CHAPTER SIX

ENGINEERING CONSENT: THE DE-POLITICIZATION OF THE POLITICAL

... That does not mean, however, that the neo-conservative analysis and the empirical arguments on which it claims to base its validity are 'true' in any objectively testable sense, or that they are 'right' according to substantive criteria of political legitimacy and social justice. [It is] ... simply highly effective and self-confirming as a political formula with which electoral majorities can be formed, and with which existing large solidaristic communities of interest can be further disorganized. (Offe 1996, 179).

In their comprehensive volume on participatory empowered institutions (EPIs), Fung and Wright (2003, 259) acknowledge that

By focusing upon similarities across institutional designs, our presentation of EPG (Empowered participatory governance) may share a fault with other proposals for collaborative and participatory governance. Such schemes are often inattentive to problems of powerlessness and domination, thus seeming to suggest that if only the institutional designs can be constructed just right, then gross imbalances of power in the contexts of these institutions will be neutralized.

What this book suggests is that context in a historical sense matters. The political and economic setting in which EPIs are set affects their outcome. Institutions do not exist in a void, and in the case of social funds (SFs) and other kinds of EPIs, structural dynamics — political, economic, and social — affect them more than they affect such dynamics. By context and structural dynamics, however, I do not mean only regime type or national economic structures, both of which are immensely important. As the similarities between Funds in Egypt and Bolivia have shown — despite the variation in regime type, demography, and the national economic base — ‘context’ and structural dynamics extend to the global level, specifically the dominant matrix of governance and development: neoliberalism. Similarly, the differences between the two Funds — in favor of the Bolivian case — suggest that current ‘contexts’ are heavily influenced by historical processes.

The differences between the two Funds even on the micro-level (communities) in both countries were largely related to the differing
macro-economic and political environments of Bolivia and Egypt. These included the set of empowering legal reforms adopted by the Bolivian state (the Law for Popular Participation [LPP] and Law of National Dialogue [LDN]), as well as distributional mechanisms (Social control and POA [Programa Operativa Annual]) recognizing the power and importance of community organizations at the local level. The Bolivian state’s relative support for civil society can be contrasted with the many legislative constraints existing in the Egyptian context, the most relevant being the NGO law and the Emergency Law prohibiting collective organization. This seemed to be a logical outcome of the difference in regime type, Bolivia being democratic and Egypt authoritarian, but is more so a result of earlier successful struggles of civil-society organizations and mass-mobilization in Bolivia which dates back to the 1952, as opposed to Egypt. Hence, each country’s SF mirrored both the shortcomings and strengths of the systems in place, historically defined.

However, in both cases, the overall achievement of the SF was to provide the political support necessary for the continuation of neoliberal policies and the resulting crisis of state legitimacy that was largely independent of specific governments. Thus, while the technical aspects of social-service delivery may be different in Egypt and Bolivia, the politicization of these programs has been very similar. Ultimately, for citizens to be able to formulate and pursue their interests — the main prerogative of civil society and EPIs — the state must alter many of these structural conditions and help to level the playing field. Social and political change on this scale cannot simply be addressed through selective targeting of welfare programs, even supposedly innovative ones like SFs.

Drawn from case studies of Bolivia and Egypt, the conclusions in this chapter focus on not only the Funds as an example of EPIs but also on the three-sphere model described at the beginning of this book namely, state, civil society, and economy. Although broad and confirmed generalizations about meta-phenomena — such as civil society, neoliberalism, and the state— cannot be made from the study of one institution (in this case SFs), specific case studies, such as the one in this book, can provide some preliminary indications about contemporary use of these concepts as intellectual constructs and about their current direction as functional entities. Again, as stated earlier, especially because institutions do not exist in a vacuum but, rather, come out of and are affected by structures of power and history, it is