



Analyzing empowerment: An ongoing process of building state–civil society relations – The case of Walnut Way in Milwaukee

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ABSTRACT

Arguments regarding citizen involvement and empowerment within neoliberal urban politics are ample in geographic literature. Existing discussions often define and evaluate empowerment as either some social, political, or economic end-product of a specific event. Such singular conceptualization is problematic. First, different kinds of social, political, and economic changes can simultaneously empower/disempower communities in contradictory ways. In addition, the view of empowerment as an end-product of a present event obscures a more nuanced understanding of empowerment as an ongoing process of state–civil society relation-building. An in-depth assessment of such a process is only possible with reference to the past and the potential future occurrences. Elwood's (2002) multi-dimensional conceptualization of empowerment recognizes the limitations of a singular definition of empowerment. However, it falls short of operationalizing empowerment as a temporal process with a historically and geographically contingent past, dynamic present, and future in the making. Therefore, in this paper I expand on Elwood's framework to show how a process-based view as opposed to a narrow end-product-based or event-based one can provide a deeper understanding of state–civil society interaction and community empowerment. This paper analyzes the interaction between the City of Milwaukee, the residents of a predominantly black inner-city neighborhood, the Walnut Way, and their community organization, the Walnut Way Conservation Corp. within a land-use dispute related to the development of a park space into a housing project. Using data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, archival research, and participant observation, this paper emphasizes that despite methodological limitations of collecting long-term data, community empowerment can and should be studied as a process with reference to the past, present, and potential future state–civil society interactions.

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1. Introduction

In early 2004 the City¹ of Milwaukee issued a request for proposals (RFP) expressing its intentions to create a new subdivision on a City-owned park located within one of its predominantly African-American inner-city neighborhoods, the Walnut Way. By March the project was awarded to the Josey Heights Development Partners LLC, and the City officially declared its plan to build 53 market-rate homes on this public green space (DCD, 2004). Popularly known as the Lloyd St. Playfield or Park, this neighborhood green space was originally a single-family residential area that had been torn down by the City almost 40 years earlier to make way for freeway construction. Citizen protests had stopped the construction of this proposed freeway. In the 1980s this fallow land was developed into a

neighborhood park which provided the area residents a place for relaxation and socialization. So, when the news about the park being developed into a housing project (the Josey Heights Development) became public, residents of Walnut Way and neighboring areas reacted negatively. As such, one newspaper article reported:

“As open space goes, it's not fancy. Just a flat, green field with soccer goals at each end. But to some of its central city neighbors, the seven acre swath bordered by W. Lloyd, W. Brown, N. 12th and N. 14th streets is their little patch of serenity. And they're not about to surrender it to a new housing development without a fight.”

(Gould, 2004)

However, the “fight” put up by a handful of Milwaukee's inner-city residents to save one of their few well-maintained and easily-accessible green spaces proved to be too weak in the face of the City's entrepreneurial plans (Harvey, 1989; Norquist, 1998; Kenny and Zimmerman, 2004). The Walnut Way Conservation Corp. (henceforth WWCC), a budding and active resident-led neighborhood organization also failed to protect Walnut Way residents'

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¹ In this paper City stands for Milwaukee's local government and not the geographic area of the city of Milwaukee.

demands. The organization opted to support the City's agenda. The residents' plea to the City "to preserve Lloyd Park as a park, rather than sell it for development" (Friends of Lloyd Park, 2004a) fell on deaf ears and an already underserved inner-city neighborhood (Public Policy Forum, 2002; Heynen et al., 2006) lost another of its green spaces.

This is not an uncommon story. Examples of state–civil society or City–community struggle over land-use in general (Martin, 2004) and open green spaces in particular (Smith and Kurtz, 2003) are widespread in the US, especially under the present trend of urban renewal and economic revitalization efforts. The majority of those stories end with the business-minded City claiming yet more victories, stifling the community demands of democratic land-use decision-making and civic empowerment, and so does this one. If we envision empowerment as some end-product either gained or lost by the civil society as a result of a specific event, the above case will appear to be a fairly common one of civil society's disempowerment and co-optation into the more powerful political–economic structure. Existing literature on neoliberal urban governance and state–civil society relations often characterizes empowerment as such an end-product; a final social, economic or political condition, or a material good either won or lost as a result of a single event or action. I call this the event-based or end-product-based assessment of empowerment. This conceptualization of empowerment fails to reveal its full complexity as a continuing process of negotiation for greater power; a process of relation-building that cannot be fully assessed without reference to the past and the potential future. Focusing only on a present event can obscure our evaluation of such City–community interaction. Thus, in this paper I emphasize the need to mobilize a process-based conceptualization of empowerment.

