

# DILEMMAS OF ACTIVISM

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**Class, Community, and  
the Politics of  
Local Mobilization**

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## Transformative Populism and the Development of a Community of Color

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with Mauricio Gaston**

The neighborhood of Roxbury is Boston's ghetto. Roxbury is the center of Boston's black community, and of a growing Latino community. Roxbury is also the economically poorest neighborhood in Boston, with a per capita income only two-thirds of the Boston average in 1980.<sup>1</sup> Over the past ten years, there has been a tug-of-war between two insurgent strategies for community development in Boston's poor and working-class communities in general and in Roxbury in particular. Both strategies are left populist, but there the similarity ends. One approach is a narrow version of populism that we call redistributive populism, which suppresses nonclass differences such as that of race, seeks to unite "the people" around a least-common-denominator program based on traditional ideology, and holds out redistribution of resources as the central goal. The second approach, transformative populism, differs markedly: It emphasizes and even celebrates diversity as well as unity, explicitly introduces derived ideology in a process of mutual education of coalition members, and targets as its central goal the transformation of consciousness through empowerment.

We use a case study of community development in Roxbury to weigh the

Mauricio Gaston passed away in 1986. He was not directly involved in the analysis of populism presented in this paper. However, the main source of data for the paper is a detailed case study of the Roxbury community that Gaston conducted with Kennedy over a period of years. We dedicate the paper to his memory and his vision. We would like to thank Jim Green, Gus Newport, Charlotte Ryan, Bob Terrell, Chuck Turner, and especially Mel King for numerous discussions (including comments on earlier drafts from Green, King, and Ryan) that influenced our thinking as reflected in this paper. The opinions expressed are our own, however, and do not necessarily reflect those of any of these people.

merits of the two populist approaches. We argue that transformative populism is a superior strategy for achieving progressive goals related to community development, including the goal of redistribution. This superiority is especially evident in communities of color, as the case of Roxbury illustrates. We offer a limited comparison between the two strategies, but our main emphasis is on the innovative contributions of transformative populism as they have emerged in Roxbury's community struggles over the past several years. The task of comparison is complicated by the fact that a redistributive populist leader, Raymond Flynn, was elected mayor of Boston in 1983 and again in 1987. Thus, redistributive populism has held a piece of state power (in this case, on the municipal level) in recent years, while transformative populism has remained a movement in opposition.<sup>2</sup>

We present the case in five steps. First, we summarize the history of Boston and Roxbury that has created the context for current community development struggles. Second, we sketch the two populist strategies as they have developed in Boston. Both strategies, we argue, are responses to the class-community dilemma—the problem that important aspects of class oppression are experienced by people as members of multiclass communities. Third, we contrast the ways in which the two populisms have dealt with the relationship between traditional ideology—the “common sense” that people bring to daily life—and derived ideology—conscious left ideology. Fourth, we describe how Boston's redistributive and transformative populist movements have approached the state, in particular the local state, which has been the arena for important conflicts over community development. Finally, we offer brief conclusions.

## **Boston and Roxbury: From Disinvestment to Displacement**

The need for community development in Roxbury follows from a thirty-year history of disinvestment. Roxbury has experienced tremendous losses of housing and industry at the hands of the market, and added assaults at the hands of the state, through urban renewal and highway clearance. In one area of the neighborhood, known locally as the “Bermuda triangle,” 70 percent of the housing stock was lost to abandonment and arson in two decades. All the signs of intense poverty are evident in Roxbury: high unemployment, low participation in the labor force, low educational levels,

a high crime rate, flourishing drug traffic, a high dropout rate from school, and a high rate of teenage pregnancy. Some of Roxbury's census tracts are among the poorest in the country, on a par with the poorest counties in Mississippi and with Indian reservations in the western United States.

To a large extent, the devastation of Roxbury was a by-product of the revitalization of Boston. Forty years ago, Boston was one of the most economically depressed cities of the Frostbelt. In the intervening decades, Boston has been transformed into a regional and even national center of services and finance. This economic transformation was facilitated by major highway construction and one of the most vigorous urban renewal programs in the country, orchestrated by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA).

But Boston's economic renaissance entailed a three-pronged attack on Roxbury's well-being. First, downtown investment came at the expense of investment in poor communities and particularly communities of color. Neighborhoods like Roxbury were "redlined" by the banks. Roxbury properties were overassessed for tax purposes (until tax laws changed in 1982) and denied services in a deliberate policy of neighborhood "triage," whereas downtown developers were given tax breaks and city services were concentrated on developing downtown areas. Second, the booming service industries created a much more polarized labor market than the manufacturing and transport industries they replaced. People of color were, and are, largely confined to very-low-wage jobs in the hotels, hospitals, restaurants, and stores that constituted much of "New Boston's" economy. Third, Boston's programs of highway construction and urban renewal physically destroyed much of Roxbury. For example, highway planners working on a new Southwest Expressway (I-95) and Inner Belt circumferential road managed to cut a broad swath through industrial, commercial, and residential buildings in Lower Roxbury and along Columbus Avenue, a major Roxbury artery, before a popular movement stopped construction. Major urban renewal projects in Madison Park and Washington Park resulted in massive demolition of housing and displacement, despite the construction and renovation of subsidized housing.

