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Front Cover: A chromolithograph cover depicting two tramps on railroad ties featured in volume 52, number 1349 (January 3, 1903) of *Puck* magazine. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Back Cover: NASA poster depicting tourists ballooning above the clouds of Jupiter. Courtesy of Nasa/JPL-Caltech

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California State Library Foundation
1225 Eighth Street, Suite 345, Sacramento, CA 95814
tel: 916.447.6331 | web: www.cslfdn.org | email: admin@cslfdn.org

The author with other staff of the community job training and business development agency, San Francisco Renaissance Center (Mission District, 1985).

The Bonfire of the Vanities

The Job Training and Anti-Poverty Programs of 1960s California

Michael Bernick

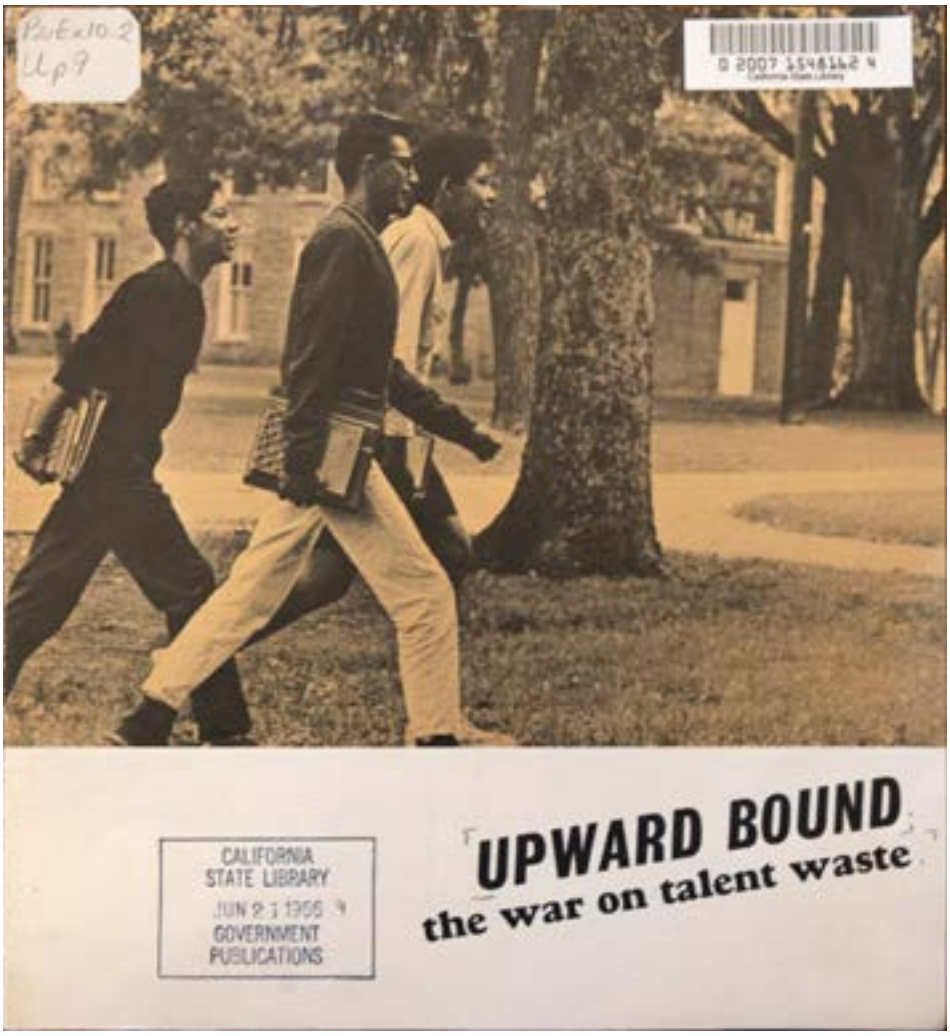
Beginning in spring 1965, and continuing through the end of the decade, the federal War on Poverty brought hundreds of millions in federal funding to California, creating a vast new structure of job training and related job counseling programs in the state.

By the mid-1970s, though, much of this structure had been dismantled, and the program leaders and staff scattered. Part of the reason for the dismantling can be found in the shifting national and state politics of the time. A larger part, though, was rooted in the disappointment that even advocates of these programs came to acknowledge with program performance. Money went out with little tracking or accountability; few metrics or expectations of results were

established, and most significantly, only a limited amount of the money came to benefit low-income individuals. The persons who benefited most often were those who scored jobs on the anti-poverty agencies themselves.

