

Embodied Ideology and Futility: The Irrationality of Voluntary Poverty in a Catholic Worker
House

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INTRODUCTION

The Troost Corridor in Kansas City, Missouri is the seat of highly racialized poverty that has been structured over the course of the past 30 years by a complex web of forces including global and national economic transformation, deindustrialization and inner-city capitalist disinvestment and institutional patterns of racial inequality and segregation (Gotham 1998). In the context of this research, I am looking to examine those relationships that are formed within and around Holy Family Catholic Worker house as an organization that aims to provide material necessities, hospitality and an environment to foster connections and reciprocal relationships with and among the poor rather than simply issuing conditional handouts or proselytizing needed life changes. I seek to understand the motivations for forming a community to endure systemic marginalization by dominant society, and examine Holy Family House as an example of an alternative, non-instrumental and charismatic society, paying special attention to the discrepancies that emerge between the movement's defining ideologies and its day to day practices, and the ways in which those who work at the house engage themselves in the construction of their own identity and a meaning for their work.

Holy Family Catholic Worker house provides breakfasts and nightly dinners for around 100 individuals in the local community, and operates a small shelter for a single homeless family. The Catholic Worker Movement, of which Holy Family House is a part, was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, Day being a journalist and a political radical who after being a part of the communist party in New York in the 1920's underwent a conversion to Catholicism, where she sought to be in solidarity with the poor and working class throughout the

world; and Maurin being a mystic, anarchist philosopher and revolutionary. Together they began distributing a paper in Union Square for a penny a copy. By living out the beatitudes, and the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing to the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the prisoner, and burying the dead, the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement believed that they could fundamentally transform society. The Movement stressed “bearing personal responsibility for the poor, and argued that people should live in poor neighborhoods, give hospitality to the otherwise poor in their house, share all that they have, and protest any institution that negatively effects the poor” (Effler 2010). The house on Troost is an attempt to do just this. The workers live in the house communally; experiencing their work as a vocational call to service of a systemically marginalized group. Thus, my study is one of an intentional community within an environment of extreme material and social deprivation. In order to contextualize the nature and function of Holy Family House as an intentional community, I will first examine intentional communities as part of the sociological literature.

Intentional communities have become radical manifestations of the social justice movement throughout the world. Thus, a great deal of sociological literature examines the habitual flow of life within such communities, as well as the ideological motivations to live in them. These ideological motivations speak to a lack of faith in the prevailing system and are often motivated in trying to create a new society, sustainable and ethical, in the shell of the old. The current marketplace no longer represents an authentic environment for all consumers; by withdrawing from the market-based lifestyle, these communities feel that they can achieve a more principled and satisfactory life (Bekin and Szmigin, 2005). As is the case with the cottage industries (Holy Odors natural deodorant) and community garden at Holy Family House, in such

communities, people become more integrated in the production of the things they consume and are thus able to “cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning.” (Bekin and Szmigin 2005:417) Work is the basis for all interaction, and because of the daily tasks of living are taken on as a concerted opposition to the mainstream, “tasks have deadlines, but there is a re-organization of time and collective distribution of tasks which makes it possible to enjoy work.” (Bekin and Szmigin 2005:419) The task to create an alternative way of living is comprised of many small, seemingly menial actions: sewing napkins, sorting huge donations of unsalable produce, and maintaining the newsletter mailing list, that in the context of an ideological struggle take on new meaning and importance.

In studying Holy Family House, I will employ the dual approach that Stephen Vaisey articulates one must have in examining intentional communities: one that relies on explanation of the structural mechanisms that are grounded in organizational factors, such as the consequences of an intentionally unbureaucratic service organization and the substantive factors that are grounded in cultural meaning, or the subjectivity of the experiences of Catholic Workers themselves. This dual approach extends to the concept of *community as experience*, as discussed in Tonnies’ and Weber’s comparison of the substantive rationality that underpins communal action, or the experiences of the Catholic Workers and their relationships with guests and the instrumental rationality that underpins associative action, or what they would see as the impersonal charity that has become so a part of institutionalized religious groups and social agencies. I agree with Vaisey’s assertion that this examination of community captures the subjectivity associated with individual experience of communal life, and is able to explain his concept of *Gemeinschaft* as a consequence of moral order. The final contribution that Vaisey makes to my research is the proposition that “ideas, culture and identity matter at least as much

as social structure for the development of particular forms of social interaction” (Vaisey 2007:855). Intentional communities, and Catholic Worker houses I would argue specifically, are said to be unique in that they are formed around a moral order in a way that is distinctly different than any other organization, and they have no “social power unless they are interpreted through the ‘hermeneutic key’ of shared moral order” (Vaisey 2007:860). This hermeneutic key is essential to understanding the subjective experiences of the workers through their own cognitive frameworks.

I am approaching this research with a significant understanding of the prevailing ideologies the movement espouses, and the moral order that is both the cause and consequence of its being. I am familiar with the writings of the movement’s founders and have visited similar organizations throughout the country. Given the fact that the organizations (houses) are affiliated without set standards for how to go about creating communal reciprocity, they are able to curtail the nature of their work to fit the local settings; aiming to “marry spirituality to both direct human service and unmediated political action” (Coy 2001:8). At the outset I was only somewhat familiar with the day-to-day activities at Holy Family House, so I relied on an understanding of the movement’s ultimate ideologies and aims of personalism, a decentralized society, a “green revolution,” nonviolence, the works of mercy, manual labor and voluntary poverty, to construct a hermeneutic key as I observed everyday rituals and work.¹

METHODS

Given the dual approach of this research, I determined that an ethnographic case study would afford me the greatest chance to develop and utilize my hermeneutic key and interpret events through the cognitive frameworks of the subjects. Ethnography is particularly well-suited

¹ The Catholic Worker Movement. “Aims and Means”. catholicworker.org. Retrieved April 2, 2011. (<http://catholicworker.org/aimsandmeans.cfm>)

to the study of a communal environment as it emphasizes understanding social relations and interactions as vitally important to understanding social phenomena, as opposed to a positivist framework, which is more likely to collect data on an individual, atomistic basis, seeing individuals as sufficient mirrors of social relations. This methodology also allowed me to develop an understanding of Holy Family House as a social entity bound in a specific space and time. This is essential to the focus of my research as I looked to examine how and why a movement such as the Catholic Worker would come to exist within the community that it does in Kansas City. In order to arrange access to the house I emailed the workers, introducing myself and conveying my intentions for my research. One person, Wren, was established as my contact person at the house, and after corresponding with her several more times I was granted access and given a letter of approval.

The two primary events I observed were nightly meals and roundtable meetings. These were purposive setting samples: meals were observed because of the high level of community attendance and as indicative of the day-to-day function of the house, while meetings were attended to allow me greater insight into the ideology of the movement; the belief behind the typical function. Within these purposive settings, I conversed with subjects according to convenience.

For the meals, I observed from the perspective of a volunteer and on other nights as a guest and engaged in dialogue with both workers and guests about their experiences with the local community on Troost and Holy Family House. I sought in the context of these conversations to measure the nature of the constructed relationships between the Catholic Workers and the guests by observing their interactions and whether or not any power dynamics

make themselves visible. I did this by observing the familiarity of the guests and the workers with one another and the level of comfort they appeared to have sharing space in the house.

I also attended the roundtable meetings for the “clarification of thought” that were offered in February and March. Aside from learning about the movement I had planned to devote this time to paying special attention to the way participation was distributed across workers, volunteers and guests. However, this proved difficult in that none of the guests who typically come to the house for dinner came to either of the meetings I attended; this fact led me to consider the reproduction of inequality, and challenged the purported inclusiveness and communal nature of the House.

