Grass-Roots Participation and Bureaucratic Interfaces: The Case of Mexico—Introduction

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La version français de cette introduction commence à la page 165.

Today "modernity," "modernism" and "modernization" have come to mean vast and complex things, but in the initial stages of the era when development became a major concern in the West, "modernization" was associated with a powerfully ethnocentric crusade led by a phalanx of American economists (Rostow), psychologists (McClelland), political scientists (Banfield, Almond and Verba) and anthropologists (Geertz and Foster) who believed that the Third World could be saved if people would just adopt "modern" culture.[1] as practised of course in some imaginary place in middle America. What was most striking and most obviously objectionable about this language and the entire project that lay behind it was its patronizing, non-consultative stewardship—though in fact it was largely motivated by US coldwar fears of a communist epidemic among poor people the world over, it was dressed in the mantle of the white man's burden: *noblesse oblige*.

Today "participation" is almost as closely associated with issues of "development" as modernization once was. Just as modernization was obviously "a good thing" then, so participation is obviously "a good thing" now. Yet, despite the fact that we would all no doubt note that it is a term with many meanings, it is for all that a much more slippery notion than the easily dispensed with "modernization." Indeed the power relations obscured by its usage are rather like that lecture-hall question: "Can you hear at the back?" Like the lecturer, the people who are talking about participation are already participating; the people who are not, are the problem and they can't hear the question anyway—regrettably in much the same way as "the traditional sector" was a "problem" for those who wished to modernize: traditional today, modernized tomorrow; marginalized today, participating tomorrow. What has mostly changed is the organizational features of capitalist production and cir-

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culation and the regulatory mechanisms necessary for their reproduction.

Foucault's views of power are notoriously complex but it is useful here to propose that he made a distinction between *monarchical power* and *modern power*. The monarchy represented itself as a force which said "No," "power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition" (1980: 119). With the coming of modern power this purely negative, zero-sum view of power—measured in terms of *my* ability to restrict *your* actions—was superseded. Power was no longer accepted because of the divine right of the monarch to govern; instead "what makes it accepted is simply that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (ibid). As we shift from being the subjects [*sic*] of monarchical power to becoming the citizens of modern power, we accept that because of the *productive* nature of power, a certain amount of collusion is to our benefit. Order (supposedly) benefits all (somewhat). This collusion becomes the essential lever of modern forms of governance. Norbert Elias, with a somewhat differing set of epochs, referred to this as the civilizing process, the shift from the gross control of behaviour to the self-control of conduct through the spread of courtly manners. Freedom as a citizen came with a poisoned gift: *self*-restraint.

Before continuing the story, let us shift to a different, yet as we shall see, connected, set of narratives, one to do with the changing nature of capitalist economics, the other to do with socialist politics. As we entered the last quarter of the last century the West's dominance of the capitalist production process faltered. Rust belts emerged. A leaner and meaner kind of capitalism didn't seem to be doing the trick, when an Italian social scientist began to write about a possible solution. Made famous to socialists by Gramsci, Italy was notoriously divided between a mass-production and prosperous "North" symbolized by Fiat and Turin, and an impoverished "South" symbolized by the wily peasant and the backwardness of Naples and Sicily. Now Bagnasco proposed that there was a "Third Italy"—one in which a *social* market operated. What made the Third Italy so successful, a possible new fix for an older and inflexible Western capitalism, was that the social world of kinship, neighbourhood and personality was not kept sharply distinct from the moral neutrality of the *market* and narrowly *economic* interest. Rather the contours of the social world in Emilia Romagna crucially shaped the way market relations worked. For a while narrowly tied to a region in Italy, the idea soon spread, especially with the notion of an "embedded economy" put forward by Granovetter.

We don't, of course, have to be soured and died-in-the-wool Marxists to take a rather cynical view of the way the market works to provide people with freedom. Weber's very idea of class relied on his view that people do not come to the market equally equipped to make free choices: advantage accrues when those with assets face those with no more than necessity. In this new kind of economy, however, we discover that people, otherwise rather low on supplies of what used to be called (apparently rather too narrowly) "capital" can bargain with the resources they bring with them from the *social* sector of their lives—their family connections, their regional cultural disposition to work and save and so on (what is termed their "social capital"). So this new, more expansive notion of the arena within which we barter and trade, appears to include as equal players people who hitherto had seemed to be playing with one hand tied behind their back. Where once the concern might have been to extend the access to very material kinds of capital, now the issue becomes one of creating conditions in which "excluded" people can expand their *social* capital: i.e., an increase in participation.

