

## Comment

# History Never Repeats Itself

*Michael Burawoy*  
*Department of Sociology*  
*University of California, Berkeley*

At a time when we look anywhere but the United States for examples of participatory democracy, when we extol participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, panchayat self-government in Kerala, or the cooperative system of Mondragon, it is salutary to learn of the democratic experiments of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)—even if they occurred some time ago now. In his presidential address Jess Gilbert examines two democratic experiments of the USDA during the New Deal: first, county planning that coordinated federal programs through citizen committees, and second, land redistribution to landless southern farmers, including a small number of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers, creating self-governing resettlement communities. Their importance is two-fold: first, these were projects promoted by the state; and second, sociologists were involved in their success. And so, concludes Gilbert, if in the past so why not in the future?

Well, first it is worth noting that both programs were quite short-lived, abolished by new administrations hostile to any sort of democratic planning. The county planning seems to have disappeared without trace, whereas the land redistribution left its mark on history, generating an independent black farming class that spawned civil-rights leaders in the 1960s. It is important to ask why the two programs left such different legacies, and what are the conditions for the longevity of democratic experiments. Perhaps, in the final analysis, the citizen committees never made decisions about anything important whereas land redistribution created viable new communities. To work effectively, participatory democracy requires some form of real and visible redistribution. That's a lesson I think we have learned from the study of such experiments in different parts of the world.

Gilbert writes that sociologists were at the center of the delineation of communities within counties, a form of collaborative social science, yet in the program of land redistribution that outlasted its inception, we hear little of sociological intervention on the ground, more inspiration from within the state. It is worth exploring further what role sociologists play in these experiments—do they do so as technicians and designers or as publicists and visionaries? Perhaps their specific expertise comes

most frequently in the formulation and elaboration of such experiments, drawing on experiences, positive or negative, from other contexts. Thus, for example, Laura Enriquez has shown (1997) that land redistribution in Nicaragua, orchestrated by the Sandinista regime (known by its Spanish acronym, FSLN), created an oppositional peasantry which was, in part, responsible for ousting the FSLN in the election of 1990. In this limited sense the FSLN was hoisted on its own petard. Through the comparative study of experiments in participatory democracy, such as those described by Gilbert, we can learn about their consequences—intended and unintended—as well as the conditions of their continuity and their dissemination, all with a view to designing them better in the future.

Jess Gilbert is right to remind us of the possibilities of synergies between states and a democratizing civil society. But what are the conditions for such synergy? Gilbert implies that the initiative for the experiments he describes came from within the USDA, but democratic decentralization is just as likely to come from the mobilization of civil society *against* the state, as in South Africa against the apartheid regime, as in Brazil against dictatorship, as in late perestroika Russia against the Soviet state, as in the Solidarity movement against the Polish state. Do such movements for democratization against the state have any better chance of surviving than those sponsored by the state? The historical record suggests that the survival of democratizing mobilization from below depends on sponsorship and concessions from above, that is, when state and civil society enter a virtuous circle of reinforcement. Sociologists can be found active in all these anti-state movements as well as working within the state to foster their continuity.

Perhaps it could even be said that such a state-society synergy occurred for a short time and in a selective manner during the civil-rights era, when state and civil society did indeed respond to each other in a spiral of mutual accountability. Yet, as Andrew Barlow has written (2007), the spaces within the state as well as state-sponsored programs, created in the 1960s and 1970s in response to collective mobilization, have now been closed down. Instead of the Farm Security Administration of the New Deal, described in glowing terms by Gilbert, we have a Department of Homeland Security bent on military security, incapable of dealing effectively with social and economic disasters. We face a state that responds to Hurricane Katrina with military occupation, and to economic crisis with a bailout for a financial oligarchy. Today there is certainly no place for sociology in the state except as bolstering control and surveillance. There's no place for the likes of Carl Taylor. Or not yet. So what to do?

Gilbert writes, “My goal is not simply policy replication, for I recognize the vast differences between the historical and political-economic contexts then and now; the ‘next deal’ will not be a carbon copy of the New Deal.” Indeed, it will not be a carbon copy. We need to put the New Deal in historical context. Following Karl Polanyi (1944), I see it as one of a number of national responses to the crisis of world capitalism brought about by the market fundamentalism of the 1920s. The national responses included Fascism and Stalinism, Social Democracy as well as the New Deal, all combating financial uncertainty, or as Polanyi would call it, the commodification of money. This was the second wave of market fundamentalism, the first having occurred during the nineteenth century and having been dominated by the commodification of labor to which reactions were more local—the formation of voluntary organizations, trade unions, cooperatives, communes, and eventually political parties. Since the 1970s we have been facing a third wave of marketization, which involves the commodification of labor and money but also, and more decisively, nature.