My formal interviews were only with staff, at their request that I refrain from formally interviewing guests in the house and thus jeopardize their comfort and sense of safety. I intended to formally interview each of the four workers who live at the house, however because one of them was out of town for all but the first of my visits, I was only able to interview three. I chose to interview all three of the ones I was able to for slightly less than an hour each in an effort to establish polyvocality, with the knowledge that each had been at the house at different times and had different duties within the house and obligations outside of the house. My initial visits to the house provided me with an understanding of the informal relationships between workers, and so I spent a considerable amount of more time with Wren and Rita, who had not been at the house as long as Ronda, who I observed to exercise more authority in the House. I asked them about how they first learned of the movement, arrived at the house, what sort of challenges they’ve experienced living in community, what their typical day consists of, what it entails for them to support one another as a community, about the relationships they have with guests, how they explain their life and work to people they meet in their day to day life, to

recount instances in which they felt particularly affirmed and particularly discouraged, how they confront the obvious criticisms of the organizational structure of the house, and what makes it worth it. In the context of these conversations I was able to measure a great deal in terms of how the community itself is constructed and the subjectivity associated with communal life.

Given the nature of work in such communities, I found that a highly effective way of estranging myself from the role of researcher was to work alongside volunteers or the workers themselves. Through participating in a collective undertaking, whether serving dinner, cleaning up or sorting through donated produce I feel that this helped me to see “social facts rather than sets of activities” (Gobo 2008:150) Personally satisfied with the completion of these tasks, I was better able to understand the meaning that workers attach to them.

Through my conversations with workers I was able to generalize how they come to construct an understanding of themselves and their work, and of the place of the House and movement as it aims to contradict the prevailing system. The power dynamics that revealed themselves in my observations I generalized as corresponding to the racialized nature of poverty in the Troost corridor. Workers’ recollections of personal experiences were generalized as being the result of the organizational structure of the House.

Measures that I took to ensure reliability and validity included interviewing multiple workers, attending meals as a volunteer and as a guest to gain both perspectives, and in respect to my dual approach, I developed the necessary understanding of movement ideology so that aside from analyzing the House within its larger social context and as it is patterned by structural forces, I was able to understand it through the subjective cognitive frameworks of the workers themselves through prior reading about the movement and attending the clarification meetings.

Personal Statement

During a semester spent in Florence, Italy, I was rarely without my mother's worn copy of Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. It was my mother's hands that had hurriedly placed it in one of my bags as I was leaving home, and as a stubborn and egocentric youth, perhaps that is why I approached first opening it with such trepidation. Immediately I was enamored of the story and the language with which it was conveyed. Indeed, Dorothy Day was my most consistent companion throughout that trip; she was with me on the steps outside churches where I sat for hours, and on many an overnight train ride to and from excursions where I had been more than slightly preoccupied by her words ringing in my ears with a clarity that drowned out the surrounding tourist chatter.

John Steinbeck once wrote that we don't take a trip, a trip takes us. And so that journey did. However, more than a trek across countries and landscapes, through cathedrals, cafes and monasteries, it was through words on a page that I was carried from the edge of complacent detachment to a deep, palpable understanding.

I was brought up Catholic, and attended a Catholic college. It was during my high school years and first year at said college that theological abstractions and the intricacies of ritual began to ring a bit hollow, and increasingly contradictory. I encountered Dorothy Day with the embittered skepticism that I assigned to everything that was passed through my mother's daily mass going hands, however her story compelled me deeply. She spoke of the sickly dehumanizing nature of capitalist enterprise, the fault of the church in serving monetary interests before human interests, a joyous anarchy of committed love of neighbor, and the belief that social institutions are worthy of preservation only insofar as they work to uphold human dignity. She spoke of her work for the communist party in New York, her disdain for religion, and how that disdain was tempered with the birth of her daughter. She spoke of how it was overwhelming

joy and gratitude that moved her to a form of prayer that was nothing akin to self-flagellating supplication.

My interest in her ideas led me to pursue Sociology as an undergraduate and eventual graduate degree. I approached all of my classes with her in mind. My interest in the Catholic Worker Movement led me to Catholic Worker houses throughout the country, as I looked to observe her ideas as they manifested themselves in varied settings. I met felons and anarchists, renegade priests and farmers both rural and urban; and they showed me the extent to which a movement of solidarity with the poor, vigilant care for the environment and active condemnation of consumerism is not only desperately needed, but undeniably present: aflame in existing communities that thrive both due to their necessity and their resonance, and flickering in the consciences of an increasing many.

I encounter my current research with the intention of giving academic voice to this movement, and to the inherent contradictions within the prevailing system that produced it. While she was alive there was brief talk about making Dorothy Day a saint. Upon hearing this she scoffed saying, “don’t make me a saint, I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” I believe that this is an essential summary of her work and the work the movement undertakes. It is not extraordinary, it is not saintly, it is work. It is that actualization of ideological aims that most often takes its form in activities like scrubbing potatoes, sorting clothes, rinsing and neatly folding pieces of aluminum foil for later use.

I acknowledge that my personal history with the movement places me in jeopardy of idealizing their actions. However, in my experience I have always remained engaged in and grateful for the critical guidance of my sociological imagination, which has proved a valuable tool for sensitizing me to contradictions. The dual analysis that was set forth in my introduction

has led me to consider how the ideology of the movement dictates the charismatic organizational structure of the house and constructs the subjective experience of the workers as they negotiate between rational and irrational altruism, and how, given the location of the house, the same ideology contributes to Holy Family's function as a reproduction of inequalities.

IRRATIONAL ALTRUISM

As discussed at the outset of this paper, the Catholic Worker movement is a loose affiliation of houses of hospitality throughout the country. The intentionally anarchistic nature of the movement predisposes it to a lack of formalized or centralized structure, and so the day to day rituals and activities of the houses are determined by their unique physical locations and the needs of the surrounding community. Holy Family House is located on the 900 block of East 31st street in Kansas City, Missouri. Kansas City is home to an extremely racialized form of poverty; the seat of which is in this neighborhood, otherwise known as the Troost Corridor. The community at the House describes its work as part of a vocational call

...to voluntary poverty, to live as though what we have belongs to those who don't have, in contrast to endless accumulation, model simplicity rather than materialism, consumerism; to live in a neighborhood of poor people, to model integration, recognition of dignity regardless of economic status; to live in community, intentionally and deliberately, committed to each other and the common venture, with the joy and frustration, encouragement and challenge, potential and limits, in contrast to the pervading spirit of individualism; to name our home a "house of hospitality," where persons, especially the stranger, can come to be noticed, accepted, welcomed, listened to, responded to, be treated as and called "guests;" to broaden the description of community, so that our table has settings for hungry people, our house has room for homeless families; to salvage food, clothing, furniture, to mediate between excess and deficiency, in contrast to a general throw-away mentality; to live nonviolently in the face of violence, war, and the pervasive disregard for the dignity and sacredness of life; to gather regularly for prayer and liturgy, bowing our head in humble admission to the

*limits of time, energy, ability, hoping to be faithful to the venture undertaken, knowing and trusting the process and results are in God's hands.*²

This vocational call is based in the substantive rationalization of relationship, recognition and connection as an ultimate remedy to the atomizing capacity of an advanced capitalist society.

The work of the house is carried out on two levels: one, bound in a specific space and time and focused on satisfying real material needs and a second more abstract pursuit of divine and transcendent justice. The function of the Holy Family House entails a cleavage between these two simultaneous objectives: the first, material based objective being intensely rational and summarily described in Wren's statement that, "we all need to eat," and the second, irrational objective of somehow spontaneously generating mass social change through charisma and voluntary poverty. The day-to-day activities of the house entail an on-going negotiation between these two aims, both of which are vital to the construction of community and purpose. The rational aim to meet the needs of the day is informed by an irrational and emotionally-laden ideological vision of change, just as that vision manifests itself in nightly meals and prescription vouchers for the nearby pharmacy.