Today, investment in downtown Boston has almost reached its physical limits. But pressure for investment continues, posing a new threat of displacement for outlying neighborhoods such as Roxbury. The pressure for investment is due both to the demands of capital and to the fiscal crisis of the local state, exacerbated by a statewide tax-cutting referendum passed in 1979. Roxbury's large amounts of publicly held land, its location only minutes from downtown, and its transportation connections to downtown

make it an ideal new turf for capital. And indeed, since 1985, BRA has been nursing a number of development plans for Roxbury, including the \$750 million Dudley Square Plan, bringing together twenty-one developers to redevelop the commercial and cultural center of Roxbury. Although the development plans are posed in terms of the “revitalization” of Roxbury, they are likely to lead to a massive displacement of current residents (Gaston and Kennedy 1987). Even the simple announcement of the plans has caused the displacement of current residents by speculators engaging in blockbusting, speculative purchases, and even arson.

Roxbury’s cycle from disinvestment to impending displacement represents, in a particularly extreme form, the problems faced by all of Boston’s low-income neighborhoods. To some extent, all these neighborhoods have suffered from neglect, and to some extent all of them are now at risk from the overflow of downtown development. In fact, this cycle typifies low-income urban neighborhoods across the country, although other neighborhoods occupy different points in the cycle. Thus the challenge facing Roxbury activists is a universal one: how to develop the community in a way that serves the people that make up the community, instead of displacing them.

### **Class, Race, and Community: Two Populist Responses**

Community development in low-income communities requires directing and harnessing private and public investment. It pits poor and working people against capital in a class conflict. But this class conflict is played out and experienced at the level of the community. Community members perceive a variety of forces, both impersonal (e.g., bank redlining) and personal (e.g., slumlords) that threaten their community. The embattled community includes landlords and business owners as well as unemployed people, welfare recipients, and people living from hustles, not just “pure” proletarians. Organizers must find ways to develop and link community-based identities and struggles in a fashion that challenges capital. This is the class–community dilemma, as defined by Posner in the Introduction to this volume.

But, as Jennings points out in Chapter 5, there is another dimension to the dilemma: race. Race adds complexity to the situation on two levels. For one thing, racial distinctions color the relationship of capital to a given community. Capital as employer seeks to maintain communities as stable

sites for the reproduction of the labor force, but seeks to limit community stability and cohesion to the extent that this cohesion serves as a basis for mobilization. Capital as user of physical space balances preserving communities within given neighborhoods as sources of income flows (rent, interest, profits) against displacing communities in order to convert the space to more profitable uses. In communities of color, both balances are tipped further toward instability. Much of the black and Latino labor force falls into a secondary labor market where flexibility, rather than stability, is at a premium, or even into the labor reserve. And because communities of color tend to be poor, current income flows to capital from these communities are small, making alternative land uses more attractive.

At a second level, race affects the possibilities for political mobilization. Where neighborhoods are relatively segregated, as in Boston, racial identities can foster unity within communities, but division among them. Where neighborhoods are mixed, racial splits can fracture coalitions within a community. Given these effects of racial divisions, and given the concentration of people of color in the inner cities of the United States, the class-community dilemma often becomes a class-race-community dilemma.

In Boston, community activists have responded to this dilemma with two divergent strategies. Both strategies are left populist; they seek to unite "the common people" to do battle with the forces of corporate greed, real estate speculation, and government indifference or corruption. In both cases, the class content of the strategy is implicit, not explicit. But the two populisms are quite distinct, particularly regarding the racial dimension of the dilemma.

The first strategy is what we call *redistributive populism*. Redistributive populism builds unity by emphasizing what people have in common, and downplaying or even overlooking differences such as race. Redistributive populists take an integrationist or assimilationist view of race, arguing that racial divisions will fade into insignificance as poor and working people pursue common goals. The strategy also assumes that people will only change their views incrementally, through participation in struggles in which they have already taken sides. Redistributive populists avoid raising issues that pose broad challenges to their constituency's world views, or proposing struggles that their constituents are not already committed to. Such populists value community organization as a means to the end of redistribution of resources and economic justice. In general, redistributive populists also hold the goal of transforming people's world views and relationships to one

another, but they see this as a long-term goal to be achieved as a by-product of the accumulation of short-term redistributive struggles.

Although redistributive populism as we have described it is an ideal type, we believe that most of the new populism, as defined by Evans and Boyte (1986) and others, can be classified within this approach. In Boston, the redistributive populist coalition ranges from the Fair Share grouping of progressive community organizations to a variety of elected and appointed officials who see themselves in the tradition of Boston's populist James Michael Curley, who was repeatedly elected mayor earlier in this century. White Irish populist politician Ray Flynn, along with his campaign organization before the 1983 mayoral election, and his staff once he became mayor—including many Fair Share activists—has led redistributive populism to electoral victory in Boston.

