

AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL M. CERNEA\*  
INTERVIEWER: DR. JUDITH FREIDENBERG

ABSTRACT

The editors and editorial board of “Human Organization”<sup>1</sup> are pleased to introduce readers to the following oral history interview with Michael M. Cernea, a development social scientist who has militated throughout his academic career and applied work for “putting people first”, in the forefront of development projects and policies. Working for a long time for the promotion of anthropological and sociological knowledge, either in the activities of the World Bank or in the policies and programs of governments of both developed and developing countries, Dr. Cernea cleared pathways for applied social science that are sure to benefit people in development settings for many years to come.

Undoubtedly many readers already know Dr. Cernea’s work well, especially those of us who teach the anthropology of development or work in applied settings and organizations, but this interview embeds his broad body of work into a personal, human, and at times tragic context that opens with brushes with death, Nazi brutality, and exile. It also provides valuable insights for carrying out the work of development anthropologists within large-scale organizations and governments.

This interview with Dr. Cernea was conducted by Dr. Judith Freidenberg, of the University of Maryland, on June 30, 2003, for the Society for Applied Anthropology Oral History Project, headquartered at the University of Kentucky Libraries. This Project aims to create, through the vehicle of oral histories, a record of the life, activities and experiences of a number of selected scholars-anthropologists who devoted a great part of their scientific work to research, to applied work in different settings, to inducing development, including to hands-on work on crafting public social policies and actual development programs.

The present transcript of the interview was reviewed by both participants for editorial purposes. Michael M. Cernea expanded some of his oral responses, for historical accuracy or to add relevant elements and facts not provided in the initial oral interaction. Some of the comments made, or questions asked, by Judith Freidenberg were also edited for fluency purposes, to help frame the various parts of the dialogue better. The overall content and structure of the interview were preserved. The subtitles were added during Human Organization’s preparation and editing of the text for print.

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<sup>1</sup> Vezi, în acest sens, “Human Organization” (revistă editată de Societatea de Antropologie Aplicată din S.U.A.), 2007, vol. 66, No. 4, Winter, p. 339–353.

Interviul de *ISTORIE ORALĂ* pe care-l publicăm în acest număr al *Revistei Române de Sociologie* prezintă un interes deosebit pentru sociologii din țara noastră, din două puncte de vedere. Pe de o parte, oferă o perspectivă de ansamblu asupra contribuțiilor științifice și vieții omului de știință american de origine română, sociologul și antropologul Michael M. Cernea – Membru Corespondent al Academiei Române (din 1991) și, de asemenea, membru în Colegiul de Redacție al revistei noastre<sup>2</sup>. Pe de altă parte, este primul articol-interviu publicat din documentele Programului de Istorie Orală al Societății Americane de Antropologie Aplicată (*Society for Applied Anthropology* – *SfAA*) în revista principală a acestei asociații – *Human Organization*. Exprimăm mulțumiri Prof. John van Willigen, de la Kentucky University, Lexington, K.Y., Statele Unite, coordonator al Programului, pentru acordul de a publica acestui interviu, precum și colegului Prof. David Craig Griffith, redactor-șef al revistei SfAA - *Human Organization*, în al cărui ultim număr a fost publicat acest interviu, concomitent (H.O., 4, 2007) cu publicarea în revista noastră. Interviul a fost condus și înregistrat de Prof. Judith Freidenburg de la Universitatea Maryland, College Park, MD, S.U.A., în 2003, membră în Comitetul SfAA de Coordonare a Programului de Istorie Orală.

Câteva cuvinte pentru clarificarea obiectivelor și conținutului acestui program de istorie a științei. Societatea de Antropologie Aplicată este cea mai importantă asociație americană și internațională dedicată aplicării științelor sociale neeconomice. Societatea include antropologi sociali, sociologi, geografi sociali, politologi, demografi ș.a. din S.U.A., precum și din Canada, Anglia, Mexic, Argentina, Germania, India, și numeroase alte țări. Pentru a înregistra și prezerva istoria contribuțiilor originale, seminale, din perioada contemporană a antropologiei sociale, conducerea Societății a luat decizia de a iniția un Program de Istorie Orală<sup>3</sup>. Misiunea acestui Program este de a face o „istorie vie”, luminând nu doar conținutul conceptual, ci și contextul istoric, societal și personal-biografic-experențial al acestor contribuții științifice.

