

LIBERALISM, CAPITALISM AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY: FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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I joined the CFRF group in 1998 as a Pre-dissertation Fellow, and subsequently continued as a Doctoral Fellow in 1999. Having finished my fieldwork in spring of 2001, I have been out of the CFRF loop for quite some time. I was immensely gratified to see the critical depth and political acuity embodied in several of the recent “Focus” columns published in this newsletter. My interest has been particularly piqued by the series of astute questions raised by Fellows in these pages: who, exactly, constitutes the “community” in community forestry? What sorts of disparities become masked by the ubiquitous but problematic “stakeholder” discourse? What does it mean to be a “participatory” researcher and how should we handle the myriad political conflicts that go along with being so deeply embedded in a community? My aim in this column is to explore some possible theoretical underpinnings for these questions, for I believe they share in common a subtle critique of the liberal ideologies that sustain the philosophy and practice of participatory research.

While there is insufficient space here to recall the long and convoluted history of the term “liberalism,” much less its concrete expression in political practice, we may begin with the basics: most scholars understand classical liberalism as an ideological product of the Enlightenment which coalesced into a full-blown political economic project (particularly in the works of Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Ferguson, and Smith) that would be carried on by innumerable succeeding scholars from John Stuart Mill to John Maynard Keynes. Indeed, Immanuel Wallerstein (1995) holds that liberalism constituted the dominating ideology of the capitalist world economy from the French Revolution in 1789 to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. While the term liberalism has taken on several complex and often contradictory meanings, its fundamental political project has been the ideological legitimization of the laissez-faire capitalism in the name of individual freedom, equality and liberty. Frequently, liberalism has also been associated with the bid to keep state institutions from constricting the free flow of capital, and keeping the state’s hand out of market is often linked to arguments about the inalienable right of individuals to make their own social decisions free from state interference.

But liberalism took a rather different turn in the United States in the 1930s with the advent of the New Deal, when the term became synonymous with the reform policies of FDR (such as Social Security and other forms of social “insurance,” ostensibly intended to provide safeguards for American workers against the exigencies of the capitalist system but which also served to quell the revolutionary fervor of an increasingly restless proletariat). In this sense, liberalism came to be associated with its exact opposite, namely, the efficacy and necessity of state interference in a range of political economic arenas, from the labor disputes to environmental degradation. Thus has Liberalism (with a capital L) come to be associated with the welfare state in North America. Over the course of the past twenty years, classical liberalism has been resurrected by regimes around the world in the form of “neoliberalism,” which has more to do with the dismantling of FDR-style social welfare programs (and anything else standing in the way of capital accumulation) than with their safeguarding, frequently in the name of globalization. In a nutshell, we’ve traveled from Lockian liberalism to American Liberalism and right back again to neoliberalism, which constitutes a modern-day return to the original form. Hence the common confusion over the term “liberalism” in the United States: what we would typically call “Conservatives” in the American political parlance are actually neo-liberals in the Lockian sense of the term.

But what does any of this have to do with community forestry, or the CFRF? I believe there is a distinct and unspoken liberalism (New Deal-style) underpinning the principles of community forestry and participatory research, to say nothing of the Ford Foundation writ-large (which is a far longer tale than can be told here). Nancy Menning put it aptly in her recent “Focus” column when she stated that “Ford is not interested so much

in forestry per se...rather, the Foundation's main focus is on alleviating poverty and injustice" (2001:3). I believe this is an accurate observation, not merely of the program itself, but of the Fellows who join it, seeking not only funding for their work, but looking for concrete solutions to the various inequalities which plague forest communities across the United States in the wake of deindustrialization and capital flight in the postfordist economy. We are particularly concerned that many individuals living in resource-rich areas of America are paradoxically poor; there is a disjuncture between the availability of natural wealth and the distribution of social wealth, and we believe that we can successfully intervene to fix this problem.

Indeed, as Fellows we are part of a longstanding tradition in the United States, which can again be traced back to FDR, of rallying various and sundry social scientific "experts" to the cause of liberal reform. We are, in a sense, experts-in-training, sent out into the field to learn about the economic dilemmas confronting US forest communities in the hope that we may eventually contribute to their alleviation. And while we are not paid by the U.S. government, the dissemination of environmental NGOs (such as Ford) across the globe constitutes an extension of the old state-led liberal reform into the private, nonprofit sector. It is important to note that FDR-style liberalism was never intended to throttle capitalism altogether; indeed, in the context of the social unrest begotten by the widespread immiseration of the Great Depression, liberal social economic policies actually served to prevent American capitalism from disintegrating into revolution or anarchy. Nor is the Ford Foundation, of course, in the business of revolution; it is here to assuage and repair, not foment dissent. Tellingly, the main page of the CFRF website itself says it best, invoking that sacred cow of liberal environmentalism, "sustainability." And that, to my mind, means seeking both humane and environmentally sound ways to sustain the capitalist mode of production by increasing the participation of various "stakeholders" in the production and distribution of forest resources.

