Book Reviews

View from the Ghetto

Prelude to Riot. A View of Urban America from the Bottom. PAUL JACOBS. Sponsored by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Random House, New York, 1967. xii + 298 pp. $5.95.

In August 1965, while corpses still lay undiscovered in the debris that was Watts, Governor Edmund Brown appointed an investigative "Commission on the Los Angeles Riots" (McCone Commission). In December 1965, the Commission presented its final report. Paul Jacobs, of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and an occasional consultant to that Commission, considered the report a failure, mainly because it did not deal squarely and openly with what he believed to be one of the major causes of ghetto discontent: the failure of government. Using as his base the consultant reports and other studies available to the Commission (much of which the Commission had used only minimally or not at all), Jacobs undertook his own investigation. The present book is his report. It is "a book about the relationships between government and the minority poor in Los Angeles, but it could be any city. . . ."

To get his "view from the bottom," Jacobs supplemented his written sources by going to the people who live and work there, knocking on doors in public housing projects; sitting in waiting rooms of hospitals and welfare and employment agencies; and talking to teachers and students in the ghetto schools, to policemen in the local precincts, and to men on the corners. With passion, conviction, and a great deal of skill, Jacobs weaves these descriptive and interview materials in and around his hard data. Each chapter of the book is given over to one of the major points of articulation between the ghetto and the larger white society in which it is embedded: police, welfare, employment, housing, medical care, and schools. The result is a first-rate description and analysis of the points of contact between the agents of top-dog and middle-dog society on the one hand and the black and Spanish-speaking underdog populations on the other.

At first the reader may become uneasy, even bored. Jacobs' writing is clean and straightforward, but we have heard all this before: how the policeman is victimized and given a skewed view of the community by the dangers he faces and by the system he serves, and how he, in turn, victimizes the ghetto dwellers; how police violence is exempted from moral sanction and legal punishment; how policemen hate and fear the ghetto and how the ghetto hates and fears policemen; how the police come to see themselves as a despised minority group, doing the dirty work of the larger society often without its support, much less its thanks; and how the internal workings of the organization serve to thwart or delay the effects of policy changes introduced from the top.

But as the reader goes on, from page to page and chapter to chapter, the steady presentation of description and fact takes on a cumulative effect, and the reader gradually finds himself under continuous assault until—perhaps like the ghetto dweller himself—he is finally overwhelmed by the enormity of it all: the incredible confusion, red tape, and conflict of interest generated by the simultaneous involvement of city, county, state, and federal governments in the life of the ghetto; penurious and often punitive state governments whose appropriations for welfare make a mockery of the minimum standard of living as defined by the same government; a woman demanding to know "how can you rent a three or four-bedroom house on a no-bedroom rent allowance"; the welfare office located six miles and an hour-and-a-half bus ride from the ghetto from which it drew 60 percent of its case load.

The list goes on: agencies and clinics which give *everyone* 8 a.m. appointments; the welfare client who had six different case workers in one year, two of whom she had never seen or spoken to; six unaccredited hospitals among the eight serving the ghetto; malnutrition in 62 percent of the Head Start children; training programs with admission standards that screen out persons they were ostensibly designed to help; ghetto rates of maternal deaths, premature births, fetal deaths, and infant mortality ranging from 40 percent higher to more than double the rates for Los Angeles County as a whole; wise and dedicated administrators and public policy makers defeated by middle-level staff and entrenched routine; bitter, underpaid welfare workers with a quit-rate of 70 percent in their first 18 months of work; a woman fighting with authorities over her right to keep a ham bone in her public housing refrigerator; and so on, and on, and on.

Only occasionally does Jacobs' clear-eyed reporting and analysis falter, as in the farfetched assertion (p. 225) that many school principals were chosen from the fields of physical education and mathematics "because such training generally produces men and women whose values are skewed to the maintenance of formal order." It is also unfortunate that Jacobs chose not to cite specific references but only to discuss his major sources very generally at the end of the book.

Much more serious is Jacobs' blind spot when he looks directly at the lower-class Negro. More correctly, perhaps, this is not Jacobs' private failure but one that most of us share with him. The failure here is not a failure of the mind or heart but of the mind's eye, a failure of perception and sensitivity. It first appears in relatively innocent form at the conclusion of the chapter on employment (p. 125), where Jacobs tells us that unemployed men and women will, for a time at least, require "special, preferential treatment" and that they and their families will "have to be held by the hand." It appears in full form in the chapter on schools, where we learn (p. 229) that ghetto children graduate from elementary school not only unable to read but "still expressing themselves in only one tense," and (p. 230) that ghetto children are "ruined by the time they get into . . . school." If "ruined" before they get to school, why devote a whole

chapter to how the schools fail the children? Why call for a changed curriculum, for "a new breed of educators"? And "only one tense"? This assertion is demonstrably false ("Johnny, he sick" is not the same tense as "he *be* sick," to choose only one of hundreds of examples). The error is Jacobs', but responsibility for it must be shared by those anthropologists and linguists who have been so busy talking to one another that they have left even our sophisticated social critics untouched by their findings.