The "Catholic Workers" who live at the house aim to provide a public space to the local community where relationships of mutuality can be formed and nurtured. Though the house provides dinners four nights per week, on Thursday nights, they open the house to have a "coffeehouse" night. For a short time at the beginning of the year, the house had been hosting cooking classes organized by Harvesters, the Kansas City food bank, but the requirement that guests sign up prior to the classes was somewhat contrary to the house's existing modus operandi, thus the decision was made to do away with the formalized event, and in its place there are now open coffeehouse nights, where the house is open to guests to come and relax, play

² Holy Family House. "Aims of Holy Family House". [holyfamilycwhouse.org](http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org). Retrieved March 15, 2011. <http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org/p/about-holy-family-house.html>

cards or dominos and chat with one another and the “workers.” “Rita,” one of the workers wrote of the decision to have a coffeehouse night saying,

*we feel our reasons for having a night where we don't serve a meal but are open to guests are well grounded in Catholic Worker thought. We wanted a time for new ideas to flourish, a night when we weren't running around serving, but a night when we could really get to know people. We wanted a night based on relationship with people in contrast to what often seems a transaction-based, agency-like meal.”*³

In this instance, the irrational is usurping the rational activities of the house. Providing a space for new ideas to flourish is deeply “grounded” in Catholic Worker thought, as is the belief that the root causes of hunger and homelessness can be remedied by means of interpersonal connections, which humanize and provide a subjective experience of poverty rather than pursuing change through the political process.

My first observation at Holy Family House was on such a “coffee house” night. Out on the front porch of the house were about 10-15 people sitting and chatting. The screen door was open and in the entry way I met Wren, my contact person with whom I had corresponded with to arrange my access. In the corner of the dining room was a table with two coffee carafes and a stack of mismatched coffee mugs. Two men sitting near the table were having a conversation in Spanish, and at the next table two students from Rockhurst University were playing dominos with two older African American men. I strolled around the room to look at the walls. The decor was in keeping with the tradition of most Catholic Worker houses. On the walls were portraits of Dorothy Day, including the most famous of her at a farm workers union protest. She is very elderly, sitting on a chair and looking up at what you know to be two police officers, their guns visible in their holsters. The caption at the bottom of the poster reads “Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy rotten system. - Dorothy Day”

³ Holy Family House. “News”. www.holyfamilycwhouse.org. Retrieved February 2, 2011.
<http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org/>

On another wall in the same room is a poster that is a staple in any Catholic Worker home. It reads on one side the “works of mercy” and on the other the “works of war.”



Rita Corbin

(Figure 1: Works of Mercy)

The point and counterpoint design of this image shows the extent to which the movement defines itself as much by what it is as what it isn't. The works of mercy, which are among the most fundamental aspects of movement ideology are set forth in contrast to the works of war. This shows explicitly the degree to which the House and the movement in general is locked in antagonism; defining itself as much by its actual work for justice as its opposition to a perceived unnatural and profane disregard for the dignity of human life.

In the living room I helped Wren pack up toiletries that had been out for people to take if needed as part of the coffeehouse night ritual. There were boxes of travel sized toothpaste, mouthwash, soap, shampoo and rolls of toilet paper. All of these goods are donated and they are set out so that people can come through, take a bag and take what they need.

Inside the communal bathroom there were several trays of dixie cups sitting under grow lights. I later learned that these were tomato plants they were sprouting to plant in the community garden they maintain two lots away; a rational means of cultivating both sustenance and meaning in the context of a collective, productive undertaking.

The irrational altruism that defines the relationships and charismatic organizational structure of the house is a concerted response to what the workers see as the impersonal nature of existing service organizations for the poor. It is understood that particularly with the poor, Americanism predisposes us to an unconscious aversion to collectivity, and substantive, non-instrumental relationships. The Worker's remedy to this is a line of philosophical thought called personalism. The notion is premised on the belief that despite differences, both real and contrived, the most crucial part of the human experience is that it is at its essence a collective experience. Relationships are not a means to an end so much as they are recognized as the meaning of life. Personalism as it is defined by the movement is, "a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals. In following such wisdom, we move away from a self-centered individualism toward the good of the other. This is to be done by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than looking to the state or other institutions to provide impersonal "charity."⁴

This aversion to impersonal charity and a non-emotive, rational approach to solving social problems is a contentious subject for workers. The most obvious criticism of Holy Family House would be that as an intentionally unbureaucratic organization, its apolitical nature is ultimately an ineffective means of going about solving poverty on a structural level, and in fact potentially worsens the situation of the poor. In devotion to this anarchic ideology, the workers

⁴ Catholic Worker Movement. "Catholic Worker Newspaper, May 2008 ed." catholicworker.org. Retrieved on April 7, 2011. <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=519&SearchTerm=personalism>

have locked themselves in an antagonism towards the prevailing rationality of individualism and upward mobility to the point of embracing an irrational and intentionally downwardly mobile lifestyle. When confronted with the seeming futility of this choice, the workers are obstinate.

Wren explains,

...we need social workers and there's a place for that...we however are not social workers and I think the CW movement in general and me in particular will tell you that we're not trying to fix everybody's problems, we're just here to meet the needs we can meet, right now, you know because we all need to eat. Several times a day, no matter where we are or what our situation is, and that's a need we can meet for people and that's a need we can connect over.sometimes what a person needs at the root at the most is connection and relationship and sometimes when that's a little more solid in life then, other things do change. So, and also it isn't to say that it's all relationship with us, you know its the four of us and 100 people here on any given night, but some of it is just having an open space, you know this kind of public house where people can come and be and just connect with people (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

To this end, the workers all emphasized the degree to which not only are they fulfilled in the work that they undertake in living their irrational vocation and working at the house, but the very rational ownership so many of the guests have in the house. In my conversation with Ronda she spoke of the dozen or so guests who will help wash dishes or sweep of their own accord,

...So like John, he rides a bicycle and he just comes and like picks up all the trash around the perimeter of the house without being asked, he doesn't need a thank you and he hardly ever comes in for dinner, that's just what he does. Or Bob sweeps almost every morning after breakfast, that's just what he wants to do and people want to give back to what they see as something that's really helping them and helping the community... (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

Buoyed up on a structural level by motivations of irrational altruism, utopian social vision and deeply humanistic ideals, the House provides the context for a highly rational exchange of time, work and material necessities. This “ownership” Ronda describes is a rational reciprocation on the part of the Troost community to the hospitality they receive at Holy Family House.

THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY AND BIFURCATED CONSCIOUSNESS

In the pursuit of a more fulfilling means of securing material justice, the workers have engaged themselves in the production of a new means of social exclusion and the reproduction of existing inequality. Marcuse wrote that a unique attribute of modernity is that it has absorbed its countermovements. With this in mind, the Catholic Worker movement provides the structure and narrative for expressing an ideological diversion from mainstream society, while not altering it in a fundamental or lasting way. Those who live and work in the house experience their work as a vocational call to action and to embodied subversion to the Establishment, however the relations of power within the house express on a micro scale the relations of power that define larger society.

Voluntary poverty is something of an oxymoron in that living in actual impoverishment means that very little, if anything, is done voluntarily. The decision to divest from mainstream society and adopt a life of simplicity allows for the assuagement of ideological angst, while materially providing for those who the system has not afforded the opportunity to actualize their own person ideologies. Thus, despite a professed condemnation of systemic injustice, the movement exists within the confines of existing power structures.

The neighboring community of which the house is a part is primarily black. The vast majority of the guests are black as well, which is striking in light of my observation of an exclusively white volunteer base.

“Prior to meal time, people filter in and out of the front door from the porch where several families sit, they come in and use the bathroom, pay for bus tickets that they can buy at a discounted price from someone who sits near the door, use the telephone and relax in the living room. This period offers a good chance to see power dynamics at play in the relationships between the people who live in the house, and the guests. This night

in particular, there were about 10 people volunteering from a local church, along with a couple who volunteers every Wednesday night. These individuals all appeared to be white, middle class to upper middle class middle aged adults, with the exception of one woman who was in her mid twenties. The “workers” themselves are all white mid-upper middle class college graduates who are also white. This is striking to observe as the guests who frequent the house are almost exclusively black. When I drive up to the house at each visit there are usually about two or three black families sitting out on the porch. It is without doubt that Kansas City has an extremely racialized form of poverty. The Troost corridor in particular is seemingly the seat of racial discrimination and poverty, and it would appear that this dynamic extends to the house. When I was standing in the foyer of the house reading some literature that was up on a wall a man came in the front door and asked me if he could use “my” bathroom, no doubt assuming I was “in charge” because of the color of my skin (Field Observation, April 6, 2011).

