Journal of Social Development in Africa (1987), 2, 5-15

Popular Participation, Statism and Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a critical look at the popular issue of participation, and suggests that a major weakness in the literature of participation is its failure to deal with the realities of statism in the modern world, and particularly the Third World. The paper argues that while many proponents of participation theory claim a commitment to socialism and marxism their views in fact derive from a blend of individualism, populism and anarchism, ideologies which incorporate a basic distrust of the state. In effect the impact of this is that participation theory has an implied distrust of state sponsored development. This distrust, the paper argues, is not necessarily a fair reflection of the current state of affairs in the Third World.

Introduction

The idea of participation is exceedingly popular in development circles today. It pervades the academic literature and is perennially discussed at international meetings and conferences. Notions of participation characterise the programmes of the large international development agencies and the activities of non-government organisations and religious groups. A substantial amount of aid for the Third World is today directly linked to small scale projects which seek to maximise the involvement of ordinary people in development. Many governments have officially endorsed these ideals and it is not uncommon to find references to participation in development plans and other public documents. Although the concept is not a new one, it has been remarkably resilient retaining its vitality in spite of a tendency towards faddishness within development studies. While the subject's archives are litered with defunct terms, phrases and slogans, the rhetoric of participation has survived the vagaries of its fashions.

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The continued popularity of the concept may be attributed not only to its affective appeal but to a surprising lack of critical debate about its precise meaning, theoretical consistency and practical value. Unlike most other ideas in development studies, popular participation has not been subjected to careful academic scrutiny and many questionable and controversial issues in participation theory have not been properly debated. As an ideal, participation is shielded from the profanities of intellectual scepticism. Few academics would quarrel with the view that development policies should be more sensitive to the needs of ordinary people or that opportunities for peoples' involvement in development projects should be enhanced or that ordinary people should share in the benefits that flow from development effort. To criticise these ideals would appear to be most ungenerous. But apparently straightforward beliefs often raise complex issues which require closer academic examination. Also, it is not only the function but the duty of academic enquiry to analyse ideas, concepts and theories in the cold light of objective criticism. And a critical examination of this kind serves both analytical and normative purposes. Concepts and theories that cannot withstand the rigours of intellectual scrutiny are of little value. Similarly, refinements that flow from these academic processes have greater value in both the worlds of ideas and practical activity.

A major weakness of the literature of participation is its failure to deal adequately with the realities of statism in the modern world. The role of the state has expanded enormously during this century and today state intervention in all spheres of contemporary life has reached a level that is historically unprecedented. The state is the primary initiater and promoter of development effort in most Third World nations and in the field of social development, state provisions have grown rapidly. Accounts of popular participation should deal with these realities and incorporate them into a comprehensive approach that embraces the dispirate elements of statist and participatory development.

However, most proponents of popular participation have ignored the issue of state-people relations in development. Others have dealt only superficially with the question appearing to dismiss the utility of state sponsored development. Some explicate a determined antipathy to state involvement that reflects the inherent dislike of establishments and bureaucracies in populist thought. These writers not only distrust the state but believe that it embodies elements that are antithetical to the attainment of participatory ideals. In these formulations, populist themes are transcended to produce an anarchist critique that dismisses the possibility of symbiosis.

Antipathies to statism in participatory theory

Contemporary popular participation theory derives from a number of antecedents which embody wider ideological conceptions about the proper organisation of human relationships and the correct ordering of society. Its immediate precursor in the developing world was the community development movement which originated in colonial times and resulted, as Brokensha and Hodge (1969) have shown, in the creation of large national community development programmes in many developing countries. These centralised and bureaucratically administered schemes were subjected to increasing criticism over the years as it was realised that their administration consumed a good proportion of scarce resources, failed to deliver tangible benefits to the mass of the population and did little to involve ordinary people in decision making. There was a gradual disenchantment with the political implications of these programmes as well. Reflecting ideological preferences for stability, self-help, consensus and self-reliance, they minimised notions of peoples' empowerment and the redistribution of access to resources. As disillusionment with community development increased, a new conception of popular participation evolved gaining widespread support and subverting established community development conventions.

The leading proponents of the new community participation approach are officials at international development organisations such as the World Health Organisation and UNICEF, administrators of non-governmental agencies and academics with an interest in social programmes, rural development and small scale development projects. Although some of them, and particularly those working in the international agencies, have a civil service background, the majority have little feel for public administration. In formulating the new popular participation approach, they drew on their knowledge of small scale, localised and informal activities rather than the traditions of centralised policy making and large scale bureaucratic management. Many were initiated into the world of development as volunteers serving as teachers or community workers for North American and European volunteer organisations. Their formative impressions of folk life and community effort had a lasting effect, fashioning the way they conceived of development problems and possible solutions. It is also engendered an antithetical attitude to state involvement in development.