Now, to many among the environmentally-minded, all of this may seem like a good idea, or at the very least, a noble one. The dilemma arises when Fellows in the field encounter problems with capitalism that cannot be fixed: built-in disparities of class, race, gender, and ethnicity that are fundamental to the continuing expansion of capital accumulation in all capitalist societies. Brinda Sarathy put the problem beautifully in her last column, when she adroitly expressed her discomfort with the language of "stakeholders:" "There are radical power imbalances in this society...which also are reflected in community-forestry arenas. There are people at stake and there are stakeholders – the two are not always commensurable" (2003:3). I would extend the critique beyond the question of language to the practice of "participatory research" itself. Fellows in other columns in this newsletter (Harris 2003, Graham 2002, Yung 2001) have described field situations in which "cooperation," "facilitation" and "partnership" between warring groups in US forest communities seem downright impossible given the often diametrically opposed interests of the groups involved. In such situations, Fellows express frustration with conducting good "PR," or participatory research, which seems inevitably to involve facilitating an egalitarian dialogue between various interests in a given community. Fellows seem compelled, in classic American liberal style, to try to keep everyone happy, seeking to get all interested parties to (at least) sit down at the same table. When they do not succeed (and some don't), they return to the perennial question: who is the community here? Whom, exactly, am I supposed to help? Where should I make my alliances? I would contend that such tensions are part and parcel of participatory research because they are rooted in the nature of capitalism itself. Fellows, through such experiences, are learning what erstwhile liberal reformers have known from time immemorial: that some conflicts are not resolvable through better training in conflict-resolution; they cannot be ameliorated through negotiation, dialogue or cooperation because they are based in fundamental structural oppositions which reform, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot amend.

To make the issue more concrete, let me give you an example from my own fieldwork. Initially, I went to the Adirondack Park in upstate New York with the intention of studying the demise of the region's logging industry as paper companies sold off properties to developers. I quickly learned that the more urgent story that needed to be told lay in the residential housing market. I subsequently spent two years in the central Adirondacks studying the phenomenon of rural gentrification, which is fairly easily explained: heavy investment in

expensive seasonal housing (rented for exorbitant sums by the week) has diverted capital from year-round, affordable housing (rented for more reasonable amounts by the month), resulting in a full-blown housing crisis for the local working class. The State of New York, which owns half the property in the Park and heavily regulates the remaining private property, has inadvertently exacerbated the problem by restricting the available land for residential development through both outright purchases (which remove land from production altogether) and complex zoning laws (which restrict the number of houses which can be built on private property). The result is gentrification: soaring residential real estate prices, a shrinking stock of permanent, affordable housing, displacement for local workers, and a subsequent labor shortage for the local capitalist contingent.

Charting the various political, economic and environmental interests in these messy waters is no easy task. While it is tempting to posit development as an insider-outsider phenomenon, with the “poor” locals on the losing end of the battle, the reality of gentrification belies such an assumption. Frequently, landowning locals are the perpetrators of gentrification themselves, building seasonal homes on their own properties (purchased before real estate prices peaked in the 1980s) and renting them out to tourists. In a similar vein, it is disingenuous to decry gentrification as uniformly “bad” for local communities. The truth is that gentrification has proven to be a deal with the devil for many Adirondack towns; without the thriving housing industry it produces, such places would likely exist in a permanent state of depression, offering few employment opportunities in either the construction trade or the service end of the ecotourism industry, both of which are bolstered by the influx of second homeowners gentrification brings. Non-gentrified Adirondack towns tend to have plenty of housing but few jobs, while the gentrified ones have plenty of jobs but scarce housing. As a participatory researcher, I find myself confronted by a situation in which I can be of little use except as a documenter. In the particular region where I conducted my fieldwork, there is little available private property left for the construction of public housing, even if these towns were eligible for HUD or FDA funding, which by and large, they are not. And besides, such projects are at best stopgap measures that might temporarily dam a quite fluid and evasive capitalistic housing market that is bound to seep around them, creating new and equally intractable problems. As urban researchers well know, public housing has hardly served as a solution to gentrification in the city, and it is unlikely to provide long-term help for rural communities faced with the same problem.

Do I believe that such structural conflicts negate the efficacy of participatory research? That depends upon what we want to get out of it. Anthropologists have been conducting such research for years, ducking, dodging and negotiating the complex political currents that run beneath the surface of any community. We call it ethnography, and it constitutes one of the most effective strategies for learning just how intractable capitalist inequality can be. In the current climate of neoliberal revanchism (Smith 1996), when social (and environmental) safety nets are being slashed at an astonishing pace, the good old days of liberal reform policy may ring with an air of nostalgia. Of course, old-style American liberalism has by no means gone the way of the dodo, as programs such as the CFRF aptly attest. But if the role of the social science researcher seems ever more crucial in the context of war and imperialism, to say nothing of eroding civil liberties here at home, then we are compelled to critically assess that role – historically, politically and theoretically. What, exactly, do we hope to gain by doing participatory research? Whose side are we on? Can we truly hope to effect political change if we view all sides of a political-ecological conflict as “stakeholders,” equal in voice, power, and agency? Why do we choose to be “participants” rather than “activists?”

I would contend that in order to answer these questions, as well as those raised by other Fellows in this column, we need to engage in an honest discussion about the capitalist mode of production and the role of academic scholars as social critics versus apologists for capitalism’s inherent disparities. And indeed, participatory research is a great way to move such discussions beyond the academy and get them out into the forest communities where such disparities are being played out in concrete struggles over capital, resources, wages, and rights. The burden of theory, however, lies with us: as scholars it is our job to infuse whatever practices we bring to the field with a critical understanding of the political economic (as well as ideological) structures faced by our community partners. I would invite other Fellows to engage in a theoretical/political debate about par-

ticipatory research in these pages.

Editors Note:

We encourage the CFRF Fellows and members of the Community Forestry community to carefully consider the questions posed here and send feedback. To respond to this column, visit the Community Forestry Bulletin Board and Message Board.

References

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