

Empowerment and Émancipation *Alain Lipietz*

Review of Marie-Hélène Bacqué, Carole Biewener, *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice*, La Découverte, Paris, 2013

It is a curious experiment, as a French-speaking author, to be writing, in English, a review of *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice* by Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Carole Biewener. For what this book tries to do is explain to a French-speaking audience what exactly is the meaning of *empowerment*, a word that has no exact equivalent in French. To do so, the book summarizes the use of “empowerment” over 35 years of activist, official and academic literature in English, in fields ranging from social action to public policies, from Saul Alinsky to Richard Neuhaus, from USA to India and South-Africa contexts and from radicalism to neoliberal conservatism. Doing so, the authors use French words, which are typical *faux-amis*, with no exact equivalent in English....

As a result, the book represents a remarkable synthesis of the social uses and theoretical genealogy and dynamics of the concept. So remarkable, that my daughter Barbara Lipietz, though educated in England, active in post-apartheid South African NGOs, and now lecturer in (participative) urban development planning at University College London, discovered the book with enthusiasm, delighted by the surplus layer such conceptual and linguistic boundary-crossing brought to the field! I cannot judge whether it would be “the best text-book about empowerment” but it certainly presents a powerful interpretation of its genealogy and manifold interpretations.

The authors were particularly well suited to write this synthesis, given their respective backgrounds at the crossroad of political economy, development studies, gender and post-colonial studies, but also given their ability to cross the boundaries between Anglo-Saxon and French political and academic cultures. I remember Carole Biewener visiting us in the 80s at CEPREMAP, when we were developing the “French Regulation Approach” in political economy; she now teaches at Simmons College, Boston. Marie-Hélène Bacqué, who teaches at Nanterre University, headed with Mohamed Mechmache (activist at *AC le Feu !*, a suburban movement born from the French urban riots of 2005), the central report framing the new “politique de la Ville”¹, an untranslatable French concept about State-lead community development policy. Bacqué’s field experience underpins the last chapter in the book - “In France, a belated importation of the concept” - chapter which will probably stand out as the most original one... for English-speaking readers!

Before elaborating on the difficulties of translation - from “empowerment” to a word in French and from “libéralisme” (in French) to a word which is *not* “liberalism” in English - let us try and summarize the book’s main argument. The basic thesis of Bacqué and Biewener is that “empowerment” bore the seeds of three evolutions:

- A radical one, dominant in the 60-70’s: the capacity of dominated groups to take power over their own life, and possibly over society, or at least over important fields of social life.

¹ *Pour une réforme radicale de la politique de la Ville*,
<http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/134000430/>

- A “liberal” one, in the English meaning of the term which, in French, is the equivalent of “social-liberal”, that is: a form of (light) social-democracy mitigated by limited forms of self-management in social policies.
- A “neoliberal” one, that is the capacity of the individual to insert herself or himself into market society.

The genealogy of this three-fold evolution is tracked through “chains of equivalence which include *empowerment*”, that is : ideas connected to this word through its direct or indirect use, in academic, activist and official (including UN agencies) literature. That genealogy is established in a variety of fields: social action, socio-psychology, gender studies and women movements, public policies, development studies, post-apartheid and post-colonial policies... And it looks extremely convincing, as if the paradigm “empowerment” had its own regular unfolding, adaptable to any field...²

Let me add a couple of personal remarks. First, the idea that one single notion could cover, or even lead to, various political positions is not new. In his famous *The great transformation*, K. Polanyi (1944) analysed how the general revolt of societies against the excesses of market dogma lead, in the Thirties, to three attractive (and widely differing) emblems: Stalinist communism, social-democracy, and fascism. In the same way, “empowerment” expresses the revolt of societies against the excesses of State (or hierarchy) controls, including that of the Welfare State, during the post-WWII period of “organized capitalism”, the one we labeled “Fordism”; and its expression was to take several forms.

During the May 68 movement - this forerunner of anti-Fordist revolts - a frequently-used slogan was “*Prenons nos affaires en mains*” which could precisely be translated as “Let us empower ourselves”. Yet, when the question “What next after Fordism ?” was developed in the late seventies, understandings of “post-Fordism” such as “workers’ involvement” were subject to strikingly different interpretations, ranging from radical-alternatives to “Third way” and “New Labour” responses³. And in their path-breaking *Beyond the Fragments*, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright showed how the very successes of Thatcherism stemmed from the frustrations and even humiliations imposed by a labourist Welfare-State on British working –classes, and women especially.

Interestingly, these three « anti-Fordist » and after-Fordist lines of evolution (alternative, liberal and Thatcherist-Reaganist) could be classified according to the degree of solidarity they include, that is the scope of the social subject reaching for empowerment. In May 68, the posters and the crowds did not only cry for empowerment, but for « solidarity » as well – solidarity between students and workers, between French and migrants... Empowerment *without* solidarity is exactly what individualism is about.