At the same time, out of this oft-chaotic and poorly structured training world, a more effective structure emerged in the late 1970s that has continued to the present. The community training groups that survived the 1960s learned to develop partnerships with employers and sharpen job placement practices. Other job training groups emerged that were built on more serious understandings of the labor market, more substantial fiscal controls, and that benefited from other intervening changes in reforms of the welfare system and the disability benefit system. California's job training system in 2023 has advanced considerably from the 1960s—even as it is still far from complete.

In this article, I'd like to briefly recount the job training world in the state prior to 1965, the War on Poverty programs that emerged in 1965, how they grew in the later 1960s, only to be dismantled within the decade, and how they led to the current system. My focus is on the job training world in San Francisco. I started in this world in 1979, with the community job training group, Arriba Juntos. Many staff and participants of the 1960s programs still lived in San Francisco at the time, and over the period of 1979 – 1981, I was able to connect with over 100 former program staff and participants. [1]



I: Job Training in California Prior to the War on Poverty

A structure of job training existed in California prior to 1965, which had its own roots in the late 1950s, and the growing concerns of city leaders at the time about rising juvenile delinquency. In March 1960, the Board of Supervisors established a Committee on Youth to examine juvenile delinquency in San Francisco and to suggest program responses.

The committee identified unemployment as the central issue: youth were dropping out of school or graduating from high school without the skills necessary to compete in the "office town" which San Francisco was becoming. The committee sought and received funding from the Ford Foundation and the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, for a Youth Opportunities Center (YOC), located in Hunters Point, and focused on job preparation. The YOC, launched in Fall 1963, included job counseling for the few youth who had office skills. For the others, there was a nine-week office clerk course, with training in typing, English and "personal development." Over the next few years, classes were added in typewriter/duplicating machine repair, secretarial/stenography, and telephone frameman.

Helene Dawson, the teacher of the personal development course, would later write a book, *On the Outskirts of Hope, Educating Youth from Poverty Areas,* about her experiences, explaining how the youth improved their confidence, vocabularies, and desire to enter the job market. She is largely silent, though, on the results in terms of jobs. Though the center provided assistance in job place-

EDITORS NOTE

Michael Bernick has been in California's employment field for over four decades, including serving as director of the California Employment Development Department. He currently is counsel with the law firm of Duane Morris LLP, research director of the California Workforce Association and Fellow with the Milken Institute. His newest book, with Dr. Louis Vismara, is *The Autism Full Employment Act* (2021).

ment, little effort was made to track job placements and no records were maintained on job outcomes.[2]

In 1963 a more extensive job training system began to emerge in San Francisco with the implementation of the federal Manpower Development Training Act (MDTA). Enacted by Congress the previous year, the MDTA responded to growing national alarms about automation and technology eliminating jobs. MDTA was a bread-and-butter program, emphasizing relatively short term training (six months or less) aimed at blue collar and office occupations. [3]

In San Francisco, the first MDTA training in 1963 featured 26 weeks of classroom instruction in clerical skills—a mix of typing, shorthand, remedial English, and a course termed "The World of Work." Subsequent MDTA training in San Francisco taught other practical skills: auto mechanics, television repair, upholstering, bank teller, and medical-secretarial.[4]

San Francisco's job training world by summer 1964 was a growing but still relatively quiet and contained one, with the MDTA training based in the established community college and adult education system. [5]

II: California's War on Poverty Training Programs: Rise, Decline, Evolution

"Growing but still relatively quiet and contained" changed soon after August 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964, formally launching the federal War on Poverty. Johnson had announced the initiative in his 1964 State of the Union address ("Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it, and above all, to prevent it").

With the EOA came funding for an array of housing, health, pre-school and education, and employment programs that dwarfed previous efforts. In a 1976 paper, "Employment Programs of the 1960s," then University of Texas Professor (later Secretary of Labor) Ray Marshall estimated the federal expenditures for employment programs alone exploded from $450 million in 1964 to $2.6 billion in 1970.

