

Sociological Subversives

RICHARD M. ELMAN

Late summer on New York's Lower East Side is as somnolent as any small town. Between Avenue C and Avenue D, along Essex and Orchid Streets, and thick along East Houston (which is pronounced House-tin), squadrons of Puerto Rican grandmothers sit on folding chairs along the kerbs. Tenement facades blister. In the chalk-marked gutters, lovely half-naked children pick their way through games. It doesn't seem to be part of any American city but some neglected European suburb where the pedlars, wearing skull caps, speak to you in a corrupt Spanish. The tiny crumbling synagogues, which stand abandoned looking on nearly every street, are shadowed and fretted by iron gates and high, spiked fence works, like church-yard monuments of some special arcane significance; 27 per cent of this neighbourhood may still be Jewish, but nobody else seems to be taking notice. The isolation is complete, almost Levantine, including a few *beats* and other deviates, but excluding just about everybody else. Around the old Jews, many of whom are now comfortably lower-middle class, a new culture of poverty has grown up, Spanish-speaking, flashy, dark-skinned, like so many *tableaux vivants* around the drab statuary of a dusty village square.

These new inhabitants suffer not only from a general alienation but from all the specific ailments of poverty – a high juvenile crime rate, narcotics addiction, school drop-outs, unemployment. To reach them, to influence them, and to assuage their hardships a five-

year Federal-City-privately sponsored programme of education, community organisation and social action, experiments with on-the-job training, street counselling, reading clinics, rent strikes, rallies. More than \$13 million will eventually be spent within the 67-square-block area. Nearly 300 social-work and educational specialists have already been employed. 'Mobilisation For Youth' has acted as the advance guard for the Kennedy-Johnson 'war on poverty' by putting such deliberately optimistic slogans into some semblance of hard practice. To give juvenile offenders 'a stake in conformity', the agency pays wages to the Negro and Puerto Rican trainees at its gasoline and service station, and to the youngsters serving kosher pot-roast sandwiches at its coffee shop; and it obtains welfare penalty exemptions. It acts as a part-time job agency to encourage drop-outs to remain in school. It supplies free legal counsel to those with housing authority or other civil and criminal law problems. Most of these activities have been well publicised and well received. On the left, though, mobilisation has been accused of seducing the lower classes into becoming petit bourgeois, of not really trying to change anything. Now, a combination of forces and interest groups on the right are charging that the agency encourages dangerous agitators and employs known communists.

These allegations, which first appeared in the shabby *New York Daily News*, draw upon certain raw FBI files. They are mainly an attempt to cripple Mobilization's community organisation and leadership programmes — programmes which try to give the lonely victim of society some leverage against the forces of interest. Only in America could a voluntary agency which drew its initial seed money from a CIA front, and which has staunch undercover support from the Justice Department, end up the target for a McCarthyite smear. But the tensions and old guilts which play upon the liberal Establishment run deep. When it was learned that Mobilization, with federal funds, had sponsored a delegation to the March on Washington, this was sufficient justification for the FBI to begin an investigation. Now we learn

that Mobilization has lent its facilities to a number of neighbourhood action groups, has attempted to organise some of its own, and has not tried to screen or otherwise control these activities or the participants, providing they were lawful and indigenous. But, if such activities seem fashionable only a year ago, they are no longer so. All the liberal social-work agencies in America at this moment are being whipped by the same backlash. A riot in Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant or even Jersey City gives ample justification to those who profit by things as they are to see red. The fact is there have not been any riots on the Lower East Side this summer because the area is not without hope. True enough, Mobilization's impact on the community is still hardly felt by most of the inhabitants, but the presence of so many earnest, obviously middle-class young men and women (who operate out of a converted catering establishment) has been noted and generally supported.

Whenever the so-called issue of communism is introduced against a liberal action group in this country, the demoralisation is quick and effective. Mobilization depends upon legislative support. It immediately turned on the defensive. A socially prominent board of directors issued the ritualistic slogans of anti-communism, but a recognisably tough anti-communist attorney was hired to investigate. Although the agency reaffirmed its belief in the legality of rent strikes, it also said it would not knowingly employ a communist in any capacity, which has led people to wonder what will be the fate of the tiny handful of workers within the organisation who have already been identified as party members or fellow travellers. Thus far Mobilization remains officially silent. It will say only that past affiliations will not be held against anybody. But if the pressure of the real estate interests, the police, the reactionary elements in city government and in the Catholic church is so strong that it can force the Mayor to back down on his original endorsement of Mobilization, it also seems likely that the purge of personnel may be more far reaching and will eventually be followed by more

resignations at the very highest executive levels. The Executive Director of Mobilization, indeed, resigned on 12 September stressing his ill-health. When city officials were asked to comment, they said that this was 'a deliberate decision'.

The same is also likely to take place if the community organisation sections which constitute, even now, only a small percentage of the budget, are discarded. Most of the working echelons of Mobilization believe that fundamental changes on the Lower East Side have to be stimulated from within. They cannot effectively be imposed by the Establishment from without; and they do not feel it is enough to be simply another settlement house, a school or a community centre; they believe it is essential to encourage protest, even agitation. They are also thoroughly pragmatic, materialist, not strongly moralistic in their orientation. When the know-nothing press refers to 'sociological' as well as communist subversives, they recognise that they are the real targets. But, here, the agency's putative idealism comes up against some saddening ironies of its own making. When the programme was first sold to Congress, officially, the community, its public relations experts decided to play down this element of protest in favour of stressing such glamorous features as the youth corps and the fashion trainee centre. Nearly everybody, including the *News* and other right-wing newspapers, found they could digest such well-intentioned pabulum. But now that these same people know differently, it seems unlikely that they will want to endorse an experiment in social change, however limited or inept, which must necessarily step on some of their own toes. If they can't find a sufficient number of Maoists to blame for the disaffections of the poor, they may start turning up some of the old ghosts from the Thirties. Not only would this mean the emasculation of the Mobilization experiment but it would also have distressing and profound effects on certain crucial provisions within President Johnson's poverty package which have been more or less deliberately modelled on what this pilot project set out to do on the Lower East Side.