The second strategy is *transformative populism*. Transformative populism emphasizes diversity as well as unity. Transformative populists seek to unite people based on their common oppression, but also seek to use the resulting coalition to battle each group's distinct oppression. In this strategy, people must learn not only from their own struggles but from the struggles of others—and therefore organizers confront coalition members with issues designed to stretch the members' world views. Instead of expecting and working for the disappearance of distinctions such as race, transformative populists project a "salad bowl" model of the good community in which differences are preserved and valued. Transformative populism views community organization—and the resulting transformation of people's consciousness—as an end in itself as well as a means toward redistribution. Even in the short term, the goal is liberation, not simply economic justice.

Transformative populism has a strong base in Boston, particularly in Roxbury. The black populist Mel King and his supporters, who formed the Boston Rainbow Coalition after King lost the 1983 mayoral election, make up the electoral arm of transformative populism in Boston. A variety of community organizations, many of them grouped in Boston's Community Control Coalition, also espouse some form of transformative populism.

The difference between the two populisms was thrown into sharp relief during the 1983 mayoral race, when Flynn and King ran against each other.<sup>3</sup> The difference between the political histories of the two candidates speaks volumes. Both were Boston natives of working-class parents. But their routes to the mayoral candidacy were utterly different. Flynn became a state representative from white, largely Irish South Boston by combining an

appeal to the economic underdog, which has mobilized Boston's Irish since the days of Mayor James Michael Curley, with extreme social conservatism. Flynn sponsored antiabortion legislation and helped lead the movement against court-ordered school desegregation. Flynn went on to join the Boston City Council, and garnered the top vote totals in the 1981 council election by broadening his economic appeal—stressing affordable housing and cultivating his ties to organized labor—without moderating his positions on social issues.

King, in contrast, rose to prominence as a community activist and then state representative from the integrated, largely black South End. Although he initially focused on neighborhood issues such as street gangs, school desegregation, employment discrimination, and affordable housing, King soon became a leading advocate on a wide range of issues including women's liberation, gay liberation, peace, and opposition to U.S. intervention abroad. King's legislative initiatives ranged from the construction of a community development finance apparatus to the divestment of Massachusetts pension funds from companies doing business with South Africa.

To the surprise of virtually all political observers, these two candidates became front-runners and then finalists in the 1983 mayoral race. Two populist groupings coalesced around the candidates. Flynn sharpened his image as a populist, proclaiming that the issue of the election was the struggle between the neighborhoods and a greedy "downtown." He shifted his stands on social issues somewhat—for example, avowing support for the Equal Rights Amendment—while avoiding any shifts that might alienate his base in South Boston and other socially conservative white neighborhoods. The progressives who joined Flynn's campaign believed that it was essential to build a coalition that brought in the white working-class communities that make up the majority of Boston's population, even if this meant setting aside a whole range of "noneconomic" issues. This coalition was almost entirely white, although there were some exceptions—for example, a Fair Share chapter from the black neighborhood of Mattapan signed on.

King also staked out a populist campaign, using such slogans as "We may have come here on different ships, but we're all in the same boat now." He made a particular effort to reach out to white working-class neighborhoods on issues of housing, jobs, and development. But, he continued to stress noneconomic issues, from racism to gay rights. As a result, he attracted active supporters from a wide range of communities and movements: blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays and lesbians, feminists, peace activ-

ists, and housing activists, among others. The result was the Rainbow Coalition, a term coined by King a year before Jesse Jackson adopted it. On the left, King attracted those who embraced what we call transformative populism—those who saw addressing noneconomic issues as the key to an effective populist coalition.

The most striking difference between the two campaigns was on the issue of race. Boston has long been a racially polarized city, and that polarization has been especially public and violent since the 1974 court-ordered school desegregation. But Flynn asserted in a television debate that “the real problem is economic discrimination,” adding that “there are poor whites and blacks who do not have access to the political structure in this city.” He insisted that the problems of white South Boston and black and Latino Roxbury were identical. King, in contrast, targeted racism as a serious problem in its own right and challenged whites and blacks to confront the problem.

Flynn won the election. Although King won 95 percent of the black vote, 67 percent of the Latino vote, and 20 percent of the white vote, this amounted to only one-third of Boston’s mainly white electorate. Redistributive populism defeated transformative populism at the polls. But in the years since the election, black, Latino, Asian, and white activists have continued to nurture transformative populism. And in the recent struggles over community development in Roxbury, the contributions of transformative populism have become increasingly clear.

Of the dozens of groups working on community development in Roxbury, a half dozen—with overlapping personnel—work within a transformative populist framework. Because of the imminent threat of displacement, the transformative populists have focused on organizing for community control over the planning process and specifically over land use. But the groups have undertaken this organizing at many different levels. Certain groups, such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and the Washington Street Corridor Coalition, target community control over development in areas that cross conventional neighborhood boundaries. The Greater Roxbury Neighborhood Authority (GRNA) is attempting to establish democratic community control over development in all of Roxbury (Gaston and Kennedy 1987). A variety of groups, including the Greater Roxbury Incorporation Project (GRIP) and Project FATE (Focusing Attitudes Toward Empowerment) have campaigned for referenda proposing that Roxbury incorporate as the separate city of Mandela, independent of Boston (Kennedy and Tilly 1987). The Center for Community Action trains organizers of color and

sponsors community forums. Most of these groups are connected to citywide coalitions: the electoral Rainbow Coalition, and the Coalition for Community Control of Development, initiated by the GRNA and now including groups from all but two of Boston's major neighborhoods. The struggles led by these groups have highlighted two areas of difference between the two populist strategies: ideology and the role of the state.