Modalitatea de „istorie orală” a fost aleasă pentru a pătrunde nemijlocit în experiența și „atelierul” omului de știință și a recolta date relevante, dar prea puțin cunoscute public, explicații, reflecții personale etc., direct de la cei a căror contribuție este considerată drept parte din teoria și istoria disciplinei. Pentru știința socială aplicată, „atelier” este nu doar obișnuita bibliotecă sau calculatorul, ci și experimentul social direct, cum ar fi crearea sau executarea unui program de dezvoltare socială pe teren, sau cadrul de interacțiune al unei agenții de dezvoltare internațională ori o echipă științifică multidisciplinară (*task force*) mandatată cu conceperea și formularea unei legislații ori unei politici sociale guvernamentale.

Interviurile sunt organizate cu proeminenți oameni de știință, membri ai SfAA, cu privire la contribuțiile aduse de ei teoriei și practicii disciplinei, la rolul lor în formularea și adoptarea instituțională a unor politici publice derivate din teorii și analize sociale, precum și în elaborarea unor

<sup>2</sup> Pe linia numeroaselor onoruri de care Michael M. Cernea a avut și are parte, în lumea de dincolo de ocean, trebuie adăugată și alegerea sa, în octombrie 2007, ca *Doctor Honoris Causa* al Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași.

<sup>3</sup> Istoria orală este o *metodă* sau *tehnică* care are scopul de a culege și arhiva informații cu caracter istoric, prin viu grai, și prin intermediul unui cercetător care conduce un interviu liber semi-structurat, adresat participanților la diferite evenimente din trecut. Scopul principal al unei asemenea istorii constă în prezentarea, din punctul de vedere al naratorului, a unei anumite perioade, a unui anumit eveniment sau mod de viață (conform cu *Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History*, la pagina de Web: [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own\\_toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own_toolkit/oralHistory.html)). Ca *sursă subiectivă* de informație și ca material de sociologie a științei, care trebuie utilizată în legătură cu documentele istorice, o istorie orală este istoria vieții unei persoane, viață caracterizată de experiențele sale într-un anumit loc și anumit timp, valoarea unei anumite istorii orale constând mai ales în informațiile și perspectivele proprii ale naratorului. Materialul de sociologie a științei cules prin istorie orală reprezintă, de aceea, un supliment inedit și important, dar nu un substitut, la lucrările publicate ale cercetătorului respectiv, care, desigur, trebuie cunoscute în mod direct.

metodologii originale de cercetare aplicată. Înregistrările interviurilor de Istorie Orală se păstrează în Colecția de Istorie Orală a Universității din Kentucky, drept material de cercetare pentru toți aceia care studiază istoria științelor sociale din S.U.A.

Decizia coordonatorilor Programului de Istorie Orală al Societății de Antropologie Aplicată din S.U.A. de a oferi publicității acest interviu demonstrează nu numai valoarea aparte ca document istoric și științific al informațiilor cuprinse în cadrul lui, ci și marele prestigiu de care se bucură profesorul și cercetătorul Michael M. Cernea în lumea științifică americană și internațională. Dintre cele mai semnificative episoade și rememorări cuprinse în acest interviu pot fi menționate: perioada copilăriei din Iași, marcată de traumele induse de abuzurile regimului antonescian și de antisemitismul din epocă, care a culminat cu ororile pogromului de la Iași, din iunie 1941, anii de studiu la Universitatea București și interesul manifestat de tânărul Cernea față de jurnalism (NB: pe care l-a și practicat, ca atare!), „iluziile” și „speranțele” (false!) investite în primii ani ai perioadei de „trecere de la capitalism la socialism”, activitatea de cercetător la Institutul de Filozofie din București, legătura cu cercetările și tradițiile sociologiei rurale ale Școlii Sociologice de la București, primele contacte cu personalități științifice din sociologia americană, precum Robert King Merton – stabilite în timpul perioadei petrecute la Centrul pentru Studii Avansate în Științele Sociale din Stanford (California)–, apoi „noul început” deschis de decizia profesorului, din vara anului 1974, de a se stabili definitiv în Statele Unite, cariera sa strălucită în calitate de sociolog (primul angajat vreodată de această instituție!) la Banca Mondială și, nu în ultimul rând, deosebitele sale realizări în planul antropologiei și sociologiei aplicate, interesul față de problematica dezvoltării – ținând seama, cu prioritate, de oameni (“Putting People First”) și care i-au adus o binecunoscută recunoaștere internațională „*Angajarea (în cadrul Băncii – nota ns., S.M.R.) – subliniază sugestiv prof. Cernea – a fost cea mai dramatică și neprevăzută cotitură (“serendipity”) în viața și activitatea mea ca sociolog. Ea mi-a oferit oportunitatea de a mă testa, pe mine însumi, ca sociolog al dezvoltării și de a acționa conform cu visele și preocupările mele timpurii în domeniul schimbării și dezvoltării sociale. Iar aceasta a devenit pentru mine o speranță și un crez (deși sună oarecum utopic): credința că folosind activ uneltele științelor sociale împotriva discriminărilor, inegalității, pentru libertate și mai multă echitate, acestea pot contribui la lupta împotriva unor fenomene sociale abominabile*” (M.Cernea, vezi mai jos).

