

Reconsidering Development

Volume 2
Issue 1 *The Local*

Article 3

2011

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Recommended Citation

Vallejo, K. (2011). NGOs, politics, and participation: A critical case study of the foreign funded NGO sector and its capacity to empower local communities. *Reconsidering Development*, 2 (1). Retrieved from <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/reconsidering/vol2/iss1/3>

Reconsidering Development is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.



NGOs, politics, and participation:

A critical case study of the foreign funded NGO sector and its capacity to empower local communities

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often employ the rhetoric of local empowerment through 'participatory' programming. A critical analysis of such programs, however, suggests that the capacity of NGOs to politically empower local communities is often misconstrued, especially since many of these programs overlook the ways in which foreign funding structures actually restrict local participation and limit local empowerment. This point is illustrated by a critical examination of studies claiming that the World Bank's 1994 PLANAFLORO program in Rondônia, Brazil *did* politically mobilize local populations.

KEYWORDS: NGOs, participatory development, voting, foreign aid

Introduction

At a time when nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in South America are facing political scrutiny from national leaders around the continent (Agencia de Noticias Fides [ANF], 2009; Petras, 1997), issues of the NGO sector's political influence on and accountability to civil society are growing topics of deliberation. Some scholars have suggested that foreign funded NGOs have an impact on local, state, and national politics, as well as improve civil society's "access to economic resources, social benefits [and] ultimately the quality of democratic representation" (Brown, Brown, & Desposato, 2002, p. 1). Such assumptions perpetuate the thinking that:

NGOs promote community organization [and] mobilization ... they legitimate and strengthen civil society, generate more pluralism and political participation, offer a base for civil resistance to oppressive political systems [and] contribute to democracy by helping to create a more 'vibrant and autonomous civil society' that can challenge despotic government. (Boulding & Gibson, 2008, p. 483)

Following this logic, a swell in NGO activity will thus result in increased opportunities for citizens to form the "horizontal linkages," or bonds of trust, cooperation and interdependence within civil society, which contribute to democratic participation and mobilize citizens to participate in shaping their political environment (Brown et al., 2002; Seixas, 2010). Critics, however, argue that such claims overlook the real relations of political power inherent in the organizational structures and administrative processes of organizations like NGOs, especially those which are large in scale and receive foreign funding. These scholars argue that NGOs, as organizations, are held more accountable to the desires of international donors than civil society; that they function in a way that inherently impedes critical citizen participation; and that, ultimately, they encourage neo-liberal homogeneity rather than the local and autonomous self-determination of development strategies (Ebrahim, 2003; Kamat, 2004; Wallace, Bornstein, & Chapman, 2007). While the debate between NGO and foreign aid influence on civil society and empowerment is one with substantial academic history, the topic is ever-pertinent as development institutions continue to channel aid money through NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) at an increasing rate. Currently, for example, the World Bank partners with NGOs and civil society organizations in approximately 81% of its development projects, a significant jump from the 21% of projects which involved CSOs in 1990 (World Bank, 2011). In order to more fully understand the consequences of this growing NGO presence in development and civil society, the impact of past foreign funding efforts to support the NGO sector and the structural allocation of these funds should be more critically analyzed.

This paper examines the World Bank-funded Rondônia Natural Resource Management Project (Plano Agropecuário e Florestal de Rondônia, or PLANAFLORO), implemented in Brazil in the mid-1990s, as a case which can help further understanding of the relationship between NGOs, foreign funding, political participation, and empowerment within civil society. The PLANAFLORO case demonstrates how the growth of the NGO sector may have led to changes in political voting patterns, though perhaps not in the overall political structures, in spite of the project's heavy emphasis on involving the local community via participatory programming. In viewing the case first through the lens of Putnam's associational theory and secondly through a more critical perspective¹, the capacity of NGO participatory programs to empower civil society is called into question.