So far this third wave of marketization, at least in the United States, has involved a collusive relation between market fundamentalism and a state that deploys coercive means to contain the fallout of neoliberal policies. Within the academy this period is marked by the ascendancy of economics, and a political science that attempts to become a branch of economics. To be sure there is resistance to this amalgam within these same disciplines—post-autistic economics and the perestroika movement in political science—but also from other disciplines. Although there are a few who seek to make sociology a branch of economics, they have no significant headway within a discipline that has always been critical of utilitarian models of social action, from Marx, Weber, and Durkheim to Parsons, Habermas, and Bourdieu. If economics takes the standpoint of market expansion, and political science takes the standpoint of political order, sociology (and allied disciplines such as anthropology and human geography) takes the standpoint of a relatively autonomous civil society and from this standpoint studies the state and the economy—among other things their effects on social movements, on inequalities, on political participation, and on institutions such as the family.

If the New Deal offered the opportunity for rural sociologists to promote the democratic organization of civil society, today that is no longer part of the state’s agenda. Instead we have to think of sociology embarking from the university and engaging with the civil society, what I call a public as opposed to a policy sociology. Even as the university is

being corporatized and its knowledge commodified, so there is a countermovement that fosters deeper engagement with surrounding communities, reflected for example in the movement for service learning and the scholarship of engagement. The initiative is not always from the side of the university. It can also come from state legislatures as in the case of California's Miguel Contreras Labor Program, annually funded to the tune of \$6 million and devoted to building relations between the university and the labor movement, a project largely dominated by sociologists. Rural sociology, with its close connection to agricultural extension of the land-grant colleges, has a ready-made foundation for building linkages between university and civil society. But here, too, it is important to distinguish between policy sociology that serves agribusiness or even trade unions and a public sociology that involves a more dialogic relation between academy and public, a dialogue that recognizes the independence of each.

Rural sociology has a special place in the response to third-wave marketization because the new era is marked by the commodification of nature, which is threatening our very survival on this planet. In particular, the commodification of land has generated some of the most powerful countermovements of the new century, whether it be the struggles of marginalized urban populations in India, China, South Africa, and elsewhere; opposition to land expropriations for sporting events, new-fangled gated communities, or luxury consumer complexes; or the struggles of rural indigenous communities in Brazil, India, Mexico, and elsewhere as they try to hold on to or regain access to their land. We now know how catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina or the tsunami are exploited by states to expel populations from their homes to prepare the ground for new capital invasions, for new rounds of primitive accumulation. Such ruthless commodification of nature—air, land, water—continues to galvanize countermovements in which rural sociology has its part to play.

As I write, the chickens of market fundamentalism are coming home to roost—plunging the world daily into an ever deeper economic crisis. Spontaneously and desperately states across the world, led by the U.S. state, are reversing their deregulation dogmas as economic concentration proceeds apace and states are seizing control of the banking and insurance industries. Nation-states are throwing up barriers around their economies to protect themselves against this economic tsunami. Such protective policies may have worked in the 1930s, but the world's economy may now be too integrated, too interdependent for such solutions to be effective. We need global solutions to global problems. The bankruptcy of economic orthodoxy has become palpable and the

question is whether sociology can seize the opportunity, whether spaces will once more open up within the state for policies of redistribution and democratization, or whether sociologists will be confined to the trenches of civil society, be they local, national, or global. But most important, can we reimagine the world in a convincing fashion so as to forge the collective will to build a more just and egalitarian society?

In the final analysis Jess Gilbert is right to turn us back to the past in order to prepare us for the in-rushing future; he is right to expand our imagination of what is possible by appealing to the past, so that we will be ready to seize opportunities for reconstruction as and when they arise. And arise they will. To be effective in this new era we need to be sharpening our comparative tools, diagnosing the structural limitations of the present period, all the better to expand the possibilities within those limits, and thereby, in turn, widening the limits themselves.

### References

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