### The Dilemma of Ideology

In addition to the class-community dilemma, Posner in her introduction to this volume identifies the dilemma of the tension between traditional ideology and derived ideology—between common sense and critical analysis. As noted in the previous section, the two populisms approach this tension in different ways.

Redistributive populism calls for uniting people around traditional ideology. In practice, this leads to an ideological dichotomy. The organizers of redistributive populist movements are generally leftists, motivated by derived ideology.<sup>4</sup> But they mobilize their constituency using much more limited discourses that reflect “where people are at.” Once more, the example of racism provides an apt illustration.

Charlotte Ryan, a community organizer in the racially mixed Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, was interviewed by Green (1984). She commented (in Green's paraphrase): “While many individual organizers in Fair Share were personally concerned with fighting racism, they did so in a private way. . . . By taking a strictly economic approach to problems that would yield ‘quick victories,’ ‘they ignored and sometimes denied the racial component of issues’ ” (p. 26). This dichotomy between privately held and publicly expressed views implies a certain elitism on the part of the organizers.

Mel King pointed out the problem in addressing a white Dorchester community meeting during the mayoral campaign: “Look, the other candidates won't come here and talk to you about the problem of race. And that's because they don't respect you enough to think you can deal with the issue” (Green 1984, 30).

By pulling people together using traditional ideology, redistributive populists build a broader coalition than might otherwise be possible in the short

run. But the coalition is riven by hidden conflicts. To hold the coalition together, redistributive populist leaders—even those who hold radical, transformative views—constantly defer transformative goals. The pressure to maintain and broaden the coalition leads inexorably to politics founded on the least common denominator.

Transformative populists, in contrast, explicitly attempt to bridge the gap between traditional and derived ideology. But how? The recent organizing in Roxbury provides some answers.

It is important to note that even redistributive populist organizing in black and Latino Roxbury could not take the same form as organizing in white areas of Dorchester. Whereas ignoring race may be expedient in parts of Dorchester, it is impossible in Roxbury. Thus the functional equivalent of an “economic fair share” approach in Roxbury would be a “racial fair share” approach: an assimilationist strategy aimed at obtaining more resources for blacks and Latinos.

But some transformative populist Roxbury activists have moved beyond this redistributive approach in several ways. First, they have linked Roxbury residents’ immediate experiences as members of a subordinate racial group to broader concepts and struggles: international issues, class analysis, and the importance of self-determination.

The main international connection drawn by Roxbury organizers is between the situation of blacks and Latinos in Roxbury and that of blacks in South Africa. Boston’s Black United Front (BUF, an organization that no longer exists) set a precedent for solidarity in 1968. After riots in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination, the liberal Polaroid Corporation announced its intention to present BUF with a check to assist in rebuilding Roxbury. But Polaroid had been targeted by black activists for selling South Africa photographic equipment used to produce the hated “passes” designed to control the movements of black South Africans. BUF held an all-night drop-in meeting to decide how to respond to Polaroid’s gift. The next day, as television cameras rolled, Chuck Turner (now director of the Center for Community Action) accepted the check on behalf of the Black United Front, and immediately signed the check over to the African National Congress.

Activists have continued to voice the connection with South Africa and other anticolonial struggles. At the GRNA’s first mass meeting to develop strategies for effective opposition to the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s Dudley Square Plan, black public housing activist Regina Placid and black School Committee member Jean McGuire compared Boston’s treatment of

Roxbury with South Africa's bantustan policy. The Center for Community Action's organizer training curriculum routinely includes material on South Africa.

The need for class analysis is posed by class divisions within Boston's black community. One example arose with BRA's opening salvo in the current development plans for Roxbury, on a piece of land known as Parcel 18. BRA, under the leadership of a Flynn-appointed director, Stephen Coyle, proposed high-rise office towers for the site, a plan that seems certain to lead to displacement in neighboring areas. In the face of community opposition, a Flynn-initiated "redistributive" solution gave a 30 percent share of the project, as well as the downtown development to which this parcel is linked, to a coalition of black, Latino, and Asian developers headed by a black-owned company. Flynn, in chorus with the local media, stressed the fact that this was the first time in Boston that minority developers would share in Boston's downtown development boom. Is this community control over development? No, answered GRNA and other groups. Commented GRNA's Bob Terrell, "It's nice that [black] individuals have mobility from Boston's investment boom, but the masses of black folks don't. . . . To move everybody forward, we need community control" (Kennedy and Tilly 1987, 17).