This paper begins with a brief history of the NGO sector in Brazil as it relates to the dawn of the PLANAFLORO initiative, followed, first, by an overview of the program itself and, second, by a summary of Brown, Brown, and Desposato's (2002, 2007) interpretation of the PLANAFLORO program that is in line with associational activity theory. This synopsis will help to contextualize the prevailing viewpointⁱⁱ held by many academics and international organizations that NGOs *do* contribute to greater democratic participation and political change (World Bank, 2011), and that NGOs do indeed serve as "bridging organizations" between social groups as well as champions of civil society (see for example Vakil, 1997). Lastly, a critical view of PLANAFLORO's use of participatory development practices is presented. This view, steeped in the values of critical pedagogy, suggests that the NGO sector actually has limited capacity to promote the agency of civil society without a concordant attempt to address deeper social structures of inequality through participatory means (Ebrahim, 2003; Freire, 1974). This perspective is perhaps best supported by the fact that today, despite heavy investment in the growth of the NGO sector under the PLANAFLORO project over a decade ago, the people of Amazonia continue to struggle for local political representation and control over the development processes that pervade their daily lives (Lemos & Roberts, 2008; Osava, 2010). By critically examining the PLANAFLORO initiative and studies surrounding its impact on civil society, researchers and the development community can gain better insight into the ways in which foreign funded NGOs and CSOs can actually impede the political empowerment of marginalized populations today, despite their intent to be participatory and to incorporate local communities. Ultimately, the paper argues that (1) foreign funded efforts to organize civil society face organizational constraints in implementing the kinds of participatory practices which stem from the theoretical camp of critical pedagogy (Cervero, 2006; Forester, 1989), and that (2) the real political impact of participatory, civil society-based development programs should be carefully critiqued and assessed based on their ability to influence local empowerment, not simply on changes in voter behavior.

The Brazilian NGO sector

The Brazilian NGO sector has a long history of working within civil society to mobilize citizen participation and political change (ABONG, 2010; Fernandes & Carneiro, 1995; Landim, 2008). Born out of heavy repression during the Brazilian military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, the Brazilian NGO sector is the direct descendant of the church, grassroots organizations, and community-led organizations that worked underground to support the radical opposition forces during that time. Originally inspired by the ideologies of liberation theology, Marxism, and Freire's popular education movement, these social change-oriented organizations played a role in the re-democratization process after the *abertura* (political "opening") in 1985, aligning themselves as political actors and representatives of the Brazilian public (Landim, 2008). Many of these community and social organizations had strong international ties due to their connections with formerly exiled Brazilian academics, political thinkers, and philosophers, including Paulo Freire. These intellectuals, who had spent significant time outside of Brazil during the dictatorship, often supported these non-profit outfits—with the assistance of foreign donors—upon returning to Brazil after *abertura*. The growth of community organizations as legitimate political actors offered new forms of political representation for marginalized peoples in a newly democratizing society. For example, these organizations helped once politically voiceless peoples accumulate political legitimacy by providing advising, funding, and general support for newly organized identity-based movements, as well as for trade union mobilizations

and policy-related initiatives especially as the government underwent decentralization (Landim, 2008). As organized bodies, these organizations became valid political actors whose intentions were considered “desirable, proper or appropriate” within the institutionalized local social structures (Scott, 2008, p. 59).

As this system of political decentralization unfolded, the newly democratic political regime moved a number of policy decision-making processes to the local level. Initiated by the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, decentralization increased public involvement in these procedures through the implementation of “participatory associations” that deliberately managed local and national policy initiatives related to social assistance, housing, education, women’s issues, environmental issues, care for the elderly, and indigenous and racial political issues (Landim, 2008). NGOs played a major role in fostering the development of these associations (Landim, 2008). Over time, the creation of this system solidified the bonds between NGOs, their donors, and various marginalized groups in Brazilian society, promoting the idea that through working together, they could achieve empowering changes in the political structure. This belief in the NGO sector’s power to build social capital within civil society and to serve as a valid representative of the public was perhaps best reinforced by the tremendous 1990s World Bank and government partnership to fund the growth of CSOs and the NGO sector in Rondônia, Brazil.