² This is a semi-joke ! Of course, to think of a paradigm as if having a « causal power » à la Roy Bhaskar could be labeled « idealist ». Yet the uses and misuses of one word do have their own “appealing power”...

³ See Barbrook R., "Mistranslations : Lipietz in London and Paris", *Science as Culture* n°8, London, 1990 ; Luc Boltanski L. and Chiapello E., *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, Paris, 1999; Lipietz A., "The Post-Fordist World. Labour Relations, International Hierarchy and Global Ecology", *Review of International Political Economy*, 4:1, Spring 1997 (<http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article536>).

And that leads us to our translation problems. One key aspect of power is “freedom to act according to one’s will”, that is, liberty. And a major aspect of liberty is freedom of undertaking. There is, admittedly, a short “chain of equivalence” between *empowerment* and *entrepreneurship*. This common root was encompassed in 18th and early 19th century French by the word “*libéralisme*”. After the development of a labor movement and especially after Karl Marx and others’ reading of the French Revolution as a “Bourgeois Revolution”, a line of demarcation was drawn between “political liberalism” (including various aspects of cultural liberalism) and “economic liberalism”. But progressively, and more sharply after the victory of the “liberal-productivist”⁴ form of post-Fordism, this clear delineation no longer holds in France and most part of Europe, and “liberalism” has become the common name for the excesses of present-day capitalism : “anti-liberal” expresses the revolt against the present dictatorship of the Market, extended today to all aspects of life.

Thus it always comes as a surprise, for a European, to hear of ‘left of centre’ political positions being, in the US, labelled as ‘liberal’; in Europe ‘libéral’ by and large equates to ‘conservative’. This US tradition may refer to the roots of the American Revolution. Also in French, the 18th century expression “*grand seigneur liberal*” did express the position of the dominant taking care of the dominated. Yet, the debate between Hamilton and Jefferson is understood (from France) as the expression of the conflict between pure liberalism (both political and economic) and the consideration that economic liberalism should be mitigated with some forms of social policies, in order to maintain a sustainable level of equality in power, and thereby, the very possibility of ‘real’ democracy.

And this leads us, finally, to the initial translation problem of “empowerment” into French. The fact that there is no obvious equivalent is often perceived as a twist of French political experience. While empowerment encompasses, with the prefix “em” and the suffix “ment”, the ideas of a process and the idea that power requires mainly the capacities of the self, hence an inner maturation, French revolutions (in 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871) were perceived as “taking power”, power which exists as something outside oneself, and which could be seized by violent and swift collective political action⁵. And it is true that this “over-politicized” view of power is dominant in French tradition (before Foucault...).

Yet another reason is that the French language had another word, privileged by radical thinkers, including the deepest French-writing thinker of empowerment, André Gorz⁶, a word finally used in the title of this book : *émancipation*. “L’émancipation des travailleurs sera l’oeuvre des travailleurs eux-mêmes”, watchword of the First International Workingmen’s

4 Lipietz A., *Green Deal. La crise du libéral-productivisme et la réponse écologiste*, La Découverte, Paris, 2012 ; Lipietz A. *Fears and Hopes : The Crisis of the Liberal-Productivist Model and its Green Alternative*, 2011 (<http://lipietz.net/spip.php?article2669>), partly published in *Capital and Class*, February 2013, 37 (1).

⁵ In spite of his own warnings in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin shared the same « Jacobinist » view. The possibility, or necessity, of empowerment for the working class, *after* or *before* « the » Revolution, occupies the greatest part of the debate about the tragic fate of Socialism in 20th century, from Lukács and Trotsky to Mao.

⁶ See Lipietz A., « André Gorz and our Youth », *Studies in Political Economy* 81, Spring 2008.

Association, could aptly be translated as « Empowerment of the workers will be the task of workers themselves ». So *émancipation*, but also *eux-mêmes* (themselves) - some time expressed in greek (« auto »), with self-management as *autogestion*⁷) - were to occupy in French the meaning position of « empowerment ». In French, we celebrated and cried for “émancipation » - of Jews, slaves, workers, colonies, women, more or less in that order...

« Emancipation » comes from Latin *mancipium*, a juridical status of possession of a person, a good, or a land. The word was composed with *manus* (hand), and *capere* (to hold). Emancipation is thus « taking something or some one from the hands of its holder”. And « *s’émanciper* » adds the idea of « self ». Thus « *s’émanciper* » is exactly « to take one’s destiny in one’s own hands ». Not so far from « empowerment ». Emancipation expresses, from the viewpoint of the dominated, what “empowerment” expresses from the viewpoint of their goal.

⁷ The anti-Fordist post-68 empowerment movements in France has once been labelled “la galaxie des *auto*” (Rosenvallon P., Viveret P., *Pour une nouvelle culture politique*, Seuil, Paris, 1978). And, just as « empowerment », it did lead some to a French version of the Third Way, *la seconde gauche*, and then to social-liberalism.