Thus the new capitalist economics. What about the changes to socialist politics? I will be brief. Central to the dispute between the Communists (of various persuasions) and the Anarchists during the Spanish civil war, was their differences in priorities. The former argued that the primary task was to smash capitalism, after which the state would wither away. The latter saw all evil residing in the state itself, indeed in the very notion of "politics" in the public sphere. Various brands of socialism have taken different views about the timescale and hence the politics of history—from revolution to compromises of various kinds—but all used to share the view that capitalism was *inherently* unjust and must eventually be done away with. This meant that, in the process of developing a hegemonic bloc to withstand the assaults of the capitalist market and the capitalist state, alliances needed to be made. The extent to which these new alliances—notably in the early years of the last century with nationalists, subsequently e.g., in Vietnam and Nicaragua, with ethnic groups—should colour the long term shape of the socialist project, was much debated. In the end though, Laclau is correct in saying that the era in which "socialists" should assume that they would be the vanguard of revolutionary social change has ended. A more genuinely inclusive and permanently open ended revindicative politics has taken its place, perhaps best symbolized by the Zapatistas and their insistence that "leadership" is less important than direct democracy, i.e.: an increase in participation.

So we can see here two, quite different, moments over the past 25 years, in which the relationship between a core and its surroundings has changed, in one case a core of the economic market place, in the other the core of a revolutionary vanguard. Let us turn back now, for a moment, to Foucault. We had left him with the important role in modern forms of governance of the citizenry's *self*-control. But we need to remember what the price of the ticket was: better overall "productivity" *for all.* What does "productivity" mean, at least to economists? It means the ability to use technology (the combination of skills and machinery) so as to increase the amount that can be produced by a fixed amount of human labour. A person with Monsanto "Roundup Ready" resistant seed, and the knowledge of how to cultivate it, will produce more corn for the same amount of labour-inputs as a person who cultivates with seed taken from her community's annual seed bank. That's productivity.

The point about liberal governance is that deprived, at least in principle, of monarchical forms of power ("a strong state") it must stretch beyond mere self-restraint as an aid in governing, to something a lot more directly useful to the economy—or at least those who most benefit from advances in the economy. Colin Gordon captures this point well. In the neo-liberal way of thinking,

> The abstract appearance of labour in society is not, as Marxism supposes, a real effect of the logic of capital, but rather a misperception caused by political economy's failure to produce *qualitative* analysis of labour.... "Work for the worker" means, according to the neo-liberals, the use of resources of skill, aptitude and competence which comprise the worker's human capital, to obtain earnings which constitute the revenue on that capital.... From this point-of-view, then, *the individual producer-consumer is in a novel sense not just an enterprise, but the entrepreneur of himself or herself.* (Gordon, 1991: 44 *Italics added*)

It is in *this* context that we need to try to come to grips with the way in which public discourses about "participation" are embedded on the one hand in forms of domination and governmentality and on the other in potential forms of subversion and resistance.

In a sense we might see this as a dispute over the meaning of "productivity" once it is no longer applied narrowly to the economy. What does it mean to talk of social or human capital or to "improving the quality of life" (as the latest EU call for social science research grant applications does), if we don't know what is meant by "capital" in this context, or "improvement?" If we add the idea of participation to these sound-bites, what we get is a notion that a better world results from all its members increasing their productivity—now of course vastly more broadly defined and (not mentioned) subject to immense amounts of debate and conflict. The reason why people like Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau have directed attention so far, far away from the way today's capitalism actually works could be that, like us, they don't really know. But that's not what they want us to believe. What they want us to believe is that we live in a moment of conjuncture where the struggle for hegemony is paramount and this, they say is a political and cultural matter. It is a struggle over the establishment of an hegemonic order in which the *entrepreneurial producer-consumer subject* appears as "natural" against some other kind of hegemonic order in the post-Gorbachev era, of which it can be said that, as yet, "nobody knows its name."

It is true that the papers gathered in this Special Issue are by people whose work has brought them into contact with the Mexican reality, but it is also true that those of us (like myself) not directly concerned with Mexico can learn much from the specificities of that case. It is after all a site in which these two hegemonies—neo-liberal governance and new forms of direct democracy and local autonomy—are much in dispute. What works so strongly against finding clear lines that would help us to grasp the political opportunities of this conjuncture is the pervasiveness of the notion of the free-choosing, self-constituting subject—an ideal pursued by both sides of the struggle: the world of the entrepreneurial subject whose "social capital" must be enhanced on the one side, and the world of the new social movements seeking the fulfilment of "empowerment" for participants on the other.