PLANAFLORO

In the mid 1990s, the World Bank in partnership with the Brazilian government initiated a program to provide a rapid and substantial influx in funding to support the growth of the NGO sector in the state of Rondônia. The program, known as PLANAFLORO, was intended to mitigate some of the harsh environmental and political damages the state had previously faced by empowering citizens through working with participatory NGO programs and forming politically active CSOs (World Bank, n.d.). Prior to this initiative, there had been only a small NGO presence in this state. This state-wide effort to bolster the expansion of the NGO sector in

Rondônia would thus contribute to an opening of social space in which people could interact, generate trust, construct collective identities, build the collective bargaining skills and develop the ‘horizontal linkages’ within society that help democracy thrive. Without building such ‘horizontal linkages’, some argue that “politics is characterized by patronage, clientelism, and corruption” (Brown et al., 2008, p. 28)



Map 1 : Rondônia lies just above Bolivia in Brazil’s western Amazonia (Beiguelman, 2003).

Like much of western Brazil, Rondônia is covered with delicate, pristine rainforests and is home to Amerindians, rubber tappers, and landless workers who have been traditionally marginalized from majority Brazilian society. While the people

living there had traditionally survived on subsistence livelihoods, harsh and exploitative development policies brought to the area in the late 1970s and 1980s decimated the local ecology

and threatened the ways of lives for many disempowered citizens (Lemos & Roberts, 2008). Projects like the government's forced colonization program of the 1970s and the World Bank's notoriously failed 1980s POLONORESTE development effort to construct a superhighway through the Amazon, eventually depleted almost a quarter of the state's rainforest by the late 1980s (World Bank, n.d.). These policies and the destruction that ensued led to the rapid in-migration of ranchers, loggers and slash and burn farmers into the newly cleared area, endangering the livelihoods of over 100,000 people living in the region (Lemos & Roberts, 2008; World Bank, n.d.). In response to this development crisis, the World Bank reoriented its approach to development and natural resource management in Rondônia, crafting the PLANAFLORO project in 1994. This project was intended to mitigate some of the health degradation, poverty, land rights violations, educational issues, and environmental destruction wrought by prior destructive policies by increasing the local NGO presence in the state and by proposing that these NGOs operated in a more participatory and inclusive manner (Lemos & Roberts, 2008; World Bank, n.d.). By inviting Brazilian professors, local agricultural workers and other rural groups to participate in strengthening grassroots coalitions, the World Bank's PLANAFLORO project sought to mobilize greater citizen participation in local governance and resource management via a stronger, more participatory NGO sector (World Bank, n.d.).

While the PLANAFLORO initiative is generally referred to as a World Bank development project, it functioned in coordination with the Brazilian government. The Bank was the major contributor to the program, funding approximately USD 167 million, while the Brazilian government contributed the remaining USD 61.9 million (World Bank, n.d.).ⁱⁱⁱ While the total amount of funds granted to PLANAFLORO was a significant decrease compared to the USD 1.6 billion allocated by the Bank in the 1980s to fund POLONOROESTE, this new project channeled funding specifically to NGOs as a means of supporting more sustainable local development and resource management. These funds, which did not have to be paid back^{iv}, were distributed directly to NGOs in the form of grants for which NGOs first had to apply. Non-governmental organizations under the PLANAFLORO initiative were to use these grants as start-up capital, for organizational growth, and to support the organization of CSOs—like workers' unions and other participatory associations aimed at mobilizing local communities to participate in the decision-making processes of the newly decentralized government (Brown et al., 2007, 2008).

While some authors, including the World Bank's own program evaluators, question the extent to which PLANAFLORO was able to accomplish this goal of social mobilization for political action and resource management (Lemos & Roberts, 2008; World Bank, n.d.), a series of studies conducted between 2002 and 2007 by David S. Brown, J. Christopher Brown, and Scott W. Desposato lend support to the World Bank's overall analysis of the PLANAFLORO project. These studies concluded that increases in NGO resources did indeed usher in a new political current and "empower[ed] new forms of political participation" in Rondônia (Brown et al., 2007, p. 135). Even if the World Bank program evaluation was critical of its own participatory mobilization techniques, civil society was nonetheless successfully mobilized to create political change as a result of the increased associational opportunities made available by a growing NGO presence in the state. In the following section, I provide an overview of Brown, Brown, and Desposato's conclusions regarding the role of PLANAFLORO in politically empowering civil society so that (1) the case may be more critically evaluated and (2) the development community can build a better understanding of the relationship between NGO funding and political empowerment.

