ways in which people, networks of relationships, and institutions operate: it builds real community. As social beings we are defined by our relationships to other people — family and kin, but also the less familiar people with whom we engage in the day-to-day business of living our lives in a complicated society. But when people lack the organizations that enable them to connect to real political power and participate effectively in public life, these social relationships disintegrate. We learn to act in ways that are not responsive to our community. There is no time and energy for collaboration, no reciprocity, no trust — in short, no social capital.



To reverse the current dissolution of community, we need to rebuild social capital, to reinvest in the institutions that enable people to learn, to develop leadership, and to build relationships, to become, in Jefferson's phrase, "participators in the affairs of government." What IAF has found is that when people learn through politics to work with each other, supporting one another's projects, a trust emerges that goes

beyond the barriers of race, ethnicity, income, and geography: we have found that we can rebuild community by reconstructing democracy.

For decades, the city of San Antonio "managed" the demands of the poorer sections of the city by successfully splitting the population geographically — making secret deals with one neighborhood in order to prevent it from joining forces with others. The IAF developed an institution called Communities Organized for

Public Service (COPS) to provide an alternative strategy and an alternative public space. The idea was to give people in San Antonio the opportunity to have conversations away from the city government, to negotiate and deliberate with each other based on a larger framework of shared values, vision, and a commitment to agitation for change.

COPS, like all IAF organizations, is primarily a federation of congregations, connected to institutions of faith and agitated by their traditions. In this context, "faith" does

not mean a particular system of religious beliefs, but a more general affirmation that life has meaning. As it turned out, the leaders in the congregations were also the leaders in the youth organizations, PTAs, and unions. And they began to agitate not only their fellow congregants, but their neighbors and coworkers. Congregations convey traditions that connect people in the present and hold them accountable to past and future generations. These institutions — churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples — are built on networks of family and neighborhood. Tragically, they are virtually the only institutions in society that are fundamentally concerned with the nature and well-being of families and communities.

The root of the word *religion* is *re-ligare*, which means to bind together that which is disconnected. The best elements in our religious traditions are inclusive — respecting diversity, and conveying a plurality of symbols that incorporate the experiences of diverse peoples. The mixed multitudes in Sinai and Pentecost are central to the Judeo-Christian traditions; they represent the constant incorporation of different traditions in our social and political fabric.

Traditions of faith provide a framework for dealing with ambiguity, irony, and tragedy.

Religious faith, history, and tradition are important because they embody the struggles of those who have gone before — their

struggles both to understand and to act. Others have made efforts, and with mixed results. Reflecting on those efforts, one learns not to take oneself too seriously, and to recognize the limits of what can be accomplished in a lifetime or in a genera-



tion. Moreover, traditions — to the extent that they are meaningful and useful — provide a framework for dealing with ambiguity, irony, and tragedy.

In addition to their connection with communities of faith, IAF organizations such as COPS also serve as “mini-universities.” Our organizations have multiple agendas, traditions, independent dues-based financing structures and include a wide variety of individuals. Like universities, broad-based organizations provide arenas in which people can engage in constrained conflict, opening the historical contradictions within and among our traditions to inquiry and reflection.

A common error in teaching history is to present conflicts as having been fully reconciled — either through war, the threat of

war, or compromise. In the IAF, we teach people to understand the strains of controversy within our traditions and history — strains which must be managed, but are

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unlikely ever to be resolved. While repressing controversies can lead to war, acknowledging and welcoming them within a framework for debate helps us to temper conflict to a manageable level. In short, COPS provides a civic education, as well as a philosophic one, enabling people to conduct their lives effectively and to build and sustain their communities.

For 20 years, COPS has focused on developing a strategy to rebuild the infrastructure of its inner-city community. With its sister organization, the Metro Alliance, COPS has brought over \$800 million of streets, parks, housing, sidewalks, libraries, clinics, streetlights, drainage, and other infrastructure to the poor neighborhoods of the inner city.

The federal government's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program — instituted in 1974 to replace numerous federal categorical programs with a single, flexible grant to cities — has been a steady, though small and diminishing, source of funds for the redevelopment of inner

cities across the country. COPS and the Metro Alliance have ensured that funds in San Antonio are used carefully and effectively, maximizing expenditures for durable capital improvements and minimizing the demands on CDBG for ongoing operating expenditures of city and private agencies. During the last two decades, only 3 percent of San Antonio's CDBG funds have been spent on administration and planning.

COPS leaders organize the annual CDBG process, in which residents of eligible neighborhoods meet in homes, schools, and churches to draw up lists of potential projects. The cost of the projects is always three or four times their neighborhood's CDBG allocation. So people begin their bargaining, trimming some projects and delaying others in exchange for mutual support. They proceed from house meetings concerned with one street or drainage issue, to neighborhood meetings proposing a package of projects, to meetings in each city council district to shape a proposal with the council member. Then, in collaboration with the council member, community leaders finalize the selection of the year's projects. COPS leaders have incorporated into the organization's collective culture the expertise not only to plan projects, but to negotiate and facilitate bargaining among neighborhoods. By leveraging both public and private moneys, IAF organizations in San Antonio have helped working families build more than 1,000 units of new housing, rehabilitate 2,600 existing ones, and purchase 1,300 more.

Beyond these new homes and infrastructure, however, the most important accomplishment of the IAF



organizations is the development of nontraditional leaders in historically disenfranchised communities. IAF leaders begin their development in one-on-one conversations with a skilled organizer. These conversations represent an exchange of views, judgments, and commitments. IAF organizers see themselves as teachers, mentors, and agitators who constantly cultivate leadership for the organization. Their job is to teach people how to form relationships with other leaders, and develop a network, a collective of relationships able to build the power to enable them to act. Leaders initially learn politics through conversation and negotiation with one another — as in the CDBG process. As they develop a broader vision of their self-interest, they begin to recognize their connections and their responsibilities to each other and to the community.

Organizing people around vision and values allows institutions to address specific concerns more effectively. Beginning with small winnable issues — fixing a streetlight,

putting up a stop sign — they move carefully into larger problems — making a school a safe and civil place for children to learn; and then to still larger issues — setting an agenda for a municipal capital improvement budget, strategizing with corporate leaders and members of the city council on economic growth policies, developing new initiatives in job training, health care, and public education. When ordinary people become engaged and shift from being political spectators to being political agents, when they begin to play large, public roles, they develop confidence in their own competence.

Virginia Ramirez is one of those leaders. She was angry at the injustice in her neighborhood — at watching a neighbor die because she did not have heat in the winter — but was afraid to speak out because she felt she wasn't educated. COPS taught Mrs. Ramirez to tap into her anger and forge it into a tool. She learned to speak publicly, to lead, to take risks with herself, and to guide others. The process taught her to develop relationships within which she could challenge the indifference and apathy of corporate and government officials. She learned how to negotiate with the powerful: to compromise, to confront when necessary, and to rebuild collaboration. She gained confidence to negotiate with the city council and mayor. She went back to school at age 44, earned her general equivalency diploma, and entered college.

Virginia Ramirez — now president of her parish council and cochair of COPS — represents her community at the negotiating table with San Antonio's corporate, finan-

cial, and municipal government leaders. She is a mentor for young leaders, some of whom are the sons and daughters of COPS founders.

Most people have an intuitive grasp of Lord Acton's dictum about the tendency of power to corrupt. To avoid appearing corrupted, they shy away from power. But powerlessness also corrupts — perhaps more pervasively than power itself. So IAF leaders learn quickly that understanding politics requires understanding power.

A central element of that understanding is that there are two kinds of power. Unilateral power tends to be coercive and domineering. It is the power of one party treating another as an object to be instructed and directed. Relational power is more complicated. Developed subject-to-subject, it is transformative, changing the nature of the situation and of the self, mastering the capacity to act, and the reciprocal capacity to allow oneself to be acted upon.

Relational power is both collectively effective and individually transformative — think again of Virginia Ramirez. The potential of ordinary people fully emerges only when they are able to translate their self-interests in issues such as family, property, and education into the common good through an intermediary organization. Each of the IAF's victories is the fruit of the personal growth of thousands of leaders — housewives, clergy, bus drivers, secretaries, nurses, teachers — who have learned how to participate and negotiate with the business and political leaders and bureaucrats we normally think of as our society's decision makers. Living by the iron rule, "Never



do for others what they can do for themselves," they have won their victories not by speaking for ordinary people but by teaching them how to speak, act, and engage in politics for themselves.

Reinvigorating urban life requires a new vision of civil society, appropriate to contemporary challenges. To be sure, government has an essential role to play in democratic renewal. After two decades of neglect, we need more public investment in housing, education, infrastructure, health care, and job training. But we also need to learn to think differently about the public sector and its relationship to the civic culture.

Government can no more create political entrepreneurship than it can create economic entrepreneurship. It cannot "empower" people, because power cannot be bestowed. Government can facilitate, encourage, and recognize grassroots organizing and local initiatives with an institutional base rooted in people's imagination and values, but it cannot and should not create

organizations and initiatives. When the government funds local organizing, those “grassroots” efforts will continue only so long as the public dollars continue to flow. And no organization funded by the government is going to be truly agitational about using public funds more effectively. (The government is not going to fund a revolution against its own status quo.) To ensure ownership of broad-based organizations by the community, those organizations must be self-supporting. The iron rule applies to institutions as well as to individuals.

To rebuild our society, we must rebuild our civic and political institutions. Under conditions of social fragmentation, it is a daunting challenge. People in modern industrial societies are atomized and disconnected from each other. And far too much of the American search for “fulfillment” is centered on the individual, encouraging utilitarian and narcissistic relationships. Such fragmentation leaves people increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose, much less of collaborating in its implementation.

The rehabilitation of our political and civic culture requires a new politics, with authentically democratic mediating institutions — teaching, mentoring, and building an organized constituency with the power and imagination to initiate change. It requires a public space in which ordinary people can learn and develop the skills of public life, and create the institutions of a new democratic politics. With organized citizens and strong mediating institutions, our communities can address structural inequalities of the economy for themselves, restore health and integrity to our political process, mitigate the distortions created by organized concentrations of wealth, and — in the end — reclaim the vision and promise of American life.

A MacArthur Fellow, Ernesto Cortés, Jr., is director of the Southwest Region of the Industrial Areas Foundation. This article is reprinted from the Boston Review and a longer version has been published in Henry Cisneros' Interwoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation (1993).