Un asemenea *credo* a caracterizat și caracterizează, în continuare, întreaga activitate științifică a profesorului și cercetătorului Michael M. Cernea.

Redactor-șef,  
Sorin M. Rădulescu

**FREIDENBERG:** Hello, Dr. Cernea. Michael, as you know I’m a member of the Oral History Project Committee, created by the Society for Applied Anthropology. As a member of that Committee, I suggested your inclusion in the interview program, given your outstanding career as an applied anthropologist and sociologist specialized in development. Among other areas, I’m intrigued in particular by your interest in the cultural and social impacts of forced population displacements and involuntary resettlement processes. My first question: please comment on when, where, and how you became interested in the field of anthropology and why you became an applied anthropologist.

**CERNEA:** Thank you, Judith. The short answer to your questions – the roots of my interest in what social science can do for social change—is simple, almost mundane: history and biography. My intellectual attraction to this domain

grew as I advanced into it, but what initially led me to it were the circumstances of my life. For better or worse, biographical events nourished that interest from early on. Initially, bad things, hard times, awakened my interest in social issues, and gave me a purpose, a yearning for change.

**FREIDENBERG:** Could you give me some details about your life circumstances at that time, about what you refer to as “mundane biography and history”?

#### **BIOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND THE “YEARNING FOR CHANGE”**

**CERNEA:** As you know, I was born in Romania and came to adolescence during World War II. From my early years, I felt the full terrible weight of a political regime which wasn’t simply un-democratic: it was outright fascist, a military and racist dictatorship, and anti-Semitic to its core. I myself was thrown out of school when I was eight years old and had barely started the elementary grades, simply for being Jewish. The regime issued a law forbidding the enrollment of Jewish children even in the primary grades of the public school system of the state.

Soon thereafter, my father, an engineer in a textile factory, was fired from his job for the same capital sin: being Jewish. Our family lost its livelihood. We had a very hard life.

When the war started, I was living in Jassy – Iași, in its original spelling – a city very close to the border between Romania and the former Soviet Union, which had a very large Jewish population. On the fateful day of June 29, 1941, exactly one week to the day when Germany and Romania launched war on Russia, a massive pogrom, meticulously organized and unprecedented in size and atrocity in Romania, was carried out against the large Jewish community of Jassy.

During a few days, some 13,000 innocent people were murdered in that pogrom, out of a Jewish population of 40–45,000. Mostly men, but also women, teenage boys, and children. Imagine the bloodletting. Imagine the devastation, the tragedy, the terror, the sufferings. The orphans left behind. And the frightful aftermath. I was almost ten at the time. That day, we were all scooped out from our homes, marched in endless columns of people, hands up, and brought to the city’s central police station. Thousands and thousands of Jewish men and teenage boys were crowded and squeezed into the police station’s large courtyard. My father was pulled into the courtyard. I was on the verge of going in with him, but he pushed me back, to my mother. My mother, I, my kid brother and old grandmother headed back home. On the way, my mother was beaten. Close to our home we were stopped by an armed gang, lined up with our faces to the wall, and were about to be shot on the street. There were bodies strewn on the street from prior killings. By miracle, they changed their mind and didn’t shoot us. As they turned the guns

away, we ran for our lives, and finally we made it home again. It was a very close call. We barely escaped alive.