PLANAFLORO as associational activity

The years between 1994 and 1998 presented Brown, Brown, and Desposato (2002, 2007, 2008) with an almost ideal historical scenario for analyzing the influence of NGO activity upon political change in Brazil. Between those years, the PLANAFLORO project was put into full swing in Rondônia as the World Bank rapidly increased the amount of development funds it was allocating to the NGO sector in the area (Brown et al., 2007; World Bank, n.d.). These years also happened to be the years between two national elections in which the same two candidates, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, were the front-runners for president. Given this history, the authors built a statistical model to test for a relationship between the increases in NGO activity in the state and political changes occurring within civil society. The authors believed this relationship would symbolize collective grassroots mobilization that resulted from increased public associational activities (Brown et al., 2007).

At the time, Rondônia had long been recognized as a conservative state mired in corruption and an institutionalized patronage-based political system. Concurrently, the World Bank had begun to fuel the growth of the NGO sector as a democratizing force in the 1990s. Programs like PLANAFLORO funneled monies to local NGOs to support the construction of participatory CSOs (like farmer cooperatives or other labor organizations) with the hope of empowering local stakeholders (World Bank, n.d.). These organizations used these funds to provide benefits (like farming subsidies) to individuals and were strengthened as more individuals joined (Brown et al., 2007). According to the logic of associational activity, as more individuals joined, these groups became better able to establish new collective norms and practices, thus influencing collective action in ways that are beneficial to group members (Scott, 2008). Since voting was compulsory for adult Brazilians, Brown and his colleagues (2002, 2007) posited that if voter preferences changed dramatically in Rondônia between 1994 and 1998, then they could conclude that citizens had been successfully “mobilized” to support new candidates or to vote in unprecedented ways due to new norms and practices established through new associational activities.^v For the authors, increased associational influence on collective action dramatically affected voting patterns at the national level, supporting the logic of the World Bank that increased participatory NGO activity affects the political participation of communities. However, limited change in voting patterns in local elections suggests that a more critical examination of participatory processes must be accounted for in order to glean better insight into the capacity of NGOs to empower the local citizenry.

Aid allocation matters, too

Brown, Brown and Desposato’s (2007, 2008) findings confirmed their hypothesis that associational activity has a significant influence on voting patterns. More specifically, the authors believed that increased support for NGO activity would create opportunities for “horizontal linkages” to flourish within civil society, strengthening the bonds of both associational activity and collective dissent and ultimately leading to a shift in voter preferences. Brown et al. (2007, 2008) found a strong positive correlation between the amount of money allocated to the NGO sector in a given municipality and the shift in voter preferences to support the leftist presidential candidate. The difference was quite large—almost 20 percentage points between those communities that received the most PLANAFLORO funding to support NGO growth and those communities that received the least PLANAFLORO funding. Municipalities that received no PLANAFLORO funding between the two elections actually voted more

conservatively in 1998, with the left vote dropping by about 5% in the second election. In the municipalities that received the most PLANAFLORO funding, the left vote increased by about 13%. According to Brown and his colleagues (2007), voters in the well-funded municipalities were suddenly expressing and acting upon decidedly less conservative political preferences, a change attributable to the democratizing effect of associational activity embedded in participatory NGO work (Boulding, 2008; Brown et al., 2007, 2008; Kamat, 2004).

At the local level, however, Brown and his colleagues observed the opposite trends in the gubernatorial elections compared to voting trends observed in the presidential elections. While leftist gubernatorial candidates in Rondônia did worse overall from 1994 to 1998, they lost the most votes in those municipalities that received the most PLANAFLORO funding (Brown et al., 2007). Brown and his colleagues attributed this maintenance of the conservative status-quo in these areas to the fact that the project funds were allocated at the municipal levels to governors who had control over *when* the funds would be released to local NGOs. While the governors did not actually have the ability to increase the funds and were not themselves responsible for bringing funding to CSOs in the area, the governors appeared in the eyes of voters to be responsible for the new programs offered by NGOs (Boulding & Gibson, 2008; Brown et al., 2007, 2008). This led to the increased support of incumbent, conservative governors by voters who simultaneously supported the more left-leaning presidential candidate.

