

Social Problems in Corporate America

Edited by
HELEN ICKEN SAFA
GLORIA LEVITAS

A *transaction/Society* TEXTBOOK



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Edited by
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SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN CORPORATE AMERICA

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**SOCIAL PROBLEMS
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Foreword

Nearly a decade ago I wrote a paper on "The Sociology of Social Problems: A Study in the Americanization of Ideas." In it I pointed out somewhat acrimoniously that:

The study of social problems is marred by intellectual timidity and mired in moral ambiguity. Of all areas and aspects of sociology as it is currently practiced, none seems at one and the same time more pervasive and parochial—pervasive in the sense that all sociologists acknowledge that there are indeed social problems and these ought to be removed; parochial in the sense that this concern for the importance of social problems seems so confined to the United States. Even when issues normally covered by a social problems orientation in the United States are handled by European scholars, they are cast in different terms—as anything from social welfare to social policy. The concept of a social problem is therefore far from self-evident. All that can be said for certain is that the social problems approach is a challenge to the sanitized world of value-suspending social science approaches.

It is both exciting and amazing to report, less than ten years later, that a considerable amount of that timidity and ambiguity has been pushed aside by an extraordinary output of work in the area of social problems. The work of Helen Icken Safa and Gloria Levitas in organizing these materials for and from *transaction/Society* convinces me that they are indeed representative of a new breed of social researcher with a level of conscience and courage equal to the task of de-parochializing this area.

The efforts herein contained have, however, been preceded by, or have run parallel with attempts to locate social problems in a structured text that has to do with the nature of the social system rather than demands for therapeutic relief. The efforts of such people as Johnathan H. Turner, Maurice Zeitlin, and Richard Quinney, following in the footsteps of a slightly older generation of scholars—people like Elliot Liebow, Lee Rainwater, and Howard Becker, to name but a few—have transformed the area of social problems. No longer is it a desultory field which assumes the health of society and the sickness of individuals and which assumes personal deviation is itself a social problem. These people have stood the world on its head, or perhaps, more sagaciously, stood the people most directly involved, those victimized by the social system, back on their feet.

The solutions and organization of *Social Problems in Corporate America* reveal how far the social sciences have come from only a decade ago, when the dominant view was based on a formula of equilibrium in which social problems emerge when social formulas break down. In other words, the volume by Safa and Levitas must be considered a contribution to structural analysis quite beyond functional analysis: a work in which few metaphysical assumptions are made concerning what is normative and what is deviant, what is right and what is wrong. If anything, the editors and the essays themselves for the most part presume individuals rather than societies to be the more important.

In all studies of social problems an enormous decision must be made by researcher, teacher, and students alike; namely, where does one allocate blame and responsibility? Who has rights and who has obligations; or better, what are the rights and obligations of individuals with respect to systems? There is no metaphysical response possible and yet the entire history of social problems texts is laden with the presumption that systems have rights and individuals have responsibilities. It is a measure of how far we have come that a text such as *Social Problems in Corporate America* puts this entire framework out of the way and places the very notion of obligations and rights in a larger context of the social order and what it *has done* to people rather than what it *might* do for them.

A great merit of this reader, as well as the introductory statements, is that Safa and Levitas do not make the opposite mistake. They do not oversimplify the issues and merely assume society is an instrument bearing all obligations while individuals retain all rights. This work must thus be considered a part of the new mainstream in the study of social problems and analysis that leaves

open ultimate questions of rights and responsibilities, and rather seeks a solution in changing, as well as understanding, the main categories of poverty, race, economy, and politics as they affect individual behavior. Indeed, the fact that politics has joined the long list of social problems is itself a major aspect of this volume, and deserves special attention. The social scientists involved, both as editors and authors of this reader, have gone beyond observation, and have entered into the vital and difficult tasks of interpretation and explanation. *Social Problems in Corporate America* has defined issues in a way that makes solutions possible. It seeks to provide answers as well as to ask the right questions. Thus, this text is dedicated not simply to highlighting social problems for students already inundated with such an awareness; but far more important, to establishing guidelines for social solutions based on the social sciences.