The literature on state–civil society² relationships seems to offer multiple and often contradictory theories. Some scholars view the rise of civil society³ through an emerging non-profit/voluntary sector as empowering and beneficial for communities; many others consider it to be rather disempowering. However, very few have attempted to analyze critically the concept of empowerment. Questions about definition(s), nature, and assessment of empowerment seem to remain largely unaddressed in geographic studies. The limited work that exists focuses on singular definitions based on substantive typologies of empowerment (McClendon, 1993; Lake 1994; Rocha, 1997) as either some socio-political, economic, or environmental condition/end-product necessary for the enhancement of community wellbeing. In reality, however, civic empowerment may consist of multiple dimensions leading to contradictory changes in the state–civil society power relation. Recognizing the limitations of such singular definitions Elwood (2002) has provided a multi-dimensional framework of analysis that enables us to focus simultaneously on different substantive aspects of empowerment that may occur through distributive, procedural, and capacity-building related changes (I provide a detailed description of these multiple dimensions of empowerment as portrayed by Elwood in the next section). While this provides a strong starting point for assessing community empowerment, a discussion of empowerment as a temporal process that is embedded within the continuum of the past, present, and the

future could further strengthen Elwood's framework. Evaluating empowerment along such a temporal continuum can enhance our ability to be simultaneously sympathetic towards community achievements and critical about the pseudo-achievements that can easily be misinterpreted as means of community empowerment.

In this paper, therefore, I attempt to build on Elwood's work by emphasizing the temporal nature of *the process of becoming empowered*. I explore the contestation and negotiation among the residents of Walnut Way, their local neighborhood organization, the WWCC, and the City around the event of Josey Heights Development on Lloyd St. Park. Based on this analysis I argue that empowerment for civic organizations, like the WWCC, and by extension their constituent communities, is an ongoing process with a historically and geographically contingent past, a dynamic present, and a future in the making. As such, past state–civil society relations, present strengths and weaknesses within such relations, and future speculations and expectations, all play a crucial role in molding the process of negotiating empowerment. Hence, we should be wary of describing a community's empowerment or disempowerment as a final state and assess state–civil society interaction through a temporal lens. This will add clarity to our understanding of the complex nature of empowerment. Also, by being more perceptive towards past, present and future state–community interaction, a temporal analysis of empowerment may potentially overcome the hegemonic representation of the all-powerful neoliberal state. Therein lays the significance of broadening Elwood's multi-dimensional analysis of empowerment simultaneously into a temporal process-oriented one.

2. Empowerment – an overused yet under-theorized concept

Empowerment is a powerful theoretical concept discussed in multiple social science disciplines including community psychology (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1990), political science (Regalado, 1988; Laws, 1994), and geography (Hasson and Ley, 1994; Miller, 1994). The interdisciplinary nature of the concept problematizes a coherent definition of the term. Lake (1994) explains that empowerment or local autonomy represents people's control over the social production of places in which they live and work. Similarly, Friedmann suggests that the *long term objective* of socio-political empowerment is "to rebalance the structure of power in society by making state action more accountable, strengthening the power of civil society in the management of its own affairs, and making corporate business more socially responsible" (1992, p. 31). These definitions present the overarching understanding of empowerment as a necessary and positive condition for the production of a just socio-environment. Speaking of long-term objectives these definitions also point out that empowerment is an ongoing process and not an end-product. However, much of the empirical work that assesses the degree of empowerment gained by civil society agents does not operationalize such a process-based view.

In urban geography the shift from government to governance in the wake of the neoliberalization of urban political-economy (Miller, 1992; Swyngedouw, 2000; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jessop 2002; Newman and Lake, 2006) has underlined the significance of questions regarding civic empowerment. Today, instead of state-centered, top-down urban/environmental planning and resource/service management, the local and global society seems to engage increasingly in the act of "governance-beyond-the-state" (Swyngedouw, 2005). As a fundamental part of this institutional transformation, new rights and responsibilities are handed over to private agents including for-profit businesses and non-for-profit/community-based organizations like that of the WWCC (Jessop, 1995, 1998, 2002; McCann, 2001; Mitchell, 2002). In response to this institutional restructuring, urban geographers have raised

² Read state as the public domain, represented in this paper by Milwaukee's city government or the City. Civil society is understood here as the collective representation of the citizens and their institutional forms, such as the non-profit/community-based organizations. More specifically, civil society in this paper is a reflection of the hopes and constraints of the residents of Walnut Way and their institutional representative, the WWCC.

³ Such categorization is in no sense monolithic. Extensive debates exist around the content, pluralistic nature and underlying motivations of the civil society (Douglass and Friedmann, 1998). However, for the purpose of maintaining simplicity and focusing on the primary argument of this paper some degree of generalization is unavoidable. This is equally true for other categories like that of the state.

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