Together, these mixed results reveal how administrative factors concerning the allocation of project funding can become a key factor in determining the political effect of a project. In this case, the local incumbents seem to have benefited enormously from the ability to control the timing of aid distribution. Similarly, incumbents could have *withheld* funds if citizens, NGOs, or other CSOs mobilized in ways that did not align with their political agendas. While the observed changes in voting patterns may suggest that on some level the NGOs in Rondônia were capable of building associative activity, encouraging “horizontal linkages and produc[ing] social capital that, in turn... foster[ed] alternative political ideas” (Boulding & Gibson, 2008), this broader question regarding the political effects of funding distribution raises doubt about the overall capacity of large-scale development projects like PLANAFLORO to empower civil society, despite their emphasis on employing participatory programs via local NGOs.

Voting, and participation: A critique

From a critical theory perspective, one cannot help but argue that efforts to create real political change on behalf of marginalized communities entail more than half-hearted efforts to involve them in voting for government representatives. Instead, political change requires that the inequalities entrenched within social structures be recognized and dealt with intentionally through participatory programming (Cervero, 2006; Forester, 1989; Freire, 1974). The option to choose between two pre-selected political platforms in an election is not the same as problematizing and acting on the issues that affect people’s livelihoods and marginalized statuses on a daily basis. While breeding horizontal linkages in society such as collective identities and increased communal trust can strengthen the associational activities of CSOs and produce changes in electoral results, this does not equate to an increase in the political *agency*^{vi} of civil society. Changes in voting preferences alone do not necessarily mean that more people are empowered to have a voice in the laws, policies, and norms that govern their everyday lives. While Brown and his colleagues (2002, 2007, 2008) present a compelling case for the power of associational activities to sway elections, they only briefly recognize the power structures embedded in the discourse of development and the political constraints of working within internationally funded structures. Oftentimes, emphasis on power structures are excluded from

analyses like Brown et al.'s due to the fact that socio-political relations are difficult to identify clearly and measure quantitatively. Researchers working with econometric and statistical regression models often face difficulties in accounting for such social complexities. In this same light, program planners in the development community often struggle to account for the power structures embedded in their work as they are difficult to monitor and manage administratively (Ebrahim, 2003; Fischer, 2000; Kamat, 2004). As NGOs and the rest of the development community have come to embrace a more participatory rhetoric, the idea of participation has evolved into something far different from its critical roots as the idea has been adapted to something more easily managed and monitored by program donors and evaluators.

While the World Bank did not begin implementing participatory programs in Brazil until the early 1990s, participatory development practices were initiated in the 1980s as both a response to top-down planning and development strategies and as a product of new civic-engagement alternatives emerging out of the 1970s dependency theory movement (Ebrahim, 2003). Initially advanced much earlier by thinkers like Freire, critical participatory methodology is a slow and tedious process which facilitates empowerment via “the creation of institutional and intellectual conditions that help people pose questions in their own ordinary (or everyday) languages and decide issues important to them” (Fischer, 2000, p. 184). A humbler understanding of the capacity of NGOs to empower civil society through participatory engagement is important here; ‘local participation’ is a term used commonly in development today, but it has become quite decoupled in practice from its essential meaning. Many of today’s ‘participatory’ programs “have moved away from education and empowerment programs that involve structural analysis of power and inequality” and have instead turned to technical projects, emphasizing managerial-style, solution-based approaches for addressing issues of poverty and oppression (Kamat, 2004, p. 168). The “mainstreaming” of these “radical and transformative” methodologies (Wallace et al., 2007, p. 21) results in their conversion to *de*-politicized approaches, essentially robbing them of their empowering character and diminishing the space within which citizens can genuinely participate and become more politically empowered. A loss of local problematization processes—which are the foundations of Freirean critical pedagogy and other critical program planning perspectives (Cervero, 2006; Fischer, 2000; Forester, 1989)—jeopardizes the capacity to mobilize the agency of civil society.