Ideological negations

In addition to the proclivities deriving from their personal backgrounds, proponents of popular participation theory have been influenced by various ideological beliefs. Some claim a commitment to socialism and although their writings make frequent references to socialist and even Marxist concepts, their views do not in fact derive from socialism but from a curious blend of individualism, populism and anarchism. These more complex and obscure sources of inspiration exert a subtle influence and it is not surprising that few proponents of community participation are aware of the impact of these ideologies on their views.

Individualist ideas associated with classical liberalism are revealed in those elements of participation theory that call for autonomous control by individuals over all matters that affect their lives and the democratic involvement of all citizens in the decision making process. The commitment to liberal democracy and especially its localised versions of neighbourhood democracy may be directly attributed to individualist thought.

Liberal notions of individual responsibility are also manifested in the popular participation literature but they are usually mixed with populist ideas that stress local cooperation in the attainment of self-reliance. Although populism is a complex ideological system which is manifested in a bewildering variety of movements, its essential tenets are clear and may be readily identified with popular participation thinking. Wile's (1969:166) widely quoted definition of populism as "the belief that virtue resides in the simple people who are in the overwhelming majority and in their collective traditions" is almost synonymous with the sentiments expressed by popular participation theorists. Like participation, populism appeals to mass sentiment and claims to represent the interests of ordinary people protecting them against hostile political forces and unfavourable economic conditions.

Anarchist ideas have also influenced popular participation but in a less overt and systematic way. Communalism and localism are tenets of anarchist thinking that are also found in participatory thinking. In anarchism, the ideal form of social organisation is the small productive commune operated on communitarian and egalitarian principles. When the proponents of popular participation extol the virtues of small communities and their community life-styles, and call for the strengthening of local participatory institutions that will mobilise local involvement, they reveal their debt to anarchist thought.

All three ideologies are hostile to statism. By denigrating the role of the state in development, they reveal clear ideological differences from socialism. While socialism requires the extension of the collective ownership of the means of production, individualism, populism and anarchism reject extensive state involvement in social and economic affairs. Socialists are, of course, opposed to the capitalist state and, like Marxists, they believe that the capitalist state represents sectional class interests. But, unlike the proponents of popular participation, socialists regard the state as central to their political agenda. Even in Marxism, the state plays a critical role in the transformation of society into communism.

Individualist liberalism rejects state 'interference' on the ground that it diminishes individual freedom and self-reliance. Liberals argue in particular that the extention of state influence is harmful to democratic ideals. As the state bloats itself with power, individual rights and freedoms are suppressed.

Populism too has a dislike and distrust of the state. Although populist leaders such as Peron and Long successfully appropriated the institutions of the state to implement their programmes, populism remains essentially hostile to the state establishment. Stewart (1969) argued that populist movements often arise in conditions of social and economic adversity and widespread cynicism about the political process. Populism flourishes in this climate to champion the interests of the long suffering masses and challenge the wicked political establishment with its inflexible and arrogant bureacracy, indifferent and corrupt politicians and manipulative pressure groups representative of oligarchic interests.

Anarchism is, of course, blatently anti-statist. Indeed, an overt hostility to the state is a primary distinguishing feature of anarchist thinking. Anarchists believe that the institutionalisation of power in the organs of the state (irrespective of its ideological complexion) is an evil which freedom loving humans must resist. To realise deomocracy, they must act collectively to create an egalitarian and communitarian society that has no need of the state.

Objections to state sponsored development

The impact of these ideologies may be discerned in much of the popular participation literature. Although few writers make a systematic case against state sponsored development, they frequently allude to the negative consequences of state involvement stressing the need for alternative approaches.

Anti-statist sentiments in popular participation are expressed in the form of three major arguments which claim respectively that the state is inefficient, that it is paternalistic and that it is oppressive. All three are inimical to the ideals of development.

Many argue that state sponsored development is highly inefficient. This is manifested in the allegedly overstaffed, poorly organised and costly bureaucracies that administer development programmes in Third World countries. Advocates of popular participation are not only critical of the inefficiency of the state but claim that participatory development offers a far more effective alternative. For example, White (1982) argues with reference to medical care that state social development programmes are far more costly than those which are provided by local people themselves. Also, he argues that village health workers are not only cheaper but much more efficient than government doctors because they "understand the environment and are typically well motivated to work within it." Hollnsteiner (1982) makes a similar point in her account of participation in primary health care. State sponsored health programmes are usually provided on a piecemeal basis and are poorly coordinated with the result that local people do not benefit properly. Popular control of health services would deal with these problems reducing the wastage that results from a lack of cross-sectoral integration.