Roxbury's transformative populists project an agenda based on self-determination, not assimilation (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of the importance of this distinction). The most striking instance of this stand arose with the debate over the 1986 "Mandela" ballot proposal to incorporate Roxbury as an independent city. From the standpoint of the redistributive populists in the Flynn administration and the black leaders they mobilized against incorporation, this proposal was not only racially divisive but insane. Roxbury residents would be staking claim to the most disinvested, economically barren parts of Boston. But transformative populists, including GRIP, GRNA, Mel King, and others, saw the matter differently. They recognized that Roxbury was ripe for reinvestment and that community wealth—the transformative potential of a community of people—was largely untapped. Transformative populists concluded that incorporation would provide a lever for community control over the potential flood of new investment, as well as more effective utilization of existing resources, both human and material. Liberal critics charged that the Mandela advocates' slogan of "Yes we stay; no we go" was deceptive, given that a yes vote favored the separation of Roxbury from Boston. But, in fact, the slogan served to popularize the idea that self-determination was the only alternative to displacement—

and helped to win over the one-quarter of Roxbury voters who eventually supported the referendum (Kennedy and Tilly 1987).

A second element of the transformative populist Roxbury organizers' approach to the dilemma of ideology is the recognition that the relationship between derived and traditional ideology runs in both directions. Activists armed with a left ideology have something to teach their constituents, but they also have something to learn from them.

Recent Roxbury community development struggles yield examples of both aspects. On the one hand, GRNA activists seized on the theory of uneven development and of cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment (as described earlier in this paper), and translated it into the popular notion that "Roxbury already paid for the downtown boom; now we're owed." This insight—far from obvious to the residents of an impoverished neighborhood—has become commonplace for those involved in Roxbury's community development movement.

On the other hand, a group of mainly white left housing experts (including author Kennedy), who had historically opposed homeownership because it atomizes communities and promotes a petty bourgeois "investor" mentality, were forced to reevaluate their position by the insistent support of Roxbury residents for homeownership. The result of discussions among intellectuals and activists was a program for nonspeculative homeownership, which maintains security of tenure and the right to alter one's living space physically but places controls on resale. In turn, Roxbury groups have begun to implement parts of the program as they develop housing (Stone 1986).

This two-way ideological street begins to break down the elitism implicit in the redistributive populist approach. Respecting ordinary people enough to believe that they can change their world view when exposed to new ideas means respecting them enough to believe that they see important parts of reality that the left does not.

A final contribution of Roxbury's organizers to solving the dilemma of ideology is their adoption of a broad concept of empowerment, emphasizing process as well as product. For redistributive populists, the criterion for success in the foreseeable future is in fact redistribution: How effective are community groups at redirecting resources toward their communities? In order to maintain momentum and keep people involved, these populists pursue what organizer Ryan calls "quick victories," believing that education will spontaneously occur as a by-product. Their long-term vision rests on the belief that enough redistributive victories will lead to a transformation of consciousness. Roxbury's transformative populist organizers instead define

empowerment in terms of a change in mass consciousness—"making a break from a dependency model to work on what would ultimately be an interdependency model," as Mel King has put it. Thus these organizers seek to cultivate a patient, long-term view of struggle. In this view, building a unit of low-income housing or improving trash pickup are victories, but adding new groups to a coalition or popularizing a radical analysis of development may be even more important victories. This difference in view spills over to conflicting populist views of the role of the state, and it is to this that we turn next.

### **The Role of the State**

The disjuncture between community-based mobilization and societywide transformation arises most sharply when we consider the role of the national state, as Posner points out in her introduction to this volume. But a smaller version of this dilemma is played out at the local level. Community development struggles in Roxbury have most directly involved Boston's municipal government.

It would be overstating the case to claim that redistributive populists hold local power in Boston. The power of the mayor is hemmed in by that of other elected officials, such as members of the City Council and The School Committee; appointed officials such as BRA's board of directors; and a vast bureaucracy, largely staffed by holdovers from former mayor Kevin White's liberal but hardly populist regime. Even so, the mayor occupies an extremely powerful position in Boston. Furthermore, Mayor Flynn has appointed avowed populists—in many cases, former organizers from Fair Share or other organizations—to key leadership positions in the bureaucracy. And substantial minorities in both the City Council and the School Committee are populists of various stripes.

Thus, when we contrast the redistributive and transformative populist approaches to the local government, we are making an asymmetrical comparison between redistributive populists largely within and working through the local government and transformative populists chiefly located outside the local government. Within the limits of this comparison, recent struggles over the role of local government in Roxbury have reproduced the split between redistribution and transformation that has come up repeatedly in this paper.

