

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Sociology translates to public action . . .

This occasional column highlights sociologists who successfully engage sociology in the civic arena in their years, members of ASA and sociologists as individual professionals and citizens have sought to make their voices heard in communities, countries, and the world community. Many sociologists within the academy and in other venues have used their knowledge to numerous critical issues through consultation, advisement, testimony, commentary, and other venues. Readers are invited to submit contributions, but consult with Managing Editor Lee Herring ([lee.herring@asa.soc.uconn.edu](#)) before submitting your draft (1,000 to 1,200 words maximum).

Empowered Participatory Governance: An Unexpected Colombian Venture

by Cesar Rodriguez and Erik Olin Wright, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In 2003 Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright published *Deepening Democracy* (London: Verso), the fourth book in the Real Utopias Project. The book elaborates the underlying principles and dilemmas of a general model of “empowered participatory governance”—and then explores these principles (with several other collaborators) in a number of innovative forms of urban direct democracy in the participatory budgeting of Porto Alegre, Brazil; rural participatory police councils and local school councils in Chicago; and participatory habitat conservation for endangered species in various places in the United States.

At the time the final manuscript was being completed, Cesar Rodriguez entered the graduate program in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He had previously taught law at the National University of Colombia and was deeply involved in the democratic movement in Colombia. He had heard that there would be great interest in it in Latin America, and thus brought it to the attention of colleagues in the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Like many other international graduate students who contribute to public sociology in the academic networks intersecting the Wisconsin Sociology Department and the Real Utopias Project, Rodriguez was in the United States. The press decided to translate all of the Real Utopias Project books into Spanish, beginning with *Deepening Democracy*, which was published just in time for the 2003 World Social Forum in Brazil. Very quickly, the book became a bestseller in sociology.

Participatory Democracy

In line with its tradition of progressive politics and commitment to the training of public intellectuals, the University of Wisconsin-Madison regarded the translation of the books in the Real Utopias Project as a means to provoke debate in Colombia about radical and feasible institutional reforms. The lively debate on the possibilities of empowered participatory governance and the publication of the book led the National University to organize a four-month workshop on the topic. For the Colombian audience, the university sought to apply the lessons of the theoretical framework and the case studies from the Real Utopias Project. Community organizers in Bogotá and other Colombian cities. Thus, it prepared didactic materials and designed a workshop that would engage the book from the point of view of their political practice in the marginalized communities.

Community organizers responded enthusiastically. Nearly 400 activists signed up for the workshop, which they would discuss the theory and practice of empowered participatory governance, on the basis of the book.

the workshop, and their own experience. Such interest in the theory and practice of participatory de leftist politics in Colombia, where the democratic left has made unprecedented gains in recent years runs the government of Bogotá, the capital city—debates on egalitarian and participatory policies ha discussion of the book thus contributed to this effervescence of progressive political discussions and

On the occasion of the end of the workshop on November 22, 2003, the National University, in coord organized a video-conference with the authors of *Deepening Democracy*. Nearly 500 people attende NGO and social movement organizations' leaders who were invited to engage in a dialogue with the interpreter, sat in a studio at the University of Wisconsin looking at a monitor on which they could se them projected on a large screen in the auditorium in which they had gathered.

The conference began with Erik and Archon presenting an overview of the central ideas of empower representative democracy and associative democracy, and the dilemmas posed by attempts to put t more than two hours of intensive discussion with the assembled activists. Many interesting and diffic

- Can EPG work in political/institutional contexts characterized by a thin democracy like that in
- Given the existence of well-established mechanisms of representative democracy—and of pol tensions arise between EPG and representative democracy? A specific instance of these tensi to set up empowered participatory councils, which will probably be resisted by the City Counc
- What room for maneuver does an EPG-type of local or national government have, given the € international economic agencies (e.g., World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade an EPG process, makes a decision that goes counter those demands?
- Bogotá's new mayor—formerly a union leader—has called himself a "center of left" politician. Bogotá and Brazil) facilitate or hinder the promotion of EPG by the left?
- If civil society associations (e.g., unions, NGOs) are to play a key role in EPG, do they have t For example, what kind of reforms would make it possible for unions to look beyond their cor concerned with issues other than those of women?
- In conditions of civil war (e.g., in Colombia), what is the scope for EPG?

It was quite extraordinary sitting in front of a TV monitor on a blustery November morning in Madisc large number of grassroots political activists in Bogotá engaged in forging new democratic institutio wrote the book thinking it would primarily be of interest to critical scholars in the academy who stud They were unprepared for the resonant cord the analyses struck with activists on the ground. The gl is enriching their ideas as much as it may, hopefully, be clarifying issues to the activists involved.

Given the enthusiastic response to the workshop and the video-conference, the National University c program on "social management." The program, which will start in August 2004, is intended to prov NGO staff members, and government officials on participatory governance and progressive policyma