Irving Louis Horowitz
Editor-in-Chief
transaction/Society

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1. Introduction



Of the many books on social problems published in the United States, some of them, like this one, have confined themselves to domestic problems; others have adopted a wider lens, focusing on a range of world problems. Why, then, yet another book on social problems? What makes this one different?

First, this is a book based entirely on articles drawn from *transaction/Society* magazine—primarily articles which have appeared during the last five years (1968–1973). As its readers know, **Society** is no ordinary social science journal. It seeks to communicate not only with the professional audience of social scientists, but also with a broader public. It numbers among its readers practitioners and policymakers responsible for developing and implementing America's social programs. Thus, it has attempted to make use of the tools of social science for the analysis of vital contemporary issues which concern a broad spectrum of the American public. Its intention has been inclusive rather than exclusive: to make social science intelligible to all rather than to confine itself to the social science élite. **Society** has, therefore, concentrated upon problems of more than abstract theoretical interest; its articles strive to join theory with action, to suggest solutions or to present alternatives which may be of value to the planner and policymaker as well as the social scientist.

Second, this volume obviously reflects the editors' own predilections, observable not only in the articles chosen but in the topics which we feel most accurately portray the most vital contemporary issues in American society. While most readers on social problems are written or edited by sociologists, we are both anthropologists. We feel that our anthropological training strongly influenced our way of perceiving and analyzing problems whether we are dealing with Australian aborigines or contemporary American society. How?

There are at least three hallmarks to the anthropological tradition reflected in this volume. First, our emphasis is upon a holistic approach to contemporary social problems. We recognize from the outset that no one problem can be divorced from another, nor from the societal context in which each occurs. Thus we see both poverty and racism as the outgrowth

of the structural and social inequality embedded in "the American way of life." Inequality, in turn, is a product of our economic system with its emphasis on material wealth and production rather than human needs and social welfare. Although both poverty and racism may derive from the same source, it is a mistake to equate them and to argue, as some have done, that blacks are poor simply because they are black—as if a biological principle, race, could explain socioeconomic inequality.

Why racial minorities like blacks tend to constitute such a large segment of the American poor can best be explained by historical analysis—a second hallmark of the anthropological method. Most Americans know that blacks were brought to this country as slaves, but they do not know how the rural Southern plantation and the Northern urban ghetto have perpetuated the pattern of subordination and exploitation initiated under slavery. Like poverty or racism, most contemporary social problems can be understood more clearly if looked at in historical perspective. Thus, Gutman's article "Industrial Invasion of the Village Green" and Sennett's article "Genteel Backlash: Chicago 1886" illustrate how nineteenth-century American cities reacted to rapid economic change and a challenge to the status quo, and how similar these reactions are to the hostility and hysteria which have overcome many of the older residents of the inner city today (e.g., Conforti's article "Newark: Ghetto or City?").

Third, anthropologists have always strived to adopt a comparative perspective, to shed themselves of ethnocentric bias, and to view each culture on its own merits. We have deliberately limited the range of our comparison here to internal American problems and have avoided dealing with issues such as the Vietnam war, the monetary crisis, or other international problems which have had a profound impact on the United States in recent years. These are topics for another book, and we chose to confine ourselves here to articles which could be analyzed within a domestic framework. The incredible diversity of the American people—by race, religion, region, class, ethnic background—provides a vast range of comparative materials. This diversity is especially apparent in the American underclass, among the poor, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Indians, as well as older European ethnic urban groups. Even the middle class has its significant divisions: despite the fears of "mass homogenization" voiced by intellectuals as they attempt to assess the impact of the exodus to the suburbs, the pervasive influence of the mass media, and other standardizing mechanisms, it appears that the tendency towards diversity is as strong as ever. This is especially true among the young, women, and other marginal groups whose refusal to conform to the American mold has led to a good deal of experimentation with social relationships. Our section on Changing Life-Styles provides graphic examples of this new diversity in sex styles, family life, economic arrangements, and even religious belief.