This encounter grants evidence to the notion that there is a privilege carried in white skin that allows one the opportunity to “choose” to live among the poor. Similarly, when I spoke with Ronda, who has been living at Holy Family for several years, I asked her to talk about trends she’s observed in the guests who come to the house, if the group I observed came regularly and had been for a long time, or if it was more sporadic,

From what I know there are people who have come here as children and as teenagers with their parents and are still coming which is a beautiful thing in that they remember this as a place of love and belonging but also the cycle of poverty hasn’t stopped so there’s fair amount of people who come and say they’ve been coming for years and years and years. (Interview by Waterbury, April 7, 2011)

It is here that a fundamental and irreparable rupture occurs between the ultimate aims the movement and the house espouse, and the means it undertakes to actualize them. Humanistic ideals and personalism, along with an intentionally charismatic and unbureaucratic structure in the name of avoiding “impersonal charity” lends itself to a different sort of exclusiveness. Knowledge of such organizations and having the time and money to voluntarily partake in their work requires existing social capital. Given the unequal distribution of such capital, it is unlikely

for such an organization to function as anything other than a reproduction of inequalities; regardless of the meals being served and the friends being made in the meantime.

An intentionally unbureaucratic and decentralized organizational structure subjects itself to the reproduction of existing social inequalities while an emotional ideology conflicts with an environment of material want. There is something of a bifurcation in the consciousness of the workers in the way they view their work, and their consciousness of the way the dominant society views their work: enabling, un-politicized and of minimal impact. Simultaneously they are working to confront dominant society's objectification of the poor with their own subjective understanding of the same poor, themselves and their work. In an environment informed by and incapable of refuting the power dynamics of larger society, the workers are constantly engaged in an effort to cultivate value and meaning in the relationships they have with the guests and in their life at Holy Family House.

I asked Rita how she explains where she lives and what she does to people she meets in her life day to day,

Ohhhhh.....you hit the bad one...I'm really bad, I don't know why, I don't know why I can't tell people, I can't be really honest with people um, and I think it has a lot to do with my parents and just kind of feeling like my life here is shameful? because I don't make money? and therefore since I'm not making money I'm somehow not supporting myself? Even though, I am supporting myself, I mean if Holy Family was giving me a salary then I would be considered supporting myself but because Holy Family pays me in room and board, therefore I'm some kind of moocher...., but it is, what my family has kind of decided what's wrong with me, is that I'm a moocher, and not...I'm lazy. I'm a lazy moocher, kind of. And so, that's a lot of shame in there, and so I...I just have a hard time telling people and being really proud of what I'm doing... being around other Catholic Workers and hearing them talk about their lives is really important because it reminds me, oh yeah what I'm doing is not shameful and um, yeah and that makes it easier to talk about...(Interview by Waterbury April 13, 2011)

Rita also spoke of a time when she had to leave the House for several months, after a particularly trying incident with one of the five homeless families who were living in the adjacent house at the time. In the middle of the night after getting a husband and wife out of the locked bathroom where they were screaming at one another:

This guy thought he was playing a video game while he was sitting on the couch just because like that's how high he was and then, and the wife was freaking out and bawling and screaming and I just - I didn't know what to do, and I knew something had to happen like we had to get this guy out of this house we had to figure out what to do and I just didn't know what to do I just had to calm everyone down a little bit and we did end up just going back to bed but that night it just like really rocked me and then the next day my parents are here and I can barely keep it together, yeah so....that was and hopefully that is the worst experience that I have in this house. Um....but like I had to sneak upstairs and sweep all the pills off the floor and put them in the toilet and like those kinds of things, you just kind of do in like this...you're like a zombie when you do them (Interview by Waterbury April 13, 2011).

Rita went on to say that, “things like that happen when you're dealing with homeless families.” I found this statement more than slightly troublesome. In an instance such as this, the vision of community and relationship conflicts sharply with the reality of entrenched social problems such as poverty, abuse and dependence; that is why it was so difficult for Rita to negotiate, and why she felt so detached and confused. She was forced to physically confront a challenge to her subjective understanding of her adopted role as a Catholic Worker.

Subjective experience: A created world

While the aim of the movement is so strongly towards personalism and a de-objectification of the poor, the oxymoron of voluntary poverty entails that the unwillingly poor become the objects of a different sort of process; one directed by the workers, whose service is equally a service to themselves and the satisfaction of their embodied, emotionally laden

ideology. Ronda describes the world she has created for herself in the context of Holy Family House:

I get to control my day ... like in responding to people that's my decision of do I want to respond to this person who's asking for something, do I choose to be with them that day ...but I also just get to create a world that I want and ... do the gardening because I think we should be gardening and take the bus because I think everyone should be taking the bus so I think its like a selfish, kind of, this is how I want my life to be and it is ... (Interview by Waterbury April 7, 2011).

Similarly, when I asked Rita what in the end made it worth it, she answered much more cheerfully than her previous accounts:

I'm just somebody who has a lot of interests in a lot of things and I get to be a cook, a menu planner, I get to be an editor I get to be a cleaning lady I get to be a social worker I get to be a counselor I get to be a best friend I get to be a bicycle rider, I get to be you know, someone who's really involved in city politics I get to be, you know someone who's...its just...I get to be whatever I want, you know I get to live here and as long as I'm kind of keeping a hand on the hospitality and as long as we keep giving things away people are going to keep giving us money and so...I get to do whatever I want otherwise! And its great! (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

The workers' objective awareness is of their isolated impact, and the perception others must have of their seemingly futile work. The workers' subjective experience of life at Holy Family is that of an embodied ideology. In the context of preparing meals and distributing prescription vouchers and taking the bus, they are constantly beset with the task of constructing and reconstructing an idea of themselves and a basis for their work and interactions with one another and the people they aim to serve. The workers have created for themselves a very different sort of iron cage, one of altruistic irrationality and unrelenting ideological warfare; one that is obstinate and defensive in the face of a futility that is unjustifiable outside the realm of ideology.

CONCLUSION

In using the hermeneutic key devised earlier, one can see how the house succeeds in achieving proximate answers, building relationship and connection, and is unique in the level of personal responsibility it calls its members to take in addressing the situation of the poor.

Marcuse's observation that modernity has absorbed its counter movements holds true for Holy Family House, but that fact appears to be accepted, as the once utopian vision of the movement is one that endures today in small, localized efforts where a spiritual experience is attainable only through the articulation of material justice. In the House, workers aim to construct relationships with guests with the belief that root causes of social problems can often be attributable to a lack of connection and relationship. This is fundamental to the ideology of the movement, in fact Dorothy Day's autobiography is titled, *The Long Loneliness*, in which she describes, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community" (Day 1952).

The subjective experiences of the workers entails an unwavering belief in this notion, and a dedication to the construction of such a community despite its irrationality and chronic failure to transform society. Because it is informed by this ideology, the work of the day takes on a profoundly richer meaning as it is carried out as both a condemnation of the alienating larger society and as a whispered articulation of a utopian vision.

The fundamental flaw in the ideology is that the charismatic organization of the movement disposes it to the reproduction of inequalities. The movement condemns the existing order while it furthers its dominance, as it subjects the poor and homeless in the community to the satisfaction of the socially privileged worker's embodied ideology.

I arrived at these conclusions through simultaneously analyzing the subjectivity of *community as experience*; interpreting events and relationships through the cognitive frameworks

of the subjects, and observing the extent to which the nature of Troost contributed to the situation of relationships and power structures within the organization. Holy Family House functions in the community it does in light of the vocational call of Catholic Workers, however the same vocational call determines the ultimate futility of this would-be rational undertaking.

