

Local Knowledge
and
Participation By Those "At the Bottom"

Bruce Woll

A Response to
Communities in Economic Crisis:
Appalachia and the South,
ed. by Gaventa, Smith, and Willingham
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Northern Illinois University

In Kentucky, a coalition of citizens' groups ended the coal industry's exemption from property taxation (p.33). In Robeson County, North Carolina, local citizens stopped an international corporation's plans to dump 500,000 gallons per day of treated wastewater into the Lumbee River, a direct drinking-water source for the county (p. 155). In Miller County, Georgia, a group of eight women started a local business, MayHaw Tree, Inc., without outside help in a county that has consistently ranked in the bottom third of all Georgia counties in the usual measures of economic growth, underemployment, educational disadvantage, illiteracy, poverty households, and health problems.

These three stories illustrate one argument for participation in policy making by people "at the bottom," people who are among those affected by policy. In each story local citizens outside the traditional policy-making process saw things that the official policy-makers either did not see or did not see in the same light. In the first story concerning the coal industry in Kentucky, the state government has traditionally supported the prerogatives of absentee mineral owners over the rights of the surface owners. The state "did not allow local governments and school districts to tax the vast mineral wealth as property, and the state property tax on coal was so small that local and appeals courts recently rule that it was really an unconstitutional tax exemption" (pp. 29,30). State courts repeatedly ruled that the right of the companies to extract their coal is more important than the rights of the surface owners to protect their lands (p. 34).

However, it was obvious to Willa Hood, for example, a county librarian, that taxes on mineral wealth was a fair way to compensate for federal cutbacks. It became obvious to Everett Akers, a local businessman, that strip mining without the consent of the surface owner was unjust. It became obvious to him when his television tower was damaged by strip mining on his land. These are two examples of a coalition of Kentucky citizens who see what those at the top cannot see; namely, that the coal industry's "stranglehold" on the state is bad for the state.

In the second story a poor minority community "saw" that the promise of jobs and economic development based on hazardous waste treatment plants brought in by outside international corporations, such as U.S. Ecology (!) was not in the best interests of the county. Their eight-year long protest resulted in state legislation to set standards for drinking water sources. The federal Environmental Protection Agency lobbied against the bill and threatened to take over North Carolina's environmental management. Instead of seeing themselves faced with a grim, either-or choice of jobs or environment, these local citizens insisted on weighing economic gain alongside economic, cultural, and environmental costs.

In the third story, the women who formed the Mayhaw Tree business "saw" that economic development does not have to be something that happens to a community from the outside. They saw the importance of capitalizing on local resources in a way that benefits the local community, in contrast to the "economics of extraction", which do nothing to enrich the community.

Participation by those "at the bottom" is vital in the policy-making process not for paternalistic reasons, not to make people feel good or to get them to consent to the policies, but because they have knowledge, insights, ways of seeing things, perspectives, judgements not available otherwise.

Great

This insight is obscured by an epistemology which assigns one-sided priority to "objective," abstract, generalized knowledge over local, particularized, concrete knowledge and then associates such abstract, generalized, rational, scientific

knowledge with corporate, or academic, or government produced knowledge. Science provides modern democracy with a language of impartiality and universality which it uses to legitimate its authority over against local knowledge.

good point

Steve Fisher refers to this bias against what I am calling "local knowledge," or knowledge at the bottom when he points out that "most analysts" of Appalachian and Southern rural economies cite rural people's "inability to comprehend the rationality of modern society" as one factor contributing to their problems (p. 263).

It is a commonplace that those at the top of any organization tend to become isolated, from bad news, for example. Aaron Wildavsky even goes so far as to argue in a provocative essay that "looked at in the large, organizations exist to suppress data" (Wildavsky, p. 29). His point is that organization by definition is focused and therefore selective. *sounds good!*

There are some common threads characterizing the knowledge of the participants "at the bottom" described in Gaventa's case studies.

First is the value placed on local place. There is a bond between human and natural life, between the human community and the the land, the earth, and natural resources such as rivers and woods. This is expressed in moving language by Deborah Clifton Hils, speaking for the Creole: "We come from Louisiana. We're native to Lousiana. We're irreplaceably identified with Louisiana" (p. 243). The Lumbee Indian attitude towards their river in Robeson County, North Carolina is the same (p. 153) The Ivanhoe Civic League's decision to turn the industrial park into a recreation park, to clean up the land and claim it as "sacred land" (p. 20) is another example. The policy of "stewardship" of land and resources expressed as one of the goals of the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky is another (p. 74, cf. p. 78).

Related to this is the emphasis on the needs of the whole community instead of just jobs or some other economic indicator by itself, a holistic approach. This is expressed explicitly in Chris Weiss's article on organizing women (ch.5, p. 66). It comes

to expression throughout the book in the emphasis upon health care, education, the care of senior citizens, children as priorities when community input occurs. This theme is expressed in the Mayhaw Tree story. The opposite approach, compartmentalization, fragmentation of community is expressed in the creation of suburban office parks and the isolation experienced by women employees, for example (p. 205).

Having argued for the importance of participation by those "at the bottom" based on their local knowledge, I want to end by relating this argument to some of the conclusions drawn in the last two chapters of Gaventa. The authors of the last chapter point out that "changing economic circumstances call into question strategies of change 'from the bottom' that were thought to have promise only a decade ago" (p. 285). They go on to acknowledge the divisions that can render local efforts impotent as well. Decentralization does not necessarily mean democratization (p. 272). They conclude that an emphasis on grassroots participation must be linked to national issues. Throughout the book it has also been made clear how local and regional economic problems are interdependent on international developments. Therefore, new strategies cannot pit local against national or international policies.

In the same way it would be a mistake to canonize local knowledge and to throw out science, reason, statistics, and all of the other modern technology of knowledge production. Local knowledge can be misguided, racist, divisive, bigotted, one-sided, compartmentalized, rigid, evil. Having said this, it is local knowledge which needs to be elevated to national attention.

National and international policies cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the "rich and impressive experiences of grassroots communities responding to economic change and decline" such as those recounted here, much less be content with calls for reform that suggest that rural communities may no longer be viable (p. 282). This last suggestion indicates just how bankrupt mainstream policy can become. As Steve Fisher points out, it is absolutely essential to integrate cultural values into economic and

political activities: "economic policy must speak directly to people's consciousness, culture, and daily practices of life" (p. 274). And this means that the "web" of "people's direct relationship to their community and its survival should be the starting point from which regional, national, and international economic issues are examined" (p.274).

The image of a web recurs in Gaventa as a metaphor for local community interdependencies and again as a metaphor for interdependence of local, regional, national, and international policies. We all participate in the "web" of life. Therefore, as Deborah Clifton Hils says:

... anything that has the potential for disrupting our complex and deeply rooted web of lifestyle, family, community, and relationships is seen as either insane or oppressive and is either ignored, avoided, or resisted - but never invited home and into our intimate circle (p.243).

Economic and political policy cannot be left to the "market," i.e., international corporate leadership which stands outside and above the web of local knowledge, local life, and local, regional, national community and is even contemptuous of it, priding itself on its "rootlessness."

REFERENCES

John Gaventa, Barbara Ellen Smith, Alex Willingham, eds., communities in Economic Crisis: Appalachia and the South. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

Aaron Wildavsky, "Information as an Organizational Problem," Journal of Management Studies, 20/1 (1983), 29-40.

*You write well -
Very insightful -
good work Bruce
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