The anthropologist's holistic, historical, and comparative view of society leads to a view of problems—and of change—which is often different from that held in other social sciences. The anthropologist's respect for and concern with cultural diversity makes him ask why a particular value or behavior pattern—though different from the norm—is maintained. He is less likely to dismiss behavioral variation by labeling it as "deviant" and pathological. In the anthropological view, differences are good—adding to the richness of human experience and to the variety of human alternatives. Anthropological sympathy with "deviance" is not surprising: one of the prime goads to the anthropological career has been the anthropologist's dissatisfaction with his own culture. This cultural alienation has sent anthropologists in pursuit of alternatives, but it has often allowed anthropologists to retreat from the

problems in their own society by withdrawing into studies of other cultures. In recent years, anthropologists have begun to turn their attention to American society. This interest has grown as primitive people and peasants gradually disappeared, as new Third World nations threatened by outsiders increasingly bar or restrict research, and as awareness by anthropologists of their role as Western culture brokers has increased.

The anthropological perspective on social problems demonstrates that how a social scientist defines a social problem clearly depends upon his values, his training, and the model of reality current in his profession. Science is not a product but a process which attempts to develop better understanding of the world in which we live. Scientists build models of reality and then test them. As long as their models work—that is, as long as the scientist finds a good fit between his model and reality—scientists have little to do but to keep testing cases against their theories. If, however, their tests do not support their theories, then scientists, like other people, engage in conflict. Some are conservative and will try to “save the model.” Like reformists and politicians who prefer to alter the deviants rather than the system, they correct their procedure and try again. Others strike out in a new direction and try to create a new model that better reflects the reality they have found. The two groups may battle vigorously, but their weapons are generally words and experiments. The conflict generally ends when one group successfully proves to the other that its model is better—that is, explains more of the facts more satisfactorily. The new model will be used until it, too, is superseded.

In this book, we have systematically attempted to present our own model of American reality, and to destroy the concept that the poor, the minorities, or any other social group is responsible for past or present social problems in America. The emphasis is not on the social pathology of persons who may, at this particular historical moment, be experiencing or producing problems in American society, but on society's inability to cope with these problems. We see the root of these problems not in the people themselves but in the external forces to which these people are subject.

In the United States, these external forces have been increasingly the dual dominance of big business and unrepresentative government. America is no longer the land of the laissez-faire, independent, small-scale entrepreneur enshrined in the persons of Horatio Alger, the pioneer, the cowboy, and the immigrant, all in pursuit of the American dream. We are living in a highly complex, bureaucratic society, controlled by a vast state machinery, and with huge sums of wealth concentrated in the hands of mammoth multinational corporations. The avenues to upward mobility are no longer open to the independent entrepreneur—the retail store, the small factory, the farm. Success is achieved primarily through the hierarchies in these large private and public bureaucracies—the corporation, the civil service, and even the universities. The more complex and controlled American society becomes, the more circuitous and narrow becomes the avenue to success—particularly for those who must start from the bottom. Our society demands a high level of skill and knowledge even for those exercising routine tasks.

Yet the mythology of an open society persists in the United States and continues to condition our view of social problems and how they should be solved. We continue to believe that the problems emanate from the poor, the blacks, and other “deviant” minorities because they have not made it in American society. We condemn those who are the victims of our society's malfunctions because they are too powerless to defend their own interests and to demand a just share of the society's resources.

Increasingly it is no longer only the poor and powerless who are the

victims of society's greed and injustice. As shown in the section on The Changing Economy the middle class too is beginning to feel the strains of unemployment, of constant uprooting and mobility, and of heavy taxation and poor public services. Like the poor, the middle class is becoming a pawn in the games played by the "power élite" who selfishly strive only to protect their own vested interest.

As long as the primary goal of American society remains greater production and greater wealth, as long as we measure our prestige and strength in global terms solely by the size of our defense establishment and the value of the dollar, the social problems undermining the fabric of American society will continue to expand. What then is the solution? What strategies for change can we suggest to reduce the inequities of present-day American society?

To correct the problems of our cities, of the poverty, racism, violence, crime, and other social ills which now beset American society, we must begin to ask how we can reorder our present system of priorities to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources. We must demand that the government use its power to redistribute our wealth—not simply through the demeaning and inadequate welfare measures now in operation, but through public guarantees of *optimal* rather than *minimal* standards of health, housing, education, income, and other necessities. We must demand that the government accept greater responsibility for the welfare of all its citizens and not simply defend the interests of big business.

