

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Public Power for Resilient Cities

An Interview with Michael Menser by Noëlle McAfee

Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system.

Noëlle McAfee: In this issue of the *Kettering Review* we are taking up the question of how we might think of governing institutions not just working by, of, and for the people but also with the people. What comes to your mind when you hear this?

Michael Menser: Public power! So many people, places, and organizations are calling for the rapid adoption of renewable energy by 2030 to head off climate collapse, but the utilities and the public regulators are moving far too slowly. This has led some to call for the public takeover of private utilities and the further democratization of the public ones. I am part of a campaign in New York State and especially active where I live on Long Island. It's a deeply personal issue for me. My block lost power for two weeks after Superstorm Sandy, and after a very minor tropical storm a year ago, most of Long Island lost power for multiple days. People lost food, work, and time, and circumstances were dangerous. Indeed, a neighbor's lawn caught on fire from a downed power line that was not properly maintained. It turned out that the private utility lied about being prepared for the storm. So, not only do we need public power to hasten the adoption of renewables to meet those 2030 goals, also we need public power to increase the accountability and resilience of our system to make sure that it's prepared for the challenges of this new climate. As we've seen from Texas to California to the Gulf Coast, we are dangerously unprepared, and our governance and ownership model is a big part of the problem.

NM: Where in particular have you put your efforts as both a scholar and a practitioner? Why in these places?

MM: As I stated above, this is a live issue for me and my community, and it also happens to be a research project that I am doing on the democratization of public services more broadly, especially water and energy but also broadband. I'm the founding board president of the non-

Participatory democracy or democratization here does not mean "everyone participates."

profit Participatory Budgeting Project, and I published a book on participatory democracy (PD) in government and the economy in 2018. So, this is an area I've been active in for years as a researcher and a teacher. But with the climate crises and democracy crises intensifying, I've become much more attracted to the public services issues. I'm doing this project with the former deputy mayor of Paris, Anne Le Strat. When Parisians became upset with their private water utility's cost and performance, she led the operation to deprivatize it and municipalize it. But they realized that simply making it publicly owned again was not adequate. It needed to be governed in a way that included not just politicians and elected officials but people from the various communities of Paris who cared deeply about the water system, as well as experts in a variety of fields. These ranged from those concerned about cost to environmentalists concerned about conservation, and to users and households worried about quality and public

health. But also it included those concerned about ecology and biodiversity, as well as farmers outside of the city who have an impact on the quality and health of the watershed. Le Strat knew that the utility itself could not do this alone. So, she also led the creation of a partner organization called the Paris Water Observatory. This new type of organization goes beyond the typical watchdog and, instead, convenes diverse stakeholders to enable them to get the information to understand the situation, as well as to make proposals about how to manage the watershed and the water system in a way that is fair, just, sustainable, and resilient.

There are important lessons from what happened in Paris. For one, participatory democracy or democratization here does not mean "everyone participates." Lots of people are not interested. And others don't have the time. But some people are very interested. The key is to enable those people who are very interested meaningful routes of participation. The flip side is that the utility also needs to be able to reach out to people to make sure their needs are being met, from the vulnerable to low-income, to resource-intensive businesses, and so on. So, it is important—for the purposes of justice and

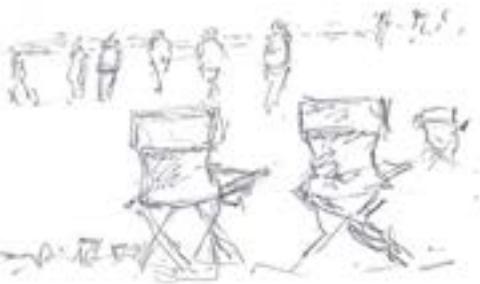


efficacy—to make sure that there is inclusive diversity of who participates, in particular with regard to how the agenda is shaped for the entity in question and for how the profits or the surplus are reinvested. Public power means energy justice as well.

Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system. There are many difficult yet intriguing conceptual questions here, and we need more work by philosophers in this space. Consumers of energy are not just passive recipients anymore. If they have solar panels on the roof, they can also be generators of energy. Rate payers are then coproducers. So, how should they be understood with regard to governance? And if they have batteries as well, they can play a role in enhancing the resilience of the grid in times of energy shortages. But this requires the sharing of information and sharing control of one's household appliances to minimize use in times of peak energy use. Who owns that information? Who owns my air conditioner? Should we have new forms of collective ownership for these technologies? This is a different understanding of governance “with” the people. Indeed, it's

reminiscent of how traditional commons are governed, where users are also actively coproducing the resource in question and thus have a seat at the governance table.