My father remained arrested in the police courtyard, together with thousands of others. As I learned later, when there was no more room in the courtyard for the newly incoming columns of Jews, the police started to register the men at the other side of the courtyard, giving them a small, numbered and stamped ticket for temporary release. My father got one of those tickets, escaped from the courtyard, and ran back home. He found us, and immediately went into hiding in a near-by ravine planted with corn on the side of our house.

The nightmare continued, however. That very night, hooligans and policemen came after us again, hitting and almost demolishing the front door. We ran out through the back of the house in the middle of the night and sought refuge in a Romanian's family home nearby, whose young girl was my friend.

My father stayed in hiding in that ravine for several days and nights, and my mother carried water and food to him.

As we were to learn soon, many of those arrested at the police station were killed in the first night, while thousands of others were put the next day in death trains, piled up in sealed boxcars, and were shuttled for days and nights on end, with no food or water. More than half of the men and boys on those trains died. Two men living in our courtyard were among those who never returned, the father and the older brother of my best friend – they perished in the death trains. It was all an unforgettable horror.

You can understand how that pogrom affected my life, the following years throughout the war.

Surely, I couldn't continue school normally during the war years. Having been thrown out of the state school, like all Jewish kids, I could only attend one of the schools improvised by the city's Jewish community in the town's many synagogues, for all us Jewish children. But because the school closest to my house was relatively far away, my parents were afraid to let me walk that long way to school everyday, wearing the yellow star all Jews had to attach on their clothing. For a full year following the pogrom-massacre of 1941, they kept me closeted in the house.

**FREIDENBERG:** Were you still living in Jassy after the pogrom?

**CERNEA:** I lived in Jassy until 1944, kind of under siege, not in a camp but ...

**FREIDENBERG:** Fearing...

**CERNEA:** Yes, fearing to go out of the house. In the spring of 1944, when the front line was again moving closer to our town, my family fled town. Many other families did the same. We all feared another pogrom as the German and Romanian armies were retreating from the advancing Russian offensive. In March 1944, we abandoned our home and everything behind, and fled to Bucharest, to save our lives, as refugees always do. When we fled, I was nearing thirteen.

Soon thereafter, in August 1944, Romania changed sides in World War II, joining the Allies. The Germans lost Romania. August 1944 was our liberation. The war ended one year later. We felt alive again. We felt like we were escaping from a dark cave, from an oppressive and criminal system, coming up for air and tasting freedom.

It was at that time, in the period of euphoria that followed those dark years, after escaping alive from the war years and their terror, that I became interested in anything that promised change, anything that pointed to a different way of living. Repressed, inner revolt became aspiration and manifest activism. I was also just at the right age to search and to thirst for values and ideals. This triggered my interest in social and political change while I was still in high school. I dropped out of high school to become a journalist, at 17. Then I registered as an undergrad at the Bucharest University to study social science and philosophy, but with a non-attending student status, to be able to continue my day work as a full time journalist (Incidentally, this turned out to be an un-planned, but great four year training in field work, in interviewing, in fighting shyness and collecting data, enormously useful later in my sociological and anthropological career). In 1954, I felt that I was done with journalism, and I left my newspaper work for regular graduate study, to get a Ph.D. in social science.

**FREIDENBERG:** So you got your Ph.D. in Bucharest?

**CERNEA:** Yes, several years later. After the war, Romania underwent a profound social transformation from the fascist regime to an emerging democratic system. During this brief period, the country's political system was a monarchy, with multiple political parties, represented in a rather ineffective, powerless parliament. By the beginning of 1948, the Communist Party took over full power. The king abdicated—in fact, he was chased away – in December 1947. Romania engaged itself in the “way toward a socialist society,” the so-called “transition period from capitalism to socialism.” This was, first, an attempt to carry through what was theorized at the time as “the bourgeois-democratic revolution” aiming to accomplish some general democratic changes after the fascist military dictatorship of the pre-war and war years. This period was then followed by “socialist changes” – nationalizing of industries and other means of production, and instituting what was openly called “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Well, the democratic social changes evaporated rapidly. And soon thereafter, our hopes about what those political changes would accomplish also began to evaporate.