The contrast is sharp. Flynn's redistributive populists are sincerely committed to redistributing wealth. But they balk at redistributing power—the power to plan and to control land use. They seek to use the power of government to provide a set of material benefits—chiefly housing and jobs—for low-income people, but not to change the power relations between the government and low-income people. Redistributive populists have proven unwilling to encourage a movement that challenges the local government as well as supports its progressive initiatives. Their vision of community development is a narrowly economic one, measuring development by the number of housing units, jobs, or dollars. In short, the redistributive populists in power emphasize representation, not participation. There are two reasons for this emphasis. First, it appears to be the most “efficient” way to achieve redistributive goals. Thus, Flynn administration officials argue that militant movements making broad demands jeopardize the limited redistributive compromises that are possible. These officials espouse the “politics of the possible.” Second, minimizing mobilization and participation lessens the risk that more conservative elements of the populist coalition will actively oppose progressive initiatives. When city officials plan reforms that go beyond the basis of the coalition—a recent example is integrating public housing in predominantly white areas of Boston—it is easier to carry them out from above than to lead an ideological struggle that may split the coalition.

In contrast, Roxbury's transformative populists hold that redistribution of power is essential. Activists have identified the politics of the possible as a trap. Organizer Chuck Turner recently commented, “We have to look at how we define material reality.” He noted that the mainstream view of Boston's economic reality is founded on a scarcity of resources, but that if Roxbury's residents accept this view and simply fight for their share of these scarce resources, they have already lost half the battle.

Transformative populists work with a broad definition of community development, akin to their broad definition of empowerment. They emphasize that community development consists not simply of developing the neighborhood where people live but, first and foremost, of developing the people who make up a community. In the words of Tanzania's Julius Nyerere,

A country, or a village, or a community cannot be developed. It can only develop itself. For real development means the development, the growth, of people. Roads, buildings, the increases of crop output, and other things of this nature, are not development; they are only tools of development. . . . A

man is developing himself when he grows, or earns, enough to provide decent conditions for himself and his family; he is not being developed if somebody gives him these things. A man is developing himself when he improves his education—whatever he learns about; he is not being developed if he simply carries out orders from someone better educated than himself without understanding why those orders have been given. A man develops himself by joining in free discussion of a new venture, and participating in the subsequent discussion; he is not being developed if he is herded like an animal into the new venture. (Nyerere 1974)

Three examples demonstrate how these two views of the relation between state and movement have clashed. First, consider the struggle over federally subsidized housing. In 1985, a large amount of housing subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in Boston, most of it located in Roxbury and other black areas, was foreclosed. In the disposition of this housing, both the tenants and Mayor Flynn's staff were concerned that the housing be repaired and remain subsidized. HUD's representatives at the federal level seemed intent on selling off the housing to interests that would thwart these goals. Tenants in a number of these developments started a massive organizing drive; the mayor's office began secret negotiations with HUD. Flynn's populists-in-office reacted with dismay to the organizing. In fact, at one point a city official, a former tenant activist himself, essentially asked author Kennedy and her colleague Muri-cio Gaston to convince the tenants to stop organizing and making noise because it was threatening the negotiations. The tenant organizing continued, and eventually a deal was struck between the city and the federal government, but not without considerable ill feeling between community activists and city officials.

A second conflict is over the scope of community participation in development planning. Compare the Flynn administration's implementation of a "community participation" process in the Parcel 18 development project with GRNA's demands for community participation. Parcel 18 is the largest development parcel in the Southwest Corridor, the land cleared for the never-built Southwest Expressway. The parcel enjoys a strategic location, adjacent to a new subway station on a recently relocated line, and near Dudley Square. Over a ten-year period, the Parcel 18 Task Force, a coalition of tenants, community development corporations, black developers, agencies, and abutting institutions, researched, planned, and explored development alternatives for the site. After studying the various proposals for

development articulated by the Task Force, BRA representatives literally said, "Thank you for your input," and proceeded to unveil a fully developed plan centered on two thirty-story office towers—a plan radically different from anything the task force had in mind. A black populist associated with the BRA explained the BRA's position: The "process" is irrelevant as long as the "development content" benefits the community (Gaston and Kennedy 1987).

GRNA made it clear that this sort of participation was not satisfactory. At a point when the city government sensed the level of popular support harnessed by GRNA, the BRA floated a proposal to create a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) for the Dudley area, with members appointed by the mayor and with only advisory power over development. GRNA countered by organizing constituency caucuses of small merchants, clergy, tenants, neighborhood associations, community development corporations, and other groups, identifying representatives from each sector, and presenting them for ratification at a Roxbury "town meeting" of more than five hundred people, as a popularly elected "interim PAC" that would serve until broader elections could be held.

City officials were forced to deal with the interim PAC. Negotiations between the interim PAC and the mayor's office resulted in a twelve-point agreement that included an expanded interim PAC (including eight mayoral appointees in addition to the thirteen community-elected representatives), community elections for a PAC within a year, and substantial review and veto powers for the PAC. Mayor Flynn, put on the spot in front of another community meeting of five hundred people, was forced to endorse the agreement, but the BRA's board of directors (holdovers from the former mayor's administration) refused to accept the PAC's expanded powers. The matter remains unresolved, but interestingly, a number of the mayor's appointees to the PAC have joined a GRNA lawsuit to compel the BRA to meet the agreement.