We increasingly hear calls for a guaranteed national income, a national health service, or nationalized housing, as indicated by several of the authors in this volume. Clearly, state and local governments can no longer absorb these costs, even with heavy federal subsidies. Yet we cling to an outworn concept of social welfare, which views aid as demeaning or at best rehabilitative, and therefore best administered by local communities with direct measures of social control.

At a time of rapid technological change, when automation threatens even the highly skilled worker, we can no longer rely on these stopgap measures. We must move toward guaranteeing every citizen an adequate level of housing, health, and income, much as we now accept free public education. Undoubtedly inequities will persist, as our educational system amply demonstrates. However, we will at least have eliminated the *idea* that basic necessities such as health and housing are commodities to be purchased on the private market rather than the rights due any citizen in a democracy. As Heilbroner notes in his article in Section 3, several European capitalist countries have accepted this notion within the framework of bourgeois democracy. It is our sanctioned notions of individualism and competition, not democracy, which are threatened by such humanitarian measures.

To the radical, these measures may seem reformist—and indeed they are. They will not wipe out the inequities inherent in a capitalist system where well-being is still primarily determined by one's purchasing power. However, we feel that the realities of American society preclude the possibility of a socialist revolution at this stage of our history. Even the reformist measures suggested above have lacked electoral support because those sectors of American society most affected—the poor, blacks, women, and other minorities—have been effectively disenfranchised. They may have a vote, but they lack a voice where the real decisions governing the society are made. It is only through the increased politicalization of such groups and their effective participation in the power structure that a radical transformation of American society may come about.

2. The Urban Crisis

No discussion of social problems in corporate America would be complete without an analysis of the urban crisis. Though clearly not confined to cities, social problems such as poverty, racism, unemployment, or crime are most visible and most explosive in our teeming metropolises.

Is urban life itself responsible for these problems? Is there something inherent in the nature of cities that breeds social disorganization and delinquency? Much public opinion as well as social research in the United States tends to support this view. We have a traditional antiurban ethos in the United States which has crept into the writing of such eminent social scientists as Louis Wirth, Robert Redfield, and Lewis Mumford. These writers viewed the modern city as a center of anomie and social disorganization while they romanticized the rural area as an organized and harmonious setting for intimate personal relationships. Wirth's classic essay on "Urbanism as a Way of Life" identified urbanism with specific sociocultural criteria such as impersonality, heterogeneity, and disorganization which influenced (and continues to influence) a whole generation of urban sociologists, just as Redfield's image of peasant society as homogeneous, highly personalistic, and stable spurred much anthropological research into cross-cultural studies of the peasantry. Most of this research tended to reinforce the rural-urban dichotomy since the research by urban sociologists focused upon rapid social change and social pathology, while the work of anthropologists, at least till recently, emphasized the stability and cohesiveness of traditional peasant society.

However, an alternative explanation for the urban crisis is possible. The cities have not been so much the cause of social problems, as the *locus* of political and economic forces in American society which have brought about conflict, change, and disorganization. Cities have traditionally been centers of power. Even in prehistoric times their influence expanded and waned with the power of the state (cf. R. Mc C. Adams 1966). It was in cities that the full range of social stratification first developed, since even today rural peasant communities are composed largely of one class of cultivators. From their early beginnings, cities were associated with the need for an increasing specialization and division of labor; with competition for control of re-

sources; and with ethnic heterogeneity resulting from conquest, immigration, slavery, and other historic phenomena which moved people across national boundaries.

The new technology introduced by industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries accelerated these trends established in earlier patterns of urbanization. Cities are still centers of power, competition, and ethnic and class conflict. Industrial cities intensified the relationships between economic class, social status, and power. After the Industrial Revolution, the basic source of wealth was transferred from land to manufacturing, mining, finance, commerce, and other potential sources of profit. However, since industrialization was developed in a free enterprise, capitalist economy, this wealth continued to be concentrated in a few hands, much as land had been earlier. Industrialization promoted the growth of a middle class, which, however, never controlled the basic means of production but found economic niches in petty business and trade and expanding professional and clerical white-collar occupations. Industrialization was responsible for the growth of an urban proletariat, employed first in factories and later in the expanding service occupations which catered to the needs of urban residents.