The slogans and ideological promises under whose flag transformations were carried out were not matched by what the evolving new system did in practice. Expectations and illusions started to deflate. We soon realized that the promise of equality and of freedom was not being fulfilled, that the promise to eliminate ethnic discrimination was not being carried out. Open anti-Semitism only went underground: it became hidden and more cunning anti-Semitism. Hot and physically violent anti-Semitism became cold anti-Semitism, latent but nonetheless

pitiless, not openly verbalized but yet unforgiving. My, and others', hopes for social change turned out to be more idealistic than realistic.

Still, I had engaged in pursuing social change and I've continued this work throughout my life. I did believe then, and I do believe now, that no social change can happen and endure without a theory to guide it, without knowledge to inform and inspire it, a theory that might help us make choices at the many crossroads which societies face at every turn. And that belief in the value of science, in the value of knowledge about the makeup of society, the desire to understand how you can cause society to change and to comprehend what accounts for society's progress, that belief led to my interest in what we now call development and the anthropology and sociology of development. These may be latter-day terms and names, but they are only another conceptualization for the study of social change and for a militant approach to the social role of social science.

After I got my Ph.D., I worked as a researcher in the Department of Social Research at the Institute of Philosophy in Bucharest. At that time I became interested in helping to revive and promote the resumption of empirical sociological research in Romania, where sociology had been banished by the Government for more than a decade. Not only had empirical research been banished, but also the very concept of sociology as social science had been decreed a political heresy. The only "discipline" was Marxism-Leninism. I did study Marxism, and it is still useful today to know the social theory of Marxism, and be able to sort out the wheat from the chaff, regardless of its overall obsolescence. But at the same time I became seriously interested in the professional traditions of Romanian rural sociology, that truly flourished between the two World Wars. My general readings in social theory and a growing interest in the traditions of Romanian rural sociology (rejected at that time by officialdom) became, so to say, the second source of my interest in social science.

#### **POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND THE SHIFTING DESTINIES OF SOCIAL RESEARCH**

**FREIDENBERG:** How did that rural sociology in Europe and Romania relate to what we call social and cultural anthropology in the U. S.?

**CERNEA:** Romania had been among the world's most advanced countries in rural sociology. It was then called the "Romanian Sociological School", or the "Monographic School of Rural Sociology." Important scholars led it, such as Dimitre Gusti, Henry H. Stahl, and Anton Golopentia. Not only was the discipline taught in all the country's universities and well structured professionally, but there was wide public interest in it.

Largely akin in their cultural outlook to the cultural anthropologists of western Europe, Romanian sociologists had carried out scores of rural community

monographs, in a number and quality unmatched at that time in any other European country, except perhaps Poland. Most significantly, their orientation to social research was underlined by a pro-active and self-proclaimed orientation to “social action and reform” which I always liked. They adopted as slogan the Latin phrase “*Sociologia Militans*” – proclaiming a militant – not just a contemplative, descriptive – sociology, one that aspired to change and reform backward villages through sociologists’ involvement in “research and action,” – a generous, but somehow utopian goal under those circumstances. But I’ve been trying to continue and embrace, through my work in different conditions and in my own way, that rich tradition and courageous call to militancy, action and social reform. In Romania, however, after 1948, that work was forcibly interrupted, top-down, because the communist authorities simply decreed that sociology was not a legitimate science. That caused a terrible research set-back. But, and this was important, we still had access to the old books !

**FREIDENBERG:** So by the time you became a research associate in that Philosophy Institute, sociology was not banished anymore?

**CERNEA:** It still was banished officially during the ’50s, and strongly so. When some economists tried in the late ’50s to initiate some empirical field research, they were publicly and harshly reprimanded and humiliated. Sociology wasn’t taught in universities. My degrees were, formally, in general philosophy. But my real specialty and personal interest were *social* philosophy and sociological theory.