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Embodied Ideology and Futility: The Irrationality of Voluntary Poverty in a Catholic Worker
House

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INTRODUCTION

The Troost Corridor in Kansas City, Missouri is the seat of highly racialized poverty that has been structured over the course of the past 30 years by a complex web of forces including global and national economic transformation, deindustrialization and inner-city capitalist disinvestment and institutional patterns of racial inequality and segregation (Gotham 1998). In the context of this research, I am looking to examine those relationships that are formed within and around Holy Family Catholic Worker house as an organization that aims to provide material necessities, hospitality and an environment to foster connections and reciprocal relationships with and among the poor rather than simply issuing conditional handouts or proselytizing needed life changes. I seek to understand the motivations for forming a community to endure systemic marginalization by dominant society, and examine Holy Family House as an example of an alternative, non-instrumental and charismatic society, paying special attention to the discrepancies that emerge between the movement's defining ideologies and its day to day practices, and the ways in which those who work at the house engage themselves in the construction of their own identity and a meaning for their work.

Holy Family Catholic Worker house provides breakfasts and nightly dinners for around 100 individuals in the local community, and operates a small shelter for a single homeless family. The Catholic Worker Movement, of which Holy Family House is a part, was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, Day being a journalist and a political radical who after being a part of the communist party in New York in the 1920's underwent a conversion to Catholicism, where she sought to be in solidarity with the poor and working class throughout the

world; and Maurin being a mystic, anarchist philosopher and revolutionary. Together they began distributing a paper in Union Square for a penny a copy. By living out the beatitudes, and the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing to the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the prisoner, and burying the dead, the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement believed that they could fundamentally transform society. The Movement stressed “bearing personal responsibility for the poor, and argued that people should live in poor neighborhoods, give hospitality to the otherwise poor in their house, share all that they have, and protest any institution that negatively effects the poor” (Effler 2010). The house on Troost is an attempt to do just this. The workers live in the house communally; experiencing their work as a vocational call to service of a systemically marginalized group. Thus, my study is one of an intentional community within an environment of extreme material and social deprivation. In order to contextualize the nature and function of Holy Family House as an intentional community, I will first examine intentional communities as part of the sociological literature.

Intentional communities have become radical manifestations of the social justice movement throughout the world. Thus, a great deal of sociological literature examines the habitual flow of life within such communities, as well as the ideological motivations to live in them. These ideological motivations speak to a lack of faith in the prevailing system and are often motivated in trying to create a new society, sustainable and ethical, in the shell of the old. The current marketplace no longer represents an authentic environment for all consumers; by withdrawing from the market-based lifestyle, these communities feel that they can achieve a more principled and satisfactory life (Bekin and Szmigin, 2005). As is the case with the cottage industries (Holy Odors natural deodorant) and community garden at Holy Family House, in such

communities, people become more integrated in the production of the things they consume and are thus able to “cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning.” (Bekin and Szmigin 2005:417) Work is the basis for all interaction, and because of the daily tasks of living are taken on as a concerted opposition to the mainstream, “tasks have deadlines, but there is a re-organization of time and collective distribution of tasks which makes it possible to enjoy work.” (Bekin and Szmigin 2005:419) The task to create an alternative way of living is comprised of many small, seemingly menial actions: sewing napkins, sorting huge donations of unsalable produce, and maintaining the newsletter mailing list, that in the context of an ideological struggle take on new meaning and importance.

In studying Holy Family House, I will employ the dual approach that Stephen Vaisey articulates one must have in examining intentional communities: one that relies on explanation of the structural mechanisms that are grounded in organizational factors, such as the consequences of an intentionally unbureaucratic service organization and the substantive factors that are grounded in cultural meaning, or the subjectivity of the experiences of Catholic Workers themselves. This dual approach extends to the concept of *community as experience*, as discussed in Tonnies’ and Weber’s comparison of the substantive rationality that underpins communal action, or the experiences of the Catholic Workers and their relationships with guests and the instrumental rationality that underpins associative action, or what they would see as the impersonal charity that has become so a part of institutionalized religious groups and social agencies. I agree with Vaisey’s assertion that this examination of community captures the subjectivity associated with individual experience of communal life, and is able to explain his concept of *Gemeinschaft* as a consequence of moral order. The final contribution that Vaisey makes to my research is the proposition that “ideas, culture and identity matter at least as much

as social structure for the development of particular forms of social interaction” (Vaisey 2007:855). Intentional communities, and Catholic Worker houses I would argue specifically, are said to be unique in that they are formed around a moral order in a way that is distinctly different than any other organization, and they have no “social power unless they are interpreted through the ‘hermeneutic key’ of shared moral order” (Vaisey 2007:860). This hermeneutic key is essential to understanding the subjective experiences of the workers through their own cognitive frameworks.

I am approaching this research with a significant understanding of the prevailing ideologies the movement espouses, and the moral order that is both the cause and consequence of its being. I am familiar with the writings of the movement’s founders and have visited similar organizations throughout the country. Given the fact that the organizations (houses) are affiliated without set standards for how to go about creating communal reciprocity, they are able to curtail the nature of their work to fit the local settings; aiming to “marry spirituality to both direct human service and unmediated political action” (Coy 2001:8). At the outset I was only somewhat familiar with the day-to-day activities at Holy Family House, so I relied on an understanding of the movement’s ultimate ideologies and aims of personalism, a decentralized society, a “green revolution,” nonviolence, the works of mercy, manual labor and voluntary poverty, to construct a hermeneutic key as I observed everyday rituals and work.¹

METHODS

Given the dual approach of this research, I determined that an ethnographic case study would afford me the greatest chance to develop and utilize my hermeneutic key and interpret events through the cognitive frameworks of the subjects. Ethnography is particularly well-suited

¹ The Catholic Worker Movement. “Aims and Means”. catholicworker.org. Retrieved April 2, 2011. (<http://catholicworker.org/aimsandmeans.cfm>)

to the study of a communal environment as it emphasizes understanding social relations and interactions as vitally important to understanding social phenomena, as opposed to a positivist framework, which is more likely to collect data on an individual, atomistic basis, seeing individuals as sufficient mirrors of social relations. This methodology also allowed me to develop an understanding of Holy Family House as a social entity bound in a specific space and time. This is essential to the focus of my research as I looked to examine how and why a movement such as the Catholic Worker would come to exist within the community that it does in Kansas City. In order to arrange access to the house I emailed the workers, introducing myself and conveying my intentions for my research. One person, Wren, was established as my contact person at the house, and after corresponding with her several more times I was granted access and given a letter of approval.

The two primary events I observed were nightly meals and roundtable meetings. These were purposive setting samples: meals were observed because of the high level of community attendance and as indicative of the day-to-day function of the house, while meetings were attended to allow me greater insight into the ideology of the movement; the belief behind the typical function. Within these purposive settings, I conversed with subjects according to convenience.

For the meals, I observed from the perspective of a volunteer and on other nights as a guest and engaged in dialogue with both workers and guests about their experiences with the local community on Troost and Holy Family House. I sought in the context of these conversations to measure the nature of the constructed relationships between the Catholic Workers and the guests by observing their interactions and whether or not any power dynamics

make themselves visible. I did this by observing the familiarity of the guests and the workers with one another and the level of comfort they appeared to have sharing space in the house.

I also attended the roundtable meetings for the “clarification of thought” that were offered in February and March. Aside from learning about the movement I had planned to devote this time to paying special attention to the way participation was distributed across workers, volunteers and guests. However, this proved difficult in that none of the guests who typically come to the house for dinner came to either of the meetings I attended; this fact led me to consider the reproduction of inequality, and challenged the purported inclusiveness and communal nature of the House.