State services are also criticised for their paternalism. Many proponents of popular participation claim that the external imposition of programmes fosters an unhealthy dependency on the state. Bugnicourt (1982) argues that the 'mobilisation' of people for development projects by government officials is counterproductive because it in fact demobilises the population negating their capacity to solve their own problems. De Graaf (1986) is equally critical of a 'top-down' style of development in which metaphorical fishing rods are handed down to a passive populace which is exhorted to fend for itself. Authentic social development occurs when ordinary people find answers to their own problems through taking direct political control over their own affairs. The technical expert, who features prominently in the demonology of participation, is often seen as epitomising the paternalism of the state. Hollsnteiner (1977) writes about the 'elite specialist' whose professional education engenders an attitude of 'knowing best'. But, by failing to involve the ordinary people, these 'developers' impose external solutions and foster paternalism; they also frequently make mistakes that are monumentally costly and wasteful.

The view that the state is oppressive and inimical to authentic development is inherent in much popular participation thinking. Reference are frequently made in the literature to Third World totalitarian regimes that are not only disinterested in development but rigorously suppress the efforts of progressive elements to bring about meaningful changes. Writing about 'people power' in urban settlements in developing countries, Hollnsteiner (1977) argues that governments frequently deal brutally with the poor who seek to improve their conditions. Charges of subversion are levied against them, police violence is frequently used and many are imprisoned. Other writers have drawn attention to the more subtle techniques of cooptation which are employed by the state to neutralise progressive movements. Bugnicourt (1982) has written at length about pseudo-participatory institutions in Africa that give the appearance of authentic involvement but are in fact agents of state manipulation. Both forms of state intervention are oppressive and antithetical to the realisation of development ideals.

Because of its inefficiency, paternalism and oppression, the state is not regarded by the proponents of popular participation as a viable agent of development. Instead, they propose an alternative strategy which devolves the responsibility for progress on to ordinary people and empowers them through *conscientisation* to take control of their own destiny. In this scenario, the structures of state power whither away, liberating human capacities and aspirations.

The realities and achievements of statism

It would, of course, be foolish to claim that the criticisms levied against the state by the proponents of popular participation are without foundation. The international media is perennially filled with reports of the corruption and brutality of state power in the modern world. State power has become increasingly centralised as single party governments, dictatorships and military regimes have multiplied. Amin, Somoza, Pahlavi, Duvalier, Marcos and Pinochet are notorious representatives of autocratic tendencies of Third World politics.

The arguments levied against statist forms of development also have validity. It is difficult to argue that state sponsored development has always been efficient, committed to welfare ideals or sensitive to local needs. Indeed, accompanying the trend towards the centralisation of power, bureaucracies have expanded rapidly and many have become unwieldy and costly. Development planning in many countries has become increasingly esoteric and divorced from the realities of mass poverty and deprivation and, in many places (particularly in Africa) public sector development programmes have stagnated.

It is important, however, to put these problems into perspective. One of the major methodological failures of contemporary social science analysis is the tendency towards overgeneralisation. In spite of the complexity and diversity of political phenomena in the Third World, social scientists have often made sweeping generalisations that are based on selective evidence. The evidence mustered to support an anti-statist veiwpoint can be countered by an alternative argument which is also based on empirical fact but which is much more sympathetic to state involvement.

There is evidence to refute the implication in much popular participation writing that Third World governments are uniformly tyrannical. Although liberal democracies are hardly commonplace, it is not the case that the majority of the developing nations are terrorised by totalitariansim. Participatory institutions including parliamentary democracies exist in many Third World countries and it should be recognised that the electoral process has replaced unpopular governments in the past. It is significant that the dictators mentioned earlier have, with one exception, been removed from power. As the Tanzanian case reveals, even one party systems have a capacity for benevolent populist rule. While few would deny the trend towards centralisation in recent times, centralisation is not the same as autocracy; indeed many Western democracies are today characterised by a high degree of political centralism.

Negative images of the nature of statist development can also be countered. Contrary to the views of popular participation advocates, there is evidence to show that Third World governments have brought about significant economic and social improvements. Following the collapse of European imperial rule during the middle decades of this century, many developing countries have experienced a remarkable degree of development which may be attributed directly to state involvement. Many economic forecasters have been surprised at the high rates of GDP increase and sizeable per capita income increases recorded in the developing countries during the post-Second World War decades. Assessing the growth potential of some 60 developing countries at the beginning of the 1960s, Rosenstein-Rodan (1961) concluded that few, if any, would achieve average annual growth rates of more than three percent. Some twenty years later, however, Loup (1983) pointed out that just under a third of these countries had exceeded this figure. These achievements are largely due to state intervention and management of the economy. Indeed, the successes of high growth countries such as South Korea and Taiwan can be attributed directly to *dirigisme.*