The Ph. D. topic I chose was along this interest, and was a counter-cultural topic, a thorny topic which gave me a lot of trouble because it went against the conformist beat in social science: I took as subject for my thesis “the contradictions in socialist society” [chuckle]. And that didn’t do me too much good in ....

**FREIDENBERG:** Not in that regime.

**CERNEA:** No. It postponed the defense of my dissertation for years and I had to rewrite the dissertation’s chapters several times.

The third source of my interest in social change and in social science was the access to Western sociology, first to French sociology and then to modern American sociology. As a researcher at that Institute, I did have access to some prohibited Western books, which were not in public circulation. So, based on those blocks of knowledge, I developed my interest in social theory, in empirical sociology, and in social work, in action-oriented sociology. Eventually, however, I had to conclude that I could not do this kind of work in Romania.

**FREIDENBERG:** Why not?

**CERNEA:** Social research was not allowed to report any findings critical of the status-quo. Censorship of scientists was constant, routine, pervasive, and

punishing. Social writings were expected to only praise the system, and were prohibited from developing any argument for change. That annihilated the very purpose of doing research, and disappointed me to no end. We had to do acrobatic writing to allude to issues and still have access to print. I felt I was failing in my dreams, my values, my chosen vocation. I started to tell my two children, Dana and Andrei, to not even consider studying social sciences, but to pursue medicine: social science in Romania's authoritarian, socialist system could not change society at large for the better, or help improve people's lives. But medicine, I told them, could, because it helps people as individuals, one at a time, by curing pain and sickness, and saving and improving their quality of life. That meant: follow the same values, but through a different path. They heard me and indeed both took a different professional path than I did: they both became physicians!

During these years, however, some American scholars visiting Romania noticed my published work. In 1968, I received an invitation to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. It took the Center a giant battle with the Romanian authorities to get me there: this is an entire story, almost a thriller, quite amazing, which I can tell you fully another day. But I finally went and spent a year at that Center, in 1970–1971. Then I had to return to Romania, to my children.

As soon as I came back, I was promptly accused publicly of being the “carrier of bourgeois sociology.”

#### A NEW BEGINNING

**FREIDENBERG:** What was your experience at the Center in Stanford?

**CERNEA:** It was a wonderful year, between November 1970 and November 1971. During that year, I met at the Center many great sociologists, top level political scientists, economists, anthropologists, social psychologists, legal scholars, historians, including Robert Merton, Irma Adelman, Alan Dershowitz, Immanuel Wallerstein, Hanna Gray, Reuben Hill, Richard Easterlin, Frank and Francesca Cancian, Alexander Bickel, Stan Wheeler, Nathan Glazer, Robert Nozick, and many others. When I returned to Romania I managed to write a book about my intellectual interactions, *Dialogues with American Sociologists*, which, after three years of pain and much maneuvering, I succeeded in publishing. There was great thirst in Romania for such accounts: the book sold out in three days !

**FREIDENBERG:** Really?

**CERNEA:** Yes. And by then, in the summer of 1974, due to a formal invitation from the American Sociological Association, I left to attend the World

Congress of Sociology, held in Toronto. This is when I “defected”. I did not return to Romania.

While still attending the World Congress in Toronto, the World Bank contacted me from Washington and sent a senior staff, Leif Christoffersen, to interview me. He then invited me to give a seminar and to come for more interviews at the World Bank in Washington DC. I gave the seminar on the peasant family’s condition in the collective farm. The result of that seminar – more than I could’ve ever imagined – and of a half-dozen interviews, was the offer of a job at the World Bank as a sociologist – in fact as the first staff-sociologist ever hired by the World Bank. The new position was in the experimental, pioneering division created by McNamara to test and apply the Bank’s new policy of rural poverty reduction.

This was the most serendipitous and dramatic turn in my life’s work. It offered me the opportunity to actually put myself to the test as a development social scientist and act on my earlier dreams and interests in social change and development. And it became for me a hope and a creed (albeit sounding a bit utopian): the belief that actively employing the tools of social science against discrimination, against inequality, for freedom, and for more equity, can help in fighting these horrible things.

#### “PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST”

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes, we all hope. And then, what came next? What did you do after being offered the job at the World Bank?