My formal interviews were only with staff, at their request that I refrain from formally interviewing guests in the house and thus jeopardize their comfort and sense of safety. I intended to formally interview each of the four workers who live at the house, however because one of them was out of town for all but the first of my visits, I was only able to interview three. I chose to interview all three of the ones I was able to for slightly less than an hour each in an effort to establish polyvocality, with the knowledge that each had been at the house at different times and had different duties within the house and obligations outside of the house. My initial visits to the house provided me with an understanding of the informal relationships between workers, and so I spent a considerable amount of more time with Wren and Rita, who had not been at the house as long as Ronda, who I observed to exercise more authority in the House. I asked them about how they first learned of the movement, arrived at the house, what sort of challenges they’ve experienced living in community, what their typical day consists of, what it entails for them to support one another as a community, about the relationships they have with guests, how they explain their life and work to people they meet in their day to day life, to

recount instances in which they felt particularly affirmed and particularly discouraged, how they confront the obvious criticisms of the organizational structure of the house, and what makes it worth it. In the context of these conversations I was able to measure a great deal in terms of how the community itself is constructed and the subjectivity associated with communal life.

Given the nature of work in such communities, I found that a highly effective way of estranging myself from the role of researcher was to work alongside volunteers or the workers themselves. Through participating in a collective undertaking, whether serving dinner, cleaning up or sorting through donated produce I feel that this helped me to see “social facts rather than sets of activities” (Gobo 2008:150) Personally satisfied with the completion of these tasks, I was better able to understand the meaning that workers attach to them.

Through my conversations with workers I was able to generalize how they come to construct an understanding of themselves and their work, and of the place of the House and movement as it aims to contradict the prevailing system. The power dynamics that revealed themselves in my observations I generalized as corresponding to the racialized nature of poverty in the Troost corridor. Workers’ recollections of personal experiences were generalized as being the result of the organizational structure of the House.

Measures that I took to ensure reliability and validity included interviewing multiple workers, attending meals as a volunteer and as a guest to gain both perspectives, and in respect to my dual approach, I developed the necessary understanding of movement ideology so that aside from analyzing the House within its larger social context and as it is patterned by structural forces, I was able to understand it through the subjective cognitive frameworks of the workers themselves through prior reading about the movement and attending the clarification meetings.

Personal Statement

During a semester spent in Florence, Italy, I was rarely without my mother's worn copy of Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. It was my mother's hands that had hurriedly placed it in one of my bags as I was leaving home, and as a stubborn and egocentric youth, perhaps that is why I approached first opening it with such trepidation. Immediately I was enamored of the story and the language with which it was conveyed. Indeed, Dorothy Day was my most consistent companion throughout that trip; she was with me on the steps outside churches where I sat for hours, and on many an overnight train ride to and from excursions where I had been more than slightly preoccupied by her words ringing in my ears with a clarity that drowned out the surrounding tourist chatter.

John Steinbeck once wrote that we don't take a trip, a trip takes us. And so that journey did. However, more than a trek across countries and landscapes, through cathedrals, cafes and monasteries, it was through words on a page that I was carried from the edge of complacent detachment to a deep, palpable understanding.

I was brought up Catholic, and attended a Catholic college. It was during my high school years and first year at said college that theological abstractions and the intricacies of ritual began to ring a bit hollow, and increasingly contradictory. I encountered Dorothy Day with the embittered skepticism that I assigned to everything that was passed through my mother's daily mass going hands, however her story compelled me deeply. She spoke of the sickly dehumanizing nature of capitalist enterprise, the fault of the church in serving monetary interests before human interests, a joyous anarchy of committed love of neighbor, and the belief that social institutions are worthy of preservation only insofar as they work to uphold human dignity. She spoke of her work for the communist party in New York, her disdain for religion, and how that disdain was tempered with the birth of her daughter. She spoke of how it was overwhelming

joy and gratitude that moved her to a form of prayer that was nothing akin to self-flagellating supplication.

My interest in her ideas led me to pursue Sociology as an undergraduate and eventual graduate degree. I approached all of my classes with her in mind. My interest in the Catholic Worker Movement led me to Catholic Worker houses throughout the country, as I looked to observe her ideas as they manifested themselves in varied settings. I met felons and anarchists, renegade priests and farmers both rural and urban; and they showed me the extent to which a movement of solidarity with the poor, vigilant care for the environment and active condemnation of consumerism is not only desperately needed, but undeniably present: aflame in existing communities that thrive both due to their necessity and their resonance, and flickering in the consciences of an increasing many.

I encounter my current research with the intention of giving academic voice to this movement, and to the inherent contradictions within the prevailing system that produced it. While she was alive there was brief talk about making Dorothy Day a saint. Upon hearing this she scoffed saying, “don’t make me a saint, I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.” I believe that this is an essential summary of her work and the work the movement undertakes. It is not extraordinary, it is not saintly, it is work. It is that actualization of ideological aims that most often takes its form in activities like scrubbing potatoes, sorting clothes, rinsing and neatly folding pieces of aluminum foil for later use.

I acknowledge that my personal history with the movement places me in jeopardy of idealizing their actions. However, in my experience I have always remained engaged in and grateful for the critical guidance of my sociological imagination, which has proved a valuable tool for sensitizing me to contradictions. The dual analysis that was set forth in my introduction

has led me to consider how the ideology of the movement dictates the charismatic organizational structure of the house and constructs the subjective experience of the workers as they negotiate between rational and irrational altruism, and how, given the location of the house, the same ideology contributes to Holy Family's function as a reproduction of inequalities.

IRRATIONAL ALTRUISM

As discussed at the outset of this paper, the Catholic Worker movement is a loose affiliation of houses of hospitality throughout the country. The intentionally anarchistic nature of the movement predisposes it to a lack of formalized or centralized structure, and so the day to day rituals and activities of the houses are determined by their unique physical locations and the needs of the surrounding community. Holy Family House is located on the 900 block of East 31st street in Kansas City, Missouri. Kansas City is home to an extremely racialized form of poverty; the seat of which is in this neighborhood, otherwise known as the Troost Corridor. The community at the House describes its work as part of a vocational call

...to voluntary poverty, to live as though what we have belongs to those who don't have, in contrast to endless accumulation, model simplicity rather than materialism, consumerism; to live in a neighborhood of poor people, to model integration, recognition of dignity regardless of economic status; to live in community, intentionally and deliberately, committed to each other and the common venture, with the joy and frustration, encouragement and challenge, potential and limits, in contrast to the pervading spirit of individualism; to name our home a "house of hospitality," where persons, especially the stranger, can come to be noticed, accepted, welcomed, listened to, responded to, be treated as and called "guests;" to broaden the description of community, so that our table has settings for hungry people, our house has room for homeless families; to salvage food, clothing, furniture, to mediate between excess and deficiency, in contrast to a general throw-away mentality; to live nonviolently in the face of violence, war, and the pervasive disregard for the dignity and sacredness of life; to gather regularly for prayer and liturgy, bowing our head in humble admission to the

*limits of time, energy, ability, hoping to be faithful to the venture undertaken, knowing and trusting the process and results are in God's hands.*²

This vocational call is based in the substantive rationalization of relationship, recognition and connection as an ultimate remedy to the atomizing capacity of an advanced capitalist society.

The work of the house is carried out on two levels: one, bound in a specific space and time and focused on satisfying real material needs and a second more abstract pursuit of divine and transcendent justice. The function of the Holy Family House entails a cleavage between these two simultaneous objectives: the first, material based objective being intensely rational and summarily described in Wren's statement that, "we all need to eat," and the second, irrational objective of somehow spontaneously generating mass social change through charisma and voluntary poverty. The day-to-day activities of the house entail an on-going negotiation between these two aims, both of which are vital to the construction of community and purpose. The rational aim to meet the needs of the day is informed by an irrational and emotionally-laden ideological vision of change, just as that vision manifests itself in nightly meals and prescription vouchers for the nearby pharmacy.