Even if you don't have solar on your roof, what about households that conserve energy or water? They are freeing up resources for other people and for other uses, but for which ones? Should we free up water for Pepsi to make more soda as they do in California, even during droughts? And when there are rolling blackouts, as in Texas and California but also in New York City, why is it that by BIPOC neighborhoods (that is, neighborhoods of Black, Indigenous, and people of color) often lose power first and for the longest? Who is making these decisions? And what values shape the decision-making procedure? In New York City, the private utility, Consolidated Edison, makes a nice profit, so why don't they further enhance the resilience of the grid? Because they allocate those profits to upper management and as dividends to shareholders! Same thing happened in California with Pacific Gas & Electric. Public power and energy democracy means the public gets to decide what to do with the surplus, with the profits, with the other financial instruments that utilities have at their disposal. For example, where are our bonds for green infrastructure to cool neighborhoods and manage storm water? Where are our bonds to create community-owned solar installations on public buildings? There are examples of all of these but not nearly enough! This is where we need both energy democracy and energy justice, as Shalanda Baker argues in her book *Revolutionary Power*, and the democratization of public services is the way this actually can be realized.



NM: You've been a leader in an international "philosophy of the city" movement. In a nutshell, what is *your* philosophy of the city?

MM: My philosophy of the city is shaped by the concepts of socio-ecological resilience, climate justice, degrowth, and adaptive management, but also by a love of parks and playgrounds, streets and stoops, bars and restaurants, and unique public spaces that so many love and missed to varying degrees during COVID. Given COVID and climate change, we need to configure all of the aforementioned in a manner to redefine the public in order to promote and proliferate a new model of economic development that is sustainable, resilient, and racially just. We need to do this not through more traditional "growth"—which has failed—but through a reduction of material use and commodity production. For me, this "degrowth" involves a kind of undoing the urban. It used to be that advocates of the city spoke against urbanization. We have lost that thread, and the ecological crisis in particular requires us to think about a different kind of dwelling that is more bioregional and adaptive.

Many urban scholars are fond of the "right to the city" frame that originated with Henri Lefebvre and focuses on guaranteeing access to the goods and services of the city for all city residents. But there is too much political and economic inequality. We need more than just "access" and instead must redistribute power. This is the aim of the democratization of publicly owned goods and services of the city. By democratization, I don't mean just people having a voice, but shared ownership, shared management, shared power, shared authority not in the abstract, but in the reality of public institutions from universities and hospitals to the parks and

the streets. Making all these ours is what public power is all about, and cities can be venues for the collaborations, both antagonistic and protagonistic.

NM: At this moment, the world is plagued by both climate crisis and the COVID pandemic. These are such huge problems. How can

Public power and energy democracy means the public gets to decide what to do with the surplus.

citizens and participatory networks possibly help address these?

MM: The first thing I would say here is that both need to be linked to the framework of racial justice and economic democracy. We cannot properly or fairly address either without the frameworks of both. Not surprisingly, when one looks deeply at the platform of the Movement for Black Lives, one sees economic democracy at the center of racial justice. It's not just a matter of "fixing" the police problem, but redefining public safety and investing in communities. But even "investing" is not enough to fix the problem. Who controls the investments? Who reaps the profits from these investments? We saw this issue above with private utilities.

As for participatory networks and the role they might play in this, I offer two examples. The first in the context of climate and references to a project I helped create and work on called "cycles of resilience." Too often, we have public engagement after the disaster, after the

hurricane hits or the fire wreaks havoc. We need engagement before the event, and we need it to be sustained engagement. In my work as associate director of Public Engagement for the Science and Resilience Institute at Jamaica Bay, we read much research and listen to a lot of

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folks about what sustained engagement looks like and can do. Sustained engagement is not a public hearing or town hall, nor is it a one-off charette. All of these (may) have a role to play, but they are not adequate for the moment. What we need are regularized channels of two-way communication between people and government that are efficacious and empowering for both. What we did in New York City is based on the example of participatory budgeting (PB).

Originating in Brazil in the 1990s, PB is practiced in thousands of cities across the world, including a couple dozen in the US. Participatory budgeting is a process by which the public gets to decide how to spend some part of a budget that impacts them. In the US, PB typically has four phases: in the first, a diverse set of local leaders come together with the support of elected officials to design the process so that it is appropriate for the people, place, and pot of money.