The fuzziness of the line comes out in many of these articles, perhaps most clearly in Hilary Cunningham's examination of the intertwined discourses of the US state as it makes manifest its policies on the Mexican border, and those of the Borderlinks activists. In this case the talk is not so much of "participation" but certainly involves activists in trying to think out the extent of their agency versus the extent of their potential cooptation. And on the other side of that border, in Mexico, cooptation is, unsurprisingly given the long history of pervasive corporatist politics, an issue that arises time and again in these papers. Marie-France Labrecque gives us a clear picture of the political setting that makes participation especially a tool of what Manon Boulianne calls vertical (as opposed to horizontal) relations of power. Originally stimulated by the priorities set by the international aid community, programs geared to economic "participation" in rural areas in and

around Yucatan's *maquiladoras* have been modified as a result of their interface with a delocalized bureaucracy controlled by the corporatist political regime. In the article that follows, Manon Boulianne pursues a highly sensitive path which goes a long way to helping us discover the lines we need, to navigate through this political minefield. She notes not just that different participant-activists (in Communal Base Organizations) or participant-recipients (of Non-Governmental Organizations) likely hold (usually unvoiced) quite different notions of what is meant by "participation"; she notes too that in doing so they might well be drawing on what I would call different "discursive conjunctures." One such discourse, for example might have to do with a more welfare-type paternalist state in which much of the discourse of participants revolves around a revindicative language directed toward the state as the source of good. Another, newer discourse, "Abandoning revindications seeking collective services for all citizens, participates now in the offer of locally structured services subsidized by international financial institutions..." which are geared toward participation in micro-enterprises. As a result the actual goal of "participating" itself can become very confused: is it, *qua* the new social movement hegemonic alternative, to engender a newly constituted, empowered and self-conscious social subject *tout court*? Or is it to increase individual and collective worker productivity, so as to generate a surplus? In which case how would such a surplus best be used to "improve the quality of life?"

Ivonne Vizcarra Bordi's paper helps us to see this shift in regimes in especially stark terms—from a broader kind of corporate welfare regime to selective "compensatory programs." We see the way in which the combination of *participation* with aid *targeted* at selected recipients (upon criteria set out by the political fashion in the West at the time) becomes an especially effective form of liberal governance—much more than an especially effective project to help the targeted recipients: "When social demands generated by poverty are formulated by external agents in an atmosphere of emergency and reduced alternatives, the target population resigns itself to the imposed restrictions and conditions, hoping to get at least some 'benefit'." Vizcarra suggests that such programs deliberately sidestep the issue of addressing poverty through *real* economic measures such as "the recuperation of real salaries."

All the papers in this collection emphasize the danger of taking any particular experience, either of participatory projects or of power interfaces, out of their very specific contexts. Monique Nuijten's paper allows us to see that this is precisely what many advocates of "participation" frequently do—not just government bureaucrats whose hearts may not be entirely in the venture, but staunch advocates of "real" participation too. As I read her article I found myself asking how often, even in articles that most avidly advocate sensitivity to local settings, does one actually learn very much about what Nuijten terms "local organizing practices." Her paper makes very clear how deep such practices may be and hence how taken-for-granted they seem to ordinary actors. The result is that such practices are not sufficiently formalized to be easily named by local people and are either not seen or understood by outsiders or are seen, but as forms of mismanagement or participatory deficit.

The hidden dimensions of local organizing practices are given an historical dimension in the article by Maria Dolores Palomo Infante, which explores the historical roots of *cofradías* in Chiapas. Though, as she notes, the fields of force in the colonial Mexico with which she deals are quite different from today, there are some provocative parallels, not least the way in which the cofradías appear to have come from Europe and been imposed on local populations by an evangelizing church, but subsequently became the channels for alternative forms of local organization. The fact that the cofradías emerged in a space between projects of the church and the not-always identical projects of the state, offers a provocative insight into Hilary Cunningham's discussion of the particular way in which the separation of church and state is played out in the politics of activists on the Mexican-US border: provocative precisely because of the very different kinds of state and church in each case and the very different historical periods.

Indeed Palomo and Cunningham's papers refer especially to the other element dealt with in this special issue: the question of *interfaces* between different organizational, cultural and institutional settings. These interfaces are the concern of Torres-Lima and Burns in their paper, in which they seek to deconstruct a social category rarely recognized by social science and hence rarely addressed properly in policy: urban agriculturalists. They see the culture and identity that comes with rural livelihoods being set against the rather different dispositions of city-dwelling as giving rise to a kind of social subject that will be of increasing significance in urban situations in Mexico.

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Note

1 In fact, like Daniel Bell's "ideology" and Fukuyama's "history" the US was thought to have gone beyond culture to a world of pure, cultureless reason.

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