A third point: Roxbury activists have stated that sometimes the best development plan is no plan at all—or at least no specific, immediate product. At a 1986 Boston housing conference bringing together progressive housing professionals from City Hall, the universities, and community agencies, a top BRA official formulated what amounted to a "trickle down" approach to housing. He argued that since Boston has a severe housing crisis and the federal government is providing no funds to build affordable housing, the city government's goal should be simply to build whatever housing it was possible to finance on city-owned vacant land

in Roxbury. If only high-priced housing could be built, he reasoned, at least it would increase the supply of housing and bring down the price. Ken Wade, a GRNA leader, responded, "No way! We should build nothing at all on that land until we can build what the community needs. We should just put all that land in a community land trust, and when we can build affordable housing, that's when we'll do it." This development strategy directly challenges the product-oriented "politics of the possible."

Redistributive populist attempts to redistribute resources without changing who has control over the resources are likely to backfire. In the case of the HUD-owned housing, it seems likely that in the absence of tenant mobilization, the city would have been less able to negotiate a favorable deal.<sup>5</sup> As for the development of Roxbury, the Flynn administration's haste to funnel development funds into the neighborhood has already led to displacement as land values around Dudley Square and the Southwest Corridor rise. Further development along the same lines will create new housing and jobs in the neighborhood of Roxbury, but a large part of the community of people currently living in Roxbury will be displaced and therefore will not share in these resources.

## Conclusion

This case study contrasts redistributive populism to transformative populism in the arena of community development in a community of color. In our view, transformative populism has proven superior to redistributive populism as an approach to community development in this setting, and this superiority is likely to extend more broadly to other arenas of social change.

This judgment depends on one's view of community development. Certainly if one defines community development primarily in terms of the development of people, the transformative approach is more appropriate. But we would argue that even redistributive populism's own stated goals—building a community-based movement for social change that can effectively carry out redistribution of resources—are better met by a transformative strategy. The evidence for this claim comes from the two strategies' different approaches to the dilemma of ideology and to the role of the state.

Redistributive populism is in some sense an “easier” strategy than transformative populism. Demands framed solely in terms of redistribution of resources are easier to formulate; broad support for such demands is easier to amass; “quick victories” are temptingly easier to claim.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the entire approach can be more easily meshed with the timetable of electoral or legislative strategies. Indeed, left community organizers tend to fall back reflexively on the redistributive strategy because it is the path of least resistance—despite their long-term transformative goals.

But the ease of pursuing redistributive populism comes at a cost. Support for a narrowly redistributive movement may be broad, but it is shallow. Redistributive populism’s commitment to the use of least-common-denominator traditional ideology leaves populist movements disarmed before the very real divisions of race, class, gender, and so on. Transformative populism’s insistence on understanding and valuing diversity, and on dealing with all kinds of inequality and injustice, not just the one type that affects the largest number of people in a community, may drive some potential supporters away, but it builds a popular consciousness that makes it more difficult to shatter or coopt a coalition. This is important even when organizing at the level of a single community—particularly a community of color, where the reality of racial divisions is unavoidable. The emphasis on dealing with diversity becomes even more crucial when building multicommunity coalitions that are diverse along racial and other lines. At a time when in the United States as a whole white poverty rates are declining but black and Latino poverty rates are increasing (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities 1988), calling for “the greatest good for the greatest number” simply is not sufficient.

The transformative strategy requires placing one’s trust in the common people to wrestle with difficult issues and come to positions that may be at odds with their traditional world views. This trust also implies a willingness of organizers and intellectuals to learn from the people being organized, leading to creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems, and alternatives to apparently unavoidable tradeoffs. In a situation where immediate material victories are severely constrained by economic and political forces, transformative populism’s emphasis on nurturing a long-term view and measuring success by movement building and consciousness raising can enable a community to sustain ambitious goals.

Transformative populists see the main progressive role of the state as empowering and building people’s movements, not simply presiding over a

fair redistribution of scarce resources. We do not claim that it is inevitable that redistributive populists in office will seek to suppress popular mobilizations, sacrifice long-run possibilities to achieve short-term material results, and avoid effective community participation—as redistributive populists in Boston’s Flynn administration have done. Nevertheless, the redistributive populist emphasis on product over process—redistribution rather than transformation—makes them likely to fall into these patterns.

In general, without a movement toward community empowerment, a reform government lacks the popular mobilization necessary to carry out substantial, lasting redistribution. The government remains hemmed in by “not enough money,” unable to make more aggressive demands on capital or to stimulate self-help initiatives. The “gifts” from the city government to disadvantaged communities turn out to be small, poorly planned and delivered, and most likely temporary. In some cases, “redistributive” assistance from a progressive-minded government can be downright destructive—as the development assistance directed toward Roxbury by the Flynn administration has been.

Finally, a transformative populist approach is better equipped to confront the deep questions of structural change that successful social movements must sooner or later answer. We believe that in order to achieve lasting change, a movement for the development of poor communities must question not only existing strategies for economic growth but the value of growth as currently defined. It must challenge not only the policies of current governments but the entire political system that rests on massive nonparticipation and an extremely restricted set of electoral choices. In doing so, it must link up with other movements concerned with these issues. While Roxbury’s transformative populists have only begun to scratch the surface of these problems, they and others like them seem more likely to come up with solutions than is a redistributive populist movement.