In the second phase, those district leaders invite diverse folks from the political jurisdiction to talk about the goals of PB and how it works. They also invite those participating to dialogue with each other and brainstorm ideas to address their needs regarding the pot of money available. In the third phase, select members of the public are invited to step up and are trained to go through the proposals and create a ballot of those that are best to address the needs of the community, are vetted by the relevant governmental bodies, and fit the requirements of the pot of money. In the fourth phase, the public comes out to vote on their top projects. In most PB processes, the public has more than one vote, so it's not a winner-take-all situation. Instead, multiple projects receive funding and then are implemented by the city or political jurisdiction.

NM: It's been almost a decade since Superstorm Sandy, hasn't it? What a wake-up call about climate change! And now the storms and the fires keep coming. In what sense can regular citizens really do anything about these big problems?



MM: Demand participatory budgeting! Or some other sustained engagement process that promotes iteration and adaptive learning. The great thing about PB is not only does it grant the public actual power and money to spend, but it goes on year after year. Because it repeats, it can be iterative and the process is adjusted to correct for weaknesses or problems of the previous year. So, PB is what we might call an adaptive learning process, which hopefully leads to adaptive management. And that's big for trying to deal with climate change because we're going to experiment and make mistakes because of its wickedness and its complexity and intensity, so having an adaptive process is really critical. So, we've done a version of this in New York City with neighborhoods around Jamaica Bay. Here, the residents discuss their needs, but this time with respect to climate change and social and ecological resilience. They meet with scientists and other experts about ideas to address those needs and then return to their communities and, working with their elected officials or other government agency personnel, create projects to get movement on their priorities. Again, the process repeats and may take on a different focus the next year or go more in-depth or try to bring in a population that hadn't been participating in the previous year.

Another goal is to create more sustained relationships for government agency personnel and community members—this is again a “governing with” example—so that there is two-way communication not just for the community, but also for the government workers who many times struggle with community engagement.

Another example of an incredibly robust participatory network in Brooklyn is the Coalition



to Transform Interfaith Hospital, which is also connected to the Vital Brooklyn Project and anchored now by Brooklyn Communities Collaborative. (See <https://www.interfaithcasestudy.org/>.) This is formally a health-care initiative initially funded with federal money to address the social determinants of health in central Brooklyn, which is primarily BIPOC and low-income, and disproportionately suffers from poor health and a lack of safe and affordable housing. What's amazing about this effort is that not only does it interconnect stakeholders from government, hospitals, community-based organizations, and schools and universities—including my own Brooklyn College—it also trains and empowers diverse members of the public to participate.

Let me give you three examples. The first is that, in order to do the research to really dig deeply into the problems, their team utilized participatory action research, or PAR. PAR works so that the educators involved teach high school students about the issues and then train them to go out and do the surveys of the com-

munity. Studies have shown that community members are more responsive to young people, and this also helps to create capacity building and employment opportunities for young people in the program, some of whom have gone on to jobs in the field. A second robust example

Climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency.

of participatory democracy in this initiative is business development. It doesn't just support business creation, it supports equitable business models, such as worker and consumer cooperatives and community land trusts. And a few have already been created (e.g., Brooklyn Packers and Brooklyn Sprouts) and others expanded (e.g., Brooklyn Queens Community Land Trust), and all are operating in the critical area of the food system. There are hundreds of people in these communities, and many lack healthy, affordable food options, so creating businesses in this space has been incredibly powerful for public health, community pride, and economic democracy. The third example is the university partnership. I am very proud that my own university and the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies have developed curriculum to support this

work both in the food system and in learning about economic democracy. We've even created a new program in Community Ownership and Worker Ownership and this fall I will co-teach Sustainable Urban Gardening. These kinds of collaborations and public partnerships among government agencies, hospitals, and universities and schools are critical for building a new model of political and economic development and a resilient, just city for the 21st century.

To sum up, climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency. We've got to get beyond simply wanting to "have a voice" and instead demand the power to explore and support efforts to create justice-enhancing forms of shared authority, ownership, and management, especially when it comes to public goods and services (and I would include the internet and social media here as well, though we didn't talk about this today). We've seen incredibly bold movements demand versions of this from Black Lives Matter to those pursuing climate justice and energy democracy. As I see it, in our role as educators and researchers, we need to not just do our own personal teaching and research in these areas, but demand that our institutions, our schools and universities partner in this remaking of the public.

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