The "Catholic Workers" who live at the house aim to provide a public space to the local community where relationships of mutuality can be formed and nurtured. Though the house provides dinners four nights per week, on Thursday nights, they open the house to have a "coffeehouse" night. For a short time at the beginning of the year, the house had been hosting cooking classes organized by Harvesters, the Kansas City food bank, but the requirement that guests sign up prior to the classes was somewhat contrary to the house's existing modus operandi, thus the decision was made to do away with the formalized event, and in its place there are now open coffeehouse nights, where the house is open to guests to come and relax, play

² Holy Family House. "Aims of Holy Family House". [holyfamilycwhouse.org](http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org). Retrieved March 15, 2011. <http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org/p/about-holy-family-house.html>

cards or dominos and chat with one another and the “workers.” “Rita,” one of the workers wrote of the decision to have a coffeehouse night saying,

*we feel our reasons for having a night where we don't serve a meal but are open to guests are well grounded in Catholic Worker thought. We wanted a time for new ideas to flourish, a night when we weren't running around serving, but a night when we could really get to know people. We wanted a night based on relationship with people in contrast to what often seems a transaction-based, agency-like meal.”*³

In this instance, the irrational is usurping the rational activities of the house. Providing a space for new ideas to flourish is deeply “grounded” in Catholic Worker thought, as is the belief that the root causes of hunger and homelessness can be remedied by means of interpersonal connections, which humanize and provide a subjective experience of poverty rather than pursuing change through the political process.

My first observation at Holy Family House was on such a “coffee house” night. Out on the front porch of the house were about 10-15 people sitting and chatting. The screen door was open and in the entry way I met Wren, my contact person with whom I had corresponded with to arrange my access. In the corner of the dining room was a table with two coffee carafes and a stack of mismatched coffee mugs. Two men sitting near the table were having a conversation in Spanish, and at the next table two students from Rockhurst University were playing dominos with two older African American men. I strolled around the room to look at the walls. The decor was in keeping with the tradition of most Catholic Worker houses. On the walls were portraits of Dorothy Day, including the most famous of her at a farm workers union protest. She is very elderly, sitting on a chair and looking up at what you know to be two police officers, their guns visible in their holsters. The caption at the bottom of the poster reads “Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy rotten system. - Dorothy Day”

³ Holy Family House. “News”. www.holyfamilycwhouse.org. Retrieved February 2, 2011.
<http://www.holyfamilycwhouse.org/>

On another wall in the same room is a poster that is a staple in any Catholic Worker home. It reads on one side the “works of mercy” and on the other the “works of war.”



Rita Corbin

(Figure 1: Works of Mercy)

The point and counterpoint design of this image shows the extent to which the movement defines itself as much by what it is as what it isn't. The works of mercy, which are among the most fundamental aspects of movement ideology are set forth in contrast to the works of war. This shows explicitly the degree to which the House and the movement in general is locked in antagonism; defining itself as much by its actual work for justice as its opposition to a perceived unnatural and profane disregard for the dignity of human life.

In the living room I helped Wren pack up toiletries that had been out for people to take if needed as part of the coffeehouse night ritual. There were boxes of travel sized toothpaste, mouthwash, soap, shampoo and rolls of toilet paper. All of these goods are donated and they are set out so that people can come through, take a bag and take what they need.

Inside the communal bathroom there were several trays of dixie cups sitting under grow lights. I later learned that these were tomato plants they were sprouting to plant in the community garden they maintain two lots away; a rational means of cultivating both sustenance and meaning in the context of a collective, productive undertaking.

The irrational altruism that defines the relationships and charismatic organizational structure of the house is a concerted response to what the workers see as the impersonal nature of existing service organizations for the poor. It is understood that particularly with the poor, Americanism predisposes us to an unconscious aversion to collectivity, and substantive, non-instrumental relationships. The Worker's remedy to this is a line of philosophical thought called personalism. The notion is premised on the belief that despite differences, both real and contrived, the most crucial part of the human experience is that it is at its essence a collective experience. Relationships are not a means to an end so much as they are recognized as the meaning of life. Personalism as it is defined by the movement is, "a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals. In following such wisdom, we move away from a self-centered individualism toward the good of the other. This is to be done by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than looking to the state or other institutions to provide impersonal "charity."⁴

This aversion to impersonal charity and a non-emotive, rational approach to solving social problems is a contentious subject for workers. The most obvious criticism of Holy Family House would be that as an intentionally unbureaucratic organization, its apolitical nature is ultimately an ineffective means of going about solving poverty on a structural level, and in fact potentially worsens the situation of the poor. In devotion to this anarchic ideology, the workers

⁴ Catholic Worker Movement. "Catholic Worker Newspaper, May 2008 ed." catholicworker.org. Retrieved on April 7, 2011. <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=519&SearchTerm=personalism>

have locked themselves in an antagonism towards the prevailing rationality of individualism and upward mobility to the point of embracing an irrational and intentionally downwardly mobile lifestyle. When confronted with the seeming futility of this choice, the workers are obstinate.

Wren explains,

...we need social workers and there's a place for that...we however are not social workers and I think the CW movement in general and me in particular will tell you that we're not trying to fix everybody's problems, we're just here to meet the needs we can meet, right now, you know because we all need to eat. Several times a day, no matter where we are or what our situation is, and that's a need we can meet for people and that's a need we can connect over.sometimes what a person needs at the root at the most is connection and relationship and sometimes when that's a little more solid in life then, other things do change. So, and also it isn't to say that it's all relationship with us, you know its the four of us and 100 people here on any given night, but some of it is just having an open space, you know this kind of public house where people can come and be and just connect with people (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

To this end, the workers all emphasized the degree to which not only are they fulfilled in the work that they undertake in living their irrational vocation and working at the house, but the very rational ownership so many of the guests have in the house. In my conversation with Ronda she spoke of the dozen or so guests who will help wash dishes or sweep of their own accord,

...So like John, he rides a bicycle and he just comes and like picks up all the trash around the perimeter of the house without being asked, he doesn't need a thank you and he hardly ever comes in for dinner, that's just what he does. Or Bob sweeps almost every morning after breakfast, that's just what he wants to do and people want to give back to what they see as something that's really helping them and helping the community... (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

Buoyed up on a structural level by motivations of irrational altruism, utopian social vision and deeply humanistic ideals, the House provides the context for a highly rational exchange of time, work and material necessities. This “ownership” Ronda describes is a rational reciprocation on the part of the Troost community to the hospitality they receive at Holy Family House.

THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY AND BIFURCATED CONSCIOUSNESS

In the pursuit of a more fulfilling means of securing material justice, the workers have engaged themselves in the production of a new means of social exclusion and the reproduction of existing inequality. Marcuse wrote that a unique attribute of modernity is that it has absorbed its countermovements. With this in mind, the Catholic Worker movement provides the structure and narrative for expressing an ideological diversion from mainstream society, while not altering it in a fundamental or lasting way. Those who live and work in the house experience their work as a vocational call to action and to embodied subversion to the Establishment, however the relations of power within the house express on a micro scale the relations of power that define larger society.

Voluntary poverty is something of an oxymoron in that living in actual impoverishment means that very little, if anything, is done voluntarily. The decision to divest from mainstream society and adopt a life of simplicity allows for the assuagement of ideological angst, while materially providing for those who the system has not afforded the opportunity to actualize their own person ideologies. Thus, despite a professed condemnation of systemic injustice, the movement exists within the confines of existing power structures.

The neighboring community of which the house is a part is primarily black. The vast majority of the guests are black as well, which is striking in light of my observation of an exclusively white volunteer base.

“Prior to meal time, people filter in and out of the front door from the porch where several families sit, they come in and use the bathroom, pay for bus tickets that they can buy at a discounted price from someone who sits near the door, use the telephone and relax in the living room. This period offers a good chance to see power dynamics at play in the relationships between the people who live in the house, and the guests. This night

in particular, there were about 10 people volunteering from a local church, along with a couple who volunteers every Wednesday night. These individuals all appeared to be white, middle class to upper middle class middle aged adults, with the exception of one woman who was in her mid twenties. The “workers” themselves are all white mid-upper middle class college graduates who are also white. This is striking to observe as the guests who frequent the house are almost exclusively black. When I drive up to the house at each visit there are usually about two or three black families sitting out on the porch. It is without doubt that Kansas City has an extremely racialized form of poverty. The Troost corridor in particular is seemingly the seat of racial discrimination and poverty, and it would appear that this dynamic extends to the house. When I was standing in the foyer of the house reading some literature that was up on a wall a man came in the front door and asked me if he could use “my” bathroom, no doubt assuming I was “in charge” because of the color of my skin (Field Observation, April 6, 2011).