I do not believe that Negroes have to be held by the hand. If "special, preferential treatment" is required, it is not Negroes that require it but our social system that requires it, if Negroes are to be given what is automatically given to everyone else. I do not believe that Negroes are "ruined" by the age of five or six. They are whole human beings, with the same powers of abstraction, cognition, and perception enjoyed by middle-class whites. The worldly stuff that serves as input to these processes may be different, but the processes themselves are the same. The Negro's problems, as Jacobs himself has shown, lie elsewhere. For those of us who know lower-class Negroes only across a desk or through some test instrument, or in some other setting alien to the ghetto Negro, there might be some excuse for not seeing what is clearly there. But for those who have watched a crap game in an alley, or sat in on a card game, or listened to the street-corner talk, or visited little children as a friend, in their own homes, there is no excuse at all. In fairness to Jacobs, it should be pointed out that it may not have been possible for a white man to enter into such relationships with Negroes in Watts after August 1965.

The book ends with a spectacular inside view of the McCone Commission (in which McCone and his report stand convicted by his own direct testimony) and a ten-page conclusion which calls for an admission that "we *are* a racist society" and for a reordering of our "twisted priorities": for a welfare system "based on the principle that human beings have a basic *right* to a reasonable income even if they cannot work," and for a whole host of new forms in all our institutions.

In the too-short conclusion, Jacobs gives himself enough room to identify some of the fundamental issues of our times but not discuss them. "Above all," he tells us (p. 292), technology must be "put into its proper place." This assertion wants discussion and specification, but Jacobs gives us none. I take the statement to mean that we must be the masters of our technology and bend it to our national purpose. But only three paragraphs later he suggests that we must learn to submit to our technology and to rationalize and quicken our social and cultural adaptations to it: "Technology is forcing us into new kinds of government, but we are not yet engaged in consciously creating these forms; instead, they come into existence in hasty and ill-conceived response to immediate pressures."

Perhaps these two views of technology are not contradictory, but their emphases are clearly different, and surely radically different public policies and social consequences will flow according as we adopt one or another position. The latter emphasis on technology as the independent variable seems to me to beckon us into the trap of faith that has long held captive traditional liberalism: a faith in "progress" that rests on the presumptive primacy of technology as the determinant of social forms and on the belief that, over time, the social forms called into existence by an advancing technology will be increasingly socialistic, democratic, and benign. Despite his lifelong commitment to socialist ideology, Jacobs recognizes—correctly, I believe—that this liberal faith rests on man's hope, not on an iron law of history: "Although I believe private enterprise [in the U.S.] may be replaced by some form of public enterprise society, I do not believe such a society would *necessarily* be free of racism. It is possible to have a . . . socialist society that is still destructive of human dignity" (p. 293).

One could object to the book as a whole (I do not) on the grounds that Jacobs gives us no blueprint for social change; he exhorts us to develop a "will to change" and calls for a global approach to the problems of the ghetto without specifying the ways and means of dealing with these problems. At the present time, I think, this is too much to ask of anyone. We are a divided nation, pulled in many different directions by contending class, race, and other vested-interest groups. There are battles to be fought before a course can be set, and it is only after we decide where we are going that we can decide on how to get there. Jacobs has performed an important public service: he has depicted in detail some of the major things that are wrong with our society and has pointed out one of the general directions we can move in if we choose to do so.

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Cardiac Contractility

Factors Influencing Myocardial Contractility. A Gordon Research Conference, 1966. RALPH D. TANZ, FREDERIC KAVALER, and JAY ROBERTS, Eds. Academic Press, New York, 1967. xxvi + 693 pp., illus. $28.

These papers attempt to correlate past and present physiological, biochemical, pharmacological, and morphological findings related to cardiac muscle function. Sections 1 to 3 pertain to the mechanical properties of cardiac muscle (18 papers). The contractile "defect" in heart failure is discussed in terms of altered ventricular contractile function, diastolic compliance, and cellular and ultrastructural mechanisms. The contradictions in the concepts of active state, diastolic compliance, and structural and functional nonhomogeneity of the left ventricle reflect the limitations of available techniques for dealing with the anatomical complexities of cardiac muscle. A unified concept and accurate quantitative model of cardiac muscle function has not been developed. Section 4 considers the behavior of heart cells in tissue culture (7 papers) and demonstrates the potentialities of tissue-culture techniques for answering many of the questions confronting the cardiac electrophysiologist, morphologist, and biochemist. The coupling mechanism relating excitation to contraction is reviewed in section 5 (5 papers). Although experimental findings based on histochemical studies and calcium flux measurements demonstrate a relationship between calcium movement, the sarcolemma, and the sarcotubular system, the data are insufficient to permit a clear model describing the coupling mechanism in heart muscle. Section 6 considers the problems of cardiac energetics and mechanochemical coupling (5 papers) without detailed consideration of correlative thermal measurements. Sections 7, 8, and 9 are con-