Four categorical War on Poverty training programs were launched in the next few years: the Neighborhood Youth Corps (1965), the Job Corps (1965), the Concentrated Employment Program (1967), and New Careers for the Poor (1968). All focused on lower income youth and adults, primarily in urban cores. By the mid- and later 1960s, following riots in major cities including Watts in Los Angeles and Hunters Point in San Francisco, inner-city unemployment and a perceived growing urban underclass came to be seen as a "firebell in the night" in journalist Ken Auletta's term, an urgent threat to social and economic stability.

Each of the four programs reflected a different approach in attacking this perceived threat. The Neighborhood Youth Corps provided paid work experience for out-of-school youth and summer jobs for in-school youth—maintenance and cleaning at the beaches and parks, soil control and reforestation, and assisting in libraries and in city offices. Job Corps, in contrast, was a residential program, with low-income youth from San Francisco sent outside of their neighborhoods to centers throughout the country.

New Careers had the goal of training low-income adults for paraprofessional jobs in the growing human services fields: healthcare, education, and substance abuse counseling. Low-income residents, according to the program design, would be good candidates for these jobs, given their "lived experiences" and ability to relate to clients.[6] The fourth program, the Concentrated Employment Program (CEP), represented less a distinct training strategy as much as a strategy emphasizing local control and decision-making. In reaction to complaints about job training programs designed out of Washington DC, the Department of Labor established CEP to give local anti-poverty agencies wide leeway to design and implement employment programs they regarded as most appropriate.

Alongside these four categorical programs was a large, but less-defined funding for improving employability of low-income residents through "Community Action" projects. Community Action, like CEP, emphasized local control and decision-making, especially decision-making by low-income residents themselves. Under the Community Action model, committees of low-income residents, with staff at the local offices of the national Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) would decide on the best employment and anti-poverty strategies and disburse funds.

It wasn't long, only a few years, before questions arose about just how the funds were being disbursed, the politics of the funding, and the job outcomes achieved. A new ecosystem of community-based agencies rapidly emerged in San Fran-

cisco following the War on Poverty funding: agencies largely based on identification with certain neighborhoods and/or ethnic-racial groups. These agencies, in turn, competed for contracts for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, CEP and, most of all, the general Community Action funds, lobbying the staff and committees of low-income residents. The result came to be a highly political process, including the use of confrontational tactics and demands.

It was a process not limited to San Francisco, but one that came to define San Francisco when it was chronicled by novelist Tom Wolfe. Years before his 1987 best-seller, *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* aimed at New York society and politics. Wolfe portrayed the War on Poverty as a venue of political theatre and vanities bonfire. In the summer of 1970, Wolfe spent time at the local OEO office in San Francisco, and among anti-poverty activists and their supporters at the area universities and political left. His lengthy essay "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers" would be published the following year along with "Radical Chic"—codas for the era's fantasies about the poor.

The anti-poverty vanities that Wolfe describes are those of clueless poverty bureaucrats, gullible professors at San Francisco State, and the community anti-poverty entrepreneurs. The poverty bureaucrats pride themselves on their connections to street activists, while the professors and their students pride themselves on their virtue and solidarity with the poor. The community entrepreneurs are the most clear-sighted: their eyes were set on the enormous sums of money coming out of the federal government for job training, summer jobs,

"Going downtown to mau-mau the bureaucrats got to be the routine practice in San Francisco," Wolfe writes of the anti-poverty entrepreneurs. "The poverty program encouraged you to go in for mau-mauing. They wouldn't have known what to do without it. The bureaucrats at City Hall and in the Office of Economic Opportunity talked 'ghetto' all the time, but they didn't know any more what was going on in the Western Addition, Hunters Point, Potrero Hill, the Mission, Chinatown, or south of Market Street than they did about Zanzibar. They didn't know where to look. They didn't even know who to ask. So, what could they do?

"They sat back and waited for you to come rolling in with your certified angry militants, your guaranteed frustrated ghetto youth, looking like a bunch of wild men. Then you had your test confrontation. If you were outrageous enough, if you could shake up the bureaucrats so bad that their eyes froze into iceballs and their mouths twisted up into smiles of sheer physical panic…then they knew you were the real goods. They knew you were the right studs to give the poverty grants and community organizing jobs to. Otherwise, they wouldn't know."

Students working on computers at Arriba Juntos in San Francisco.
Courtesy of the San Francisco Public Library.