Though the PLANAFLORO project was intended to be participatory and to engage local citizens, the Bank concludes in its program evaluation that the participatory measures used to engage citizens in policy making failed to function effectively in practice (World Bank, n.d.). Initially geared to “[c]ontribute to the social and political organization of rural communities and traditional peoples [to] stimulate the process of democratization for the exercise of citizenship” in Rondônia (Brown et al., 2007, p. 128), local government representatives were resistant to the participation of CSOs in local decision-making dialogue (World Bank, n.d.). Oftentimes, government officials were absent from community meetings, which were meant to include stakeholders from both the government and civil society in decision-making processes. Meetings that included stakeholders from various social groups were not always productive because the language of communication (including the high usage of technical jargon) hindered participation by constituents. Citizens were often viewed as “partisan” or too “technically weak to participate in complex development projects,” making government officials reluctant to work with the participatory organizations that NGOs had organized (World Bank, n.d.). Furthermore, working together was difficult for those who had little experience or training in participatory methodologies, as the concepts of ‘problematizing’ and ‘facilitating of empowerment’ were

unfamiliar to those local leaders in charge of programming (Fischer, 2000; World Bank, n.d.). Moreover, the World Bank assessment noted that the state of Rondônia had been historically run by elites and had a political system that functioned via political clientelism. The involvement of civil society in decision-making processes thus threatened to upset institutionalized oligarchic power structures. As a result, local leaders were de-incentivized from being inclusive of local citizens groups, causing PLANAFLORO great difficulty in enacting critical participatory projects.

Perhaps the greatest indication that the PLANAFLORO project diverged from critical participatory methodologies is the fact that the goals of the project were not defined by members of the local community to begin with. Instead, the program came equipped with four major themes that happened to align with overseas donors and the Brazilian government's interests (World Bank, n.d.). To some extent this divergence may indicate a lack of experience or training in managing participatory experiences—a shortcoming which the World Bank evaluation itself acknowledges—or to the inherent difficulties in translating such a non-hierarchical and fluid participatory discourse into the language of controllable projects which by nature must be manageable, clearly defined, generally quantifiable, and are often severely limited by both time and budget (Cleaver, 1999).

Conclusion

Overall, the PLANAFLORO project calls to attention the ways in which foreign funded participatory NGO programs may influence political affairs within a country but are still unable to facilitate transformations of power relations at the local level. This calls into question the capacity of the NGO sector to organize and mobilize civil society and, most importantly, the relationship between foreign development aid and local empowerment. As the international development community continues to pursue its course of funding participatory programs and relying heavily on NGOs to act as agents of change in civil society, a more critical view of these processes needs to be developed in order to more fully account for the political implications of such aid allocation structures and its effect on marginalized communities. Until this happens, international development efforts may offer few opportunities to politically empower local communities, whether their programs are participatory in nature or not.

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ⁱ Critical perspective here refers to the camp of theory based heavily on a Marxist tradition. This perspective has evolved over time and across the social sciences, but is primarily concerned with the liberation of human beings from the socio-political and economic inequalities that oppress them. For a comprehensive overview of a number of critical perspectives, see The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>)

ⁱⁱ See works like Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman's (2007) *The aid chain, coercion and commitment in development NGOs* for more insight into this perspective as well as critiques of the democratic capacities of NGOs which have evolved over the past decade.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a massive amount of money allotted for a single project in a single state, especially when compared to the total amount of USAID assistance given to the entire country of Brazil in 2010: USD 22.5 million (<http://brazil.usaid.gov/>).

^{iv} Neither the World Bank (n.d.) nor Brown and colleagues (2007, 2008) address how it came to be that these "loans" from the World Bank were granted with no strings attached. This is a far cry from the Bank's typical loan procedures in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that PLANAFLORO implementers were aware of the growing criticism of this loan scheme and the growing pressure from other international donors and country leadership advocating the removal of debt repayment obligations on funds given to Brazil for sustainable development initiatives in the Amazonia region (Brooke, 1989).

^v Brown et al. (2002, 2008) also base much of their logic on the works of Robert Putnam's interpretation of associational theory and social capital, which attributes better functioning democracies to increases in civic engagement. For a brief overview, see <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/putnam.htm>.

^{vi} I use the term agency here to mean the ability of individuals or social groups to understand, control, and change the way they act and interact within social *structures* (e.g. the "rules and resources" which are allocated within society and upheld by social institutions) (Giddens, 1979).