There has been a significant expansion of state social services in the Third World as well, with concommitant improvements in levels of living. Figures released by the United Nations (1979) at the end of the 1970s show that budgetary allocations to the social services had increased significantly and that the state's share in social service provision had also increased. Hardiman and Midgley (1982) reported that social services have expanded rapidly, particularly in the fields of education and health but also (although to a lesser extent) in housing. While social security and social work services remain relatively underdeveloped, they too have grown (Midgley, 1984a; 1984b). It is, of course, difficult to assess the precise impact of these social provisions on levels of welfare but there is evidence to show that the expansion of state services in developing countries has been accompanied by significant improvements in life expectancy, literacy and other indicators of social development.

Although this alternative account challenges the pervasive anti-statism of popular participation theory, it does not suggest that state sponsored development has been an unqualified success or that statism offers a utopian vision of progress to the hundreds of millions of people who still live in conditions of appalling poverty and deprivation in Third World countries. Vivid images of starvation in Africa, of urban squalor in Latin America, of civil strife in the Middle East and the persistence of rural deprivation in Asia belie any claims of this kind. Rather, it suggests that a more balanced view that recognises the real achievements of state sponsored development is required.

Irrespective of whether or not the proponents of popular participation accept these arguments, they cannot escape the realities of statism in the Third World. As suggested at the beginning of this article, the modern state today intervenes in social and economic affairs to an extent previously unkown. As Held (1984:9) put it, "the state appears to be everywhere regulating the conditions of our lives from birth registration to death certification." In development, the state not only determines policy but is the provider of a great variety of services. Of even greater significance to the advocates of popular participation is the fact that the state has the power to determine the nature and extent of participatory activities and, in many countries, it already does so. In view of these realities, it is surprising that so many writers continue to ignore or minimise the significance of state involvement in either development or popular participation.

Dealing with the state

There is an urgent need for the proponents of participatory development to deal properly with the realities of statism in the Third World. Instead of perpetuating a simplistic antipathy to state involvement, they need to recognise the realities as well as the positive consequences of state sponsored development. They should also come to grips with the fact that the state is now extensively involved in the promotion of participatory programmes.

It is commonly accepted among popular participation advocates that state support for participation diminishes participation. Although the paradoxical character of this view is seldom acknowledged, it emanates from the widespread belief that state involvement in participation results in the manipulation of spontaneous action and the co-optation of popular leaders. Co-optation and manipulation may also occur as a result of deliberate and cynical attempts by the state to neutralise participation or it may occur inadvertently through the creation and institutionalisation of formal channels of communication between the state and citizens. It may also occur because the state has created what it believes to be legitimate and adequate channels for participation and the expression of democratic views (which are usually operated through the ruling political party). In this case, national leaders and party officials cannot conceive of the need for alternative participatory mechanisms and they will either seek to suppress or subvert these activities. Where participation is manipulated by the ruling party through its organised channels, opportunities for authentic involvement are minimised and participatory activities are used instead for the endorsement of what Bugnicourt (1982: 67) describes as "hierarchically transmitted impulses".

While there is no doubt that manipulation of this kind does occur, a recent study of participatory social development schemes (Midgley et al, 1986) rejected the idea that state involvement was primarily committed to the suppression or manipulation of people's involvement. Instead, state support was generally haphazard, sporadic and *ad hoc,* reflecting the widespread tendency towards incrementalist social administration in Third World countries. There was evidence of manipulation, but this did not characterise all state involvement or preclude harmony in community and state effort.

This finding calls for the development and consolidation of participatory programmes that recognise the legitimacy and benefits of state involvement. Since the state is able to mobilise resources, provide expertise and redistribute goods and services in favour of the most needy groups, ways of harmonising popular and public effort must be found. There have been some attempts in the literature to identify tactics that will achieve this end. United Nations publications (1975, 1976, 1981) have been particularly concerned with this question. They have urged that local leaders be trained in the techniques of bargaining and skilled in the use of methods that will pressurise recalcitrant politicians and bureaucrats. They have also urged that more viable forms of decentralised administration be established and that opportunities for public consultation and the expression of popular opinion be created. Civil servants, planners and politicians need to be trained in participatory government and taught to be more sensitive to local needs. Although these proposals will be difficult to implement, they offer a prospect of harmonising state and popular effort in development. The determined advocacy of these tactics by the proponents of popular participation rather than the perpetuation of a nihilistic anti-statism might, through the mobilisation of the very considerable resources of the state, bring about real improvements in welfare for the Third World's impoverished masses.

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