We have coined the terms “transformative” and “redistributive” for this paper. Without using these names, most Boston activists sense the importance of the differences in approach we have outlined. Regardless of what terms are used, we believe it is important for activists in Boston and elsewhere to become conscious of the distinction and to explicitly develop what we have called transformative populism. It is easy to fall into redistributive populism, and the clear understanding necessary to avoid this goes well beyond what this paper has to offer. The continued

efforts of activists and intellectuals working together can make this understanding possible.

## Notes

1. The boundaries of Roxbury are variously defined from one governmental agency to another and by different community organizations. We are generally referring to the 1980 Boston Neighborhood Statistical Areas 9 (North Dorchester/Dudley), 30 (Franklin Field), 38 (Egleston Square), 52 (Highland Park), 53 (Lower Roxbury), 54 (Sav-Mor), and 55 (Washington Park). Per capita income in Roxbury in 1979 varied from a low in Lower Roxbury of 52% of the citywide per capita income to a high of 73% in Sav-Mor.

2. Several readers of earlier drafts of this paper argued that we are “too easy on the Flynn administration.” We would like to emphasize that this paper in no way constitutes an evaluation of the accomplishments (or lack thereof) of the Flynn administration or of opposition groups. In order to pose the contradictions in the case most clearly we have assumed a best-case scenario for the Flynn administration and the broader movement it represents. The primary question posed is this: If what we are terming redistributive populists acted in good faith on the stated intentions of their most progressive spokespeople, how would their strategy compare with the alternative transformative populist strategy?

3. Much of this discussion draws on Green (1984).

4. According to a Flynn staffer, even Ray Flynn has confidentially identified himself as a socialist.

5. In a related example outside Roxbury, Flynn government officials proposed development of housing on vacant city-owned land in the South End. The city officials initially stipulated that only 35% of the housing be developed for low- and moderate-income residents, fearing that proposing a higher level of affordability would arouse political opposition from middle-class South End residents and developers. Community activists responded by forming the Ad Hoc Housing Committee. Over opposition by city officials, they won a more participatory process. In the course of this process, the Ad Hoc Housing Committee built majority support—including most of the representations of the South End’s middle class—for a formula of one-third low-income, one-third moderate income, and one-third market rate. The city belatedly endorsed the formula. Without the mobilization from below, city officials never would have gone beyond the original 35% target, despite their avowed support for affordable housing.

6. Of course, dogmatic left sloganeering is also easy; transformative populism must avoid this trap as well.

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## For Further Reading

Following are publications we found helpful in analyzing community development struggles in Boston's Roxbury. This list is in no way exhaustive, as we did not do a literature search in the usual sense.

Any analysis of the effectiveness of community development strategies needs to be framed in the context of postindustrial restructuring of urban environments and the labor force in the United States and, to some extent, internationally. Books we recommend on this topic follow.

- Fainstein, Susan S., Norman I. Fainstein, Richard C. Hill, Dennis Judd, and Michael P. Smith, eds. 1986. *Restructuring the City*. Rev. ed. New York: Longman.
- Hartman, Chester. 1984. *The Transformation of San Francisco*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld.
- Mollenkopf, John. 1983. *The Contested City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Palen, John, and Bruce London, eds. 1984. *Gentrification, Displacement and Neighborhood Revitalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Smith, Michael P., ed. 1984. *Cities in Transformation: Class, Capital and the State*. Urban Affairs Annual Reviews No. 26. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Smith, Neil. 1984. *Uneven Development*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Smith, Neil, and Peter Williams, eds. 1986. *Gentrification of the City*. Boston: Allen and Unwin.

Tabb, William, and Larry Sawers, eds. 1978, 1984. *Marxism and the Metropolis*. 1st and 2nd ed. New York, Oxford University Press. The two editions have a number of different selections, and both editions are interesting.

Works helpful in elaborating the race–class component of community development struggles include the following:

Boston, Thomas D. 1988. *Race, Class and Conservatism*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.  
Harrison, Bennett. 1974. “Ghetto Economic Development: A Survey.” *Journal of Economic Literature*. March.

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Tabb, William. 1970. *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto*. New York: Norton.

Sources useful in thinking about organizing and about progressive municipal policy include the following:

Castells, Manuel. 1983. *The City and the Grassroots*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clavel, Pierre. 1986. *The Progressive City: Planning and Participation, 1969–1984*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Cowley, John, Adah Kaye, Marjorie Mayo, and Mike Thompson, eds. 1977. *Community or Class Struggle?* London: Stage One.

*Radical America*. 1983–1984. Special Issue on “The Mel King Campaign and Coalition Politics in the Eighties.” Vols. 17 and 18, nos. 6 and 1.

The following bibliography may be useful on the general subject of community development:

Tilly, Chris, with Yohel Camayd-Freixas, P. Clay, Bellen Daniels, and Frank Jones. 1985. *Fifteen Years of Community Development: An Annotated Bibliography, 1968–1983*. Bibliography No. 156. Chicago: Council of Planning Librarians.