**CERNEA:** I started the work in summer of 1974, immediately after I attended the World Congress of Sociology. This is when I left Romania for good, but my children were still there. I could attend the World Congress only due to the American Sociological Association. In Romania, I had been nominated by the Academy of Sciences to be a member of the country’s delegation to the World Congress, but my “file” didn’t clear the Party’s political controls over the composition of that delegation, and I was kicked out of it. But American sociologists, who knew me from my year at the Center in Stanford, had sent me a ticket and invitation, all fully paid, because I didn’t have any foreign currency. Professor Reuben Hill, who was at that time the President of the International Sociological Association, was instrumental in arranging for this invitation.

So I was able to travel at the last minute, as a private tourist, representing myself, not the country. The members of the “official” Romanian delegation were stunned when I showed up at the World Congress a couple of days late, but nonetheless present. From Canada, I went to Washington. I didn’t return to Romania.

In fact, as it turned out, the World Bank had been trying to get in touch and interview me for that position starting from 1973, but the Romanian government interfered and prevented the Bank's representative from meeting me in Bucharest. This is a thriller story in itself, but we may not have time for it now. They blatantly told the interviewer from the World Bank that I was out of the country, while he phoned me and found me at home. But he couldn't, therefore, meet with me officially at that time. However, it was lucky for me that the Bank persevered, sent another staff member to meet me one year later, and eventually found me at the World Congress, brought me to Washington, and asked me to give a seminar.

After that seminar, I was interviewed thoroughly by six different teams. And then, was offered the position.

**FREIDENBERG:** That's great. I can imagine how you felt that day.

**CERNEA:** Yes, I was elated. Kind of like I was dreaming ... And I also was utterly scared, not exactly knowing what I was getting into, what it was that I have to do.

**FREIDENBERG:** Well, while you were at the World Bank, one of the books you produced and that impacted on the way anthropologists and sociologists teach development, including myself, was *Putting People First*. I've used that book every single year that I've taught Development Anthropology at the University of Maryland and I think that that book made a significant impact both on the way anthropologists work in development, as well as on the conceptualization of development and its policy issues. And, in doing this interview, I now have the honor to ask you to comment on these impacts from your perspective.

**CERNEA:** Well, I've tried from the outset to involve other anthropologists and sociologists in the projects the World Bank was supporting. The World Bank is huge. So, for the book I was contemplating, I invited contributions from a large number of scholars, anthropologists and sociologists, mainly from outside the Bank. The title of the book refers to the cornerstone of what I believe development anthropology should do: namely, to advocate and rely on the primary role of people as actors of development. The title of the book, *Putting People First*, means putting people first *in projects*. In the late '70's, when I tentatively started work on that book, this was a revolutionary concept in the Bank. At that point, it was still a struggle for me to write correctly in English, and to start paragraphs with a "topic sentence." I continued work on the book, intensively, in the early '80s. It took a few years to get the book out.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes, I think the first publication was '84.

**CERNEA:** The reason publication was delayed was that it suggested a serious change, a reversal, in Bank thinking, because what the World Bank was putting first in projects was money, the financing. We had an internal Bank

newsletter at that time, which was distributed desk to desk and its sensible editor decided to publicize my unusual kind of work on Bank projects. He talked to me, and published a very long interview entitled: "Putting People First in Projects!" My argument received full exposure among thousands of Bank staff members.

Before that time, the Bank was still strongly influenced by the technology transfer theory of development. Much money had been lent to developing countries for the building of new technical infrastructure and equipment. The book presented a different argument, saying directly that yes, the World Bank is in the business of financially-induced development, but financially induced development cannot succeed unless it recognizes the crucial determining role of local social organization and of the local population that has to support that development.

**FREIDENBERG:** Right.

**CERNEA:** The population is not a passive guinea pig in technology transfer programs. In fact, ultimately it is the decisive actor. People have to absorb the technology, to rise to it, to create a new capacity through adjusted social organization. New technologies – whether in agriculture, in industry or in any other sector – have to be incorporated within specific social contexts and societies. Creating new institutions and patterns of social organization to shoulder and internalize such changes is a totally different thing than simply the purchase and "transfer" of technology. Therefore, the first premise, what we argued in the book, was a concept that did not yet exist in the development literature: that "putting people first" is the crux of any development project. Further, the book presented a model for doing this, a model of "entry points" focused on how to translate the "putting people first" concept and metaphor into explicit steps and actions, a model that I developed during my first years at the Bank.