Gutman's article on the "Industrial Invasion of the Village Green" documents the resistance to factory owners in the nineteenth-century American mill towns of the East. The resistance stemmed not just from workers, but from older ruling groups—local politicians and nonindustrial property owners who resented the new, hard-cutting competitive wages of the industrialists and often backed workers in their demand for higher wages and better working conditions.

As Gutman points out, the degree of local autonomy enjoyed by these mill towns enabled the resistance to new industrialists to be successful, if only temporarily. The resistance by the older nonindustrial ruling groups can be interpreted as a vain attempt to protect this autonomy since many foresaw that industrialization would necessitate the forging of new political and economic links across community boundaries and the loss of local community control. The nature of the industrial productive process demands a wider scale of operation, involving not only larger sources of capital and labor, but more extensive financing, marketing, etc.

As the scale of industrialism grew in the United States in the early twentieth century, attempts were made to curb this monopolistic trend of big business by antitrust legislation and the institution of such redistributive measures as a progressive income tax. However, this did not prevent the growth of "monopoly capitalism," as the new industrial giants of the twentieth century came to be known. Whitt's article on "Californians, Cars and Technological Death" demonstrates the impotence of ordinary citizens and consumers against these powerful, organized and well-financed vested interests in the defeat of Proposition 18 in California, a measure designed to alleviate pollution and create additional funds for mass transit. Opposition to Proposition 18 came especially from an interlocking directorate of oil, automobile, and banking interests, which launched a vigorous and well-publicized campaign against the amendment. Though pollution could not force us to reduce wanton use of the private automobile, the energy crisis may. Till now, however, the result of the energy crisis has been rapidly rising profits for oil corporations and the relaxation of pollution standards to "conserve" energy. As usual, it is the consumer who suffers.

Industrialism signified not merely a change in the economic structure of the United States, but in its political forces as well. The growth of "big business" necessitated the growth of "big government" to cope with the

increasing complexity and scale of the American economy and society. The struggle for local autonomy was fought not only at the community level but by states and cities as well. In the period following the Civil War, the federal government became increasingly powerful through new legislation, federal agencies, Supreme Court decisions, etc. The authority of the federal government was reinforced by the increasing dependence of states, cities, and local communities on financial aid from the federal government to cope with mounting social welfare and other public expenditures.

Greer's article on "The 'Liberation' of Gary, Indiana," demonstrates how cities are caught in a vise between business and government which severely limits their alternatives and freedom of action. Gary, Indiana, the home of U.S. Steel, is the largest of all company towns in the United States and virtually the entire business community is a "de facto fief of the corporation." Local government was weak, corrupt, and highly fragmented, without adequate legal and financial authority to carry out municipal functions. Racism was evident both in the corporation's employment practices and in the grossly inadequate public services provided to the black community, which eventually grew to a majority of the population. On the basis of these grievances, Hatcher was able to develop a black united front and to be elected Gary's first black mayor. However, the apparent victory of blacks was short-lived, for Hatcher and his staff found themselves dependent on an old, largely white bureaucracy, which balked at many of his reforms, and on federal aid to carry out many of the social welfare programs he had promised. The regulations involving federal aid reduced even further Hatcher's freedom to respond to the needs of the black community.

Reforms carried out in the name of good government often tend to undermine even further the attempts by blacks and other low-income groups to establish a local power base in their own communities. Metro-government, for example, certainly appears rational and progressive in view of the need for cities to expand their tax base and to consolidate the provision of public services such as transportation, water, electricity, etc. However, as Sloan and French demonstrate in their article "Black Rule in the Urban South?" the move to consolidate the inner city with the surrounding suburbs, as in Jacksonville, is often a calculated strategy on the part of the white community to curb black attempts at gaining some measure of political power and community control. Actually, as Sloan and French point out, most black leaders in Jacksonville supported consolidation, which was approved by a "healthy majority" of black voters, since the gains in terms of a widened tax base and representation on the new community council were seen to outweigh the disadvantages in terms of a weakening of black control. By this time blacks realized that to control a bankrupt inner city with a diminishing tax base and an increasing tax burden represented a hollow victory.

Newark represents probably the most severe case of economic bankruptcy with its high incidence of deteriorated and abandoned housing, rising welfare rolls, and fleeing industry. As Conforti writes in his article, Newark "symbolizes all that is wrong with cities in America." His historical documentation of Newark's steady decline parallels those of many other old American industrial cities, particularly in the Northeast. In contrast to Suttles, who limits his analysis of interethnic relationships to the slum community of Chicago, Conforti describes how the ethnic pecking order of Newark affects the entire city, with blacks and Italians vying for control of the construction industry, poverty programs, political posts, etc. "There continues to be a scramble for the spoils, and the spoils continue to diminish." This continued even after the election of Kenneth Gibson as the city's first black mayor and according to Conforti, Gibson may well find him-

self heading the "first major urban welfare reservation in the United States."

Thus, the problems of American cities have been intensified by industrialization and the growth of giant corporations and the bureaucratic state. Cities have been the arena in which the contest between public gain and private interest has been most bitterly fought. This has engendered racism, poverty, ethnic and class conflict, and an increasing sense of powerlessness, particularly on the part of the poor, blacks, and other racial minorities.

Suttles, in his description of an ethnically heterogeneous slum neighborhood in "Anatomy of a Chicago Slum," suggests ways in which this competition and conflict among the poor may be reduced. Apparently, in older established urban neighborhoods, where each ethnic group has found its ecological niche, extending the gamut of residences, stores, churches, clubs, etc., tensions and potential conflict among ethnic groups are reduced. However, as we know from many other studies, (e.g., Gans' *The Urban Villagers*), these older neighborhoods are being systematically destroyed, either through urban renewal or the invasion of new ethnic groups which upset the delicate ecological balance.

What, then, is the solution to the social and physical deterioration of our cities? Must we abandon the city, as so many of the white middle class have done, and attempt to develop a new life-style in the suburbs, free of congestion, noise, violence, and the other ills commonly associated with the city? Clearly suburbanization, since it is an alternative open only to mobile élites, only intensifies the structural inequalities in our society and reinforces the isolation of the urban poor into "dark ghettos."

The solution to the problem of American cities lies not in the abandonment of the inner city and the flight to the suburbs, nor even in more novel approaches such as the construction of new towns or metro-government. New planned communities tend to replicate segregated suburban patterns, both in terms of race and class, as the experiments in Columbia, Maryland and Reston, Virginia demonstrate. Blacks are now constructing their own new town in Soul City, North Carolina with aid from the federal government. However, the ability of these new towns to attract industry and other sources of taxation and employment is questionable, and they may therefore be reduced to residential suburbs, still dependent on outside sources of employment.

Urban planning in the United States has concentrated upon measures which will take people out of the city—new towns, suburbs, highways, outlying industrial zones, branch stores, and shopping centers. We have abandoned the inner city to the blacks and the poor, and to the commercial interests that need to remain at the core, such as banks, insurance companies, and corporate headquarters. In an effort to retain this business, higher priority is assigned to downtown civic centers and shopping malls than to low-income housing, better schools, or more parks and recreation facilities. We consistently favor private gain above the general public welfare, on the theory that the profits from increased private investment will eventually trickle down and benefit all.

We are not advocating that all public money be spent on social goals, but certainly a better balance could be struck between the needs of the people and those of private business. We also need to give the people who live in the inner city a greater voice in city governance, not just through elections or public hearing, but through meaningful community control and government decentralization. Citizen interest in the recent experiment in little city halls through the Office of Neighborhood Government in New York City suggests that we are not dealing with a totally apathetic public,

as many would have us believe. On the contrary, the bitter struggle fought by blacks and Puerto Ricans for school decentralization in New York City indicates their desire to obtain greater control over their own institutions. Community control increases citizen sense of self-esteem and self-confidence as they become active participants in the political process. Community control and greater citizen participation would also assure the expression of a greater diversity of interests among different ethnic and racial groups, classes, and ages. We need special programs designed for a variety of needs, not an abstractly defined public interest. To design such programs, these community boards must have real fiscal control and not simply serve in an advisory capacity.

So far these experiments in community control have not been very successful because they face the entrenched opposition of powerful bureaucracies, political parties, real estate interests, as well as factionalism within the community. Community control is not an easy way out as the difficulties of "maximum feasible participation" under OEO pointed out. However, it could help considerably to politicize the urban population and make neighborhood groups aware of the issues affecting them. Community boards could serve as a powerful counter-group to the vested interests now controlling our cities.