This encounter grants evidence to the notion that there is a privilege carried in white skin that allows one the opportunity to “choose” to live among the poor. Similarly, when I spoke with Ronda, who has been living at Holy Family for several years, I asked her to talk about trends she’s observed in the guests who come to the house, if the group I observed came regularly and had been for a long time, or if it was more sporadic,

From what I know there are people who have come here as children and as teenagers with their parents and are still coming which is a beautiful thing in that they remember this as a place of love and belonging but also the cycle of poverty hasn’t stopped so there’s fair amount of people who come and say they’ve been coming for years and years and years. (Interview by Waterbury, April 7, 2011)

It is here that a fundamental and irreparable rupture occurs between the ultimate aims the movement and the house espouse, and the means it undertakes to actualize them. Humanistic ideals and personalism, along with an intentionally charismatic and unbureaucratic structure in the name of avoiding “impersonal charity” lends itself to a different sort of exclusiveness. Knowledge of such organizations and having the time and money to voluntarily partake in their work requires existing social capital. Given the unequal distribution of such capital, it is unlikely

for such an organization to function as anything other than a reproduction of inequalities; regardless of the meals being served and the friends being made in the meantime.

An intentionally unbureaucratic and decentralized organizational structure subjects itself to the reproduction of existing social inequalities while an emotional ideology conflicts with an environment of material want. There is something of a bifurcation in the consciousness of the workers in the way they view their work, and their consciousness of the way the dominant society views their work: enabling, un-politicized and of minimal impact. Simultaneously they are working to confront dominant society's objectification of the poor with their own subjective understanding of the same poor, themselves and their work. In an environment informed by and incapable of refuting the power dynamics of larger society, the workers are constantly engaged in an effort to cultivate value and meaning in the relationships they have with the guests and in their life at Holy Family House.

I asked Rita how she explains where she lives and what she does to people she meets in her life day to day,

Ohhhhh.....you hit the bad one...I'm really bad, I don't know why, I don't know why I can't tell people, I can't be really honest with people um, and I think it has a lot to do with my parents and just kind of feeling like my life here is shameful? because I don't make money? and therefore since I'm not making money I'm somehow not supporting myself? Even though, I am supporting myself, I mean if Holy Family was giving me a salary then I would be considered supporting myself but because Holy Family pays me in room and board, therefore I'm some kind of moocher...., but it is, what my family has kind of decided what's wrong with me, is that I'm a moocher, and not...I'm lazy. I'm a lazy moocher, kind of. And so, that's a lot of shame in there, and so I...I just have a hard time telling people and being really proud of what I'm doing... being around other Catholic Workers and hearing them talk about their lives is really important because it reminds me, oh yeah what I'm doing is not shameful and um, yeah and that makes it easier to talk about...(Interview by Waterbury April 13, 2011)

Rita also spoke of a time when she had to leave the House for several months, after a particularly trying incident with one of the five homeless families who were living in the adjacent house at the time. In the middle of the night after getting a husband and wife out of the locked bathroom where they were screaming at one another:

This guy thought he was playing a video game while he was sitting on the couch just because like that's how high he was and then, and the wife was freaking out and bawling and screaming and I just - I didn't know what to do, and I knew something had to happen like we had to get this guy out of this house we had to figure out what to do and I just didn't know what to do I just had to calm everyone down a little bit and we did end up just going back to bed but that night it just like really rocked me and then the next day my parents are here and I can barely keep it together, yeah so....that was and hopefully that is the worst experience that I have in this house. Um....but like I had to sneak upstairs and sweep all the pills off the floor and put them in the toilet and like those kinds of things, you just kind of do in like this...you're like a zombie when you do them (Interview by Waterbury April 13, 2011).

Rita went on to say that, “things like that happen when you're dealing with homeless families.” I found this statement more than slightly troublesome. In an instance such as this, the vision of community and relationship conflicts sharply with the reality of entrenched social problems such as poverty, abuse and dependence; that is why it was so difficult for Rita to negotiate, and why she felt so detached and confused. She was forced to physically confront a challenge to her subjective understanding of her adopted role as a Catholic Worker.

Subjective experience: A created world

While the aim of the movement is so strongly towards personalism and a de-objectification of the poor, the oxymoron of voluntary poverty entails that the unwillingly poor become the objects of a different sort of process; one directed by the workers, whose service is equally a service to themselves and the satisfaction of their embodied, emotionally laden

ideology. Ronda describes the world she has created for herself in the context of Holy Family House:

I get to control my day ... like in responding to people that's my decision of do I want to respond to this person who's asking for something, do I choose to be with them that day ...but I also just get to create a world that I want and ... do the gardening because I think we should be gardening and take the bus because I think everyone should be taking the bus so I think its like a selfish, kind of, this is how I want my life to be and it is ... (Interview by Waterbury April 7, 2011).

Similarly, when I asked Rita what in the end made it worth it, she answered much more cheerfully than her previous accounts:

I'm just somebody who has a lot of interests in a lot of things and I get to be a cook, a menu planner, I get to be an editor I get to be a cleaning lady I get to be a social worker I get to be a counselor I get to be a best friend I get to be a bicycle rider, I get to be you know, someone who's really involved in city politics I get to be, you know someone who's...its just...I get to be whatever I want, you know I get to live here and as long as I'm kind of keeping a hand on the hospitality and as long as we keep giving things away people are going to keep giving us money and so...I get to do whatever I want otherwise! And its great! (Interview by Waterbury, April 13, 2011).

The workers' objective awareness is of their isolated impact, and the perception others must have of their seemingly futile work. The workers' subjective experience of life at Holy Family is that of an embodied ideology. In the context of preparing meals and distributing prescription vouchers and taking the bus, they are constantly beset with the task of constructing and reconstructing an idea of themselves and a basis for their work and interactions with one another and the people they aim to serve. The workers have created for themselves a very different sort of iron cage, one of altruistic irrationality and unrelenting ideological warfare; one that is obstinate and defensive in the face of a futility that is unjustifiable outside the realm of ideology.

CONCLUSION

In using the hermeneutic key devised earlier, one can see how the house succeeds in achieving proximate answers, building relationship and connection, and is unique in the level of personal responsibility it calls its members to take in addressing the situation of the poor. Marcuse's observation that modernity has absorbed its counter movements holds true for Holy Family House, but that fact appears to be accepted, as the once utopian vision of the movement is one that endures today in small, localized efforts where a spiritual experience is attainable only through the articulation of material justice. In the House, workers aim to construct relationships with guests with the belief that root causes of social problems can often be attributable to a lack of connection and relationship. This is fundamental to the ideology of the movement, in fact Dorothy Day's autobiography is titled, *The Long Loneliness*, in which she describes, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community" (Day 1952).

The subjective experiences of the workers entails an unwavering belief in this notion, and a dedication to the construction of such a community despite its irrationality and chronic failure to transform society. Because it is informed by this ideology, the work of the day takes on a profoundly richer meaning as it is carried out as both a condemnation of the alienating larger society and as a whispered articulation of a utopian vision.

The fundamental flaw in the ideology is that the charismatic organization of the movement disposes it to the reproduction of inequalities. The movement condemns the existing order while it furthers its dominance, as it subjects the poor and homeless in the community to the satisfaction of the socially privileged worker's embodied ideology.

I arrived at these conclusions through simultaneously analyzing the subjectivity of *community as experience*; interpreting events and relationships through the cognitive frameworks

of the subjects, and observing the extent to which the nature of Troost contributed to the situation of relationships and power structures within the organization. Holy Family House functions in the community it does in light of the vocational call of Catholic Workers, however the same vocational call determines the ultimate futility of this would-be rational undertaking.

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