To make a brief parenthesis, I must say that soon after I joined the Bank I realized that I had first to understand that mammoth, that giant, and how the institution works, if I wanted to be effective in the belly of the beast, so to say.

**FREIDENBERG:** Exactly. That's well put.

**CERNEA:** And so I tried to learn how the Bank works, from the labyrinthine system of buildings, which included about ten multi-story buildings in downtown Washington, all the way to economic concepts such as disbursement, sensitivity analysis, rate of return, cost benefit, shadow prices, and so forth. Once I started to master the mechanics and procedures of the World Bank, the articulations of the project cycle, I again tried to redefine the work-focus, distinguish the goals and means: as I wrote verbatim in *Putting People First*, I argued that the main "product" of the Bank was not the loan package, but the development project. That the loan, the money, was only the means, was again an idea that only irritated some economists, particularly the financial guys, who smiled cynically. But the idea finally was accepted, or at least not rejected. Then, if the development project is the

essential product, what can the anthropologist do? That was the main challenge, the main question I asked myself.

I discussed this with colleagues and peers and gave the answers, first presenting it inside the Bank and adopting the project cycle model, which had been at that time “legitimized” by a key Bank Vice-President, Warren Baum. We then discussed it in the book, raising the issue of “entry points” for social knowledge in that project cycle model.

If you look at the development project as a social process, you can identify a number of stages, an intra-project cycle, starting from preparing the development intervention to assessing it, appraising it, executing it and finally handing it over to work on its own, and also evaluating it. And the point was that in each one of these stages the anthropologist as the embodiment of a certain social knowledge has to find the proper “entry points” in the project cycle. Further, I argued that the body of knowledge to be used cannot be the same throughout the project cycle. Every phase of the project cycle requires another set of concepts, other “inputs”, and other types of applied social contribution. The social scientist must know how to mobilize the social knowledge relevant for that particular stage. Rather than giving general lectures, his or her knowledge must be targeted to the challenge at hand, so that the message can be functional, understood, accepted, embraced, and implemented.

**FREIDENBERG:** Right.

**CERNEA:** I had also started then to invite anthropologists-scholars to the Bank, to give lectures on sectoral social characteristics. That was the other side of the model I proposed. It is not only that each stage of the project requires a different type of knowledge and a different role for the anthropologist, but that different needs develop in each sector. Different economic sectoral characteristics require again different bodies of social knowledge and different interventions. For instance, if you have a sector that affects a pastoral area, it’s totally different than irrigated agricultural areas and different also from urban development projects...

**FREIDENBERG:** Of course.

**CERNEA:** ... or from a forest development project. But it was extremely important to articulate in the World Bank’s context the need to differentiate the usable bodies of knowledge as a methodology for anthropological contributions to development. Therefore, *Putting People First* is a book constructed along a sectoral social typology...

**FREIDENBERG:** ...forestry, irrigated agriculture, pastoral...

**CERNEA:** ... fishing, rural roads, and others, plus a chapter on evaluation and a chapter on participation. The contributors were scholars of high caliber, highly respected in the profession, such as Conrad Kottak, Robert Chambers, Ted

Scudder, Norman Uphoff, Walt Coward, Fran Korten, David Freeman, Richard Pollnac, and others.

**FREIDENBERG:** So, it seems to me that you were able through your work on that book to make a substantive contribution to the World Bank, and to the field of applied anthropology. You highlighted the social and cultural factors conducive to development. What you were arguing is that if your own institution wouldn't take into account people as major stakeholders and not just recipients, and would not use social and cultural knowledge at each stage, then its development efforts, its goals might not be attained.

**CERNEA:** Exactly, good summary. As you know, the book has both a substantive value and a methodological value. The methodology of using sociological knowledge for development is clearly articulated, translated into sequences of steps and models of how anthropologists can actually participate in project design and execution. They must not allow themselves to be sidelined.

The book's substantive value is that in every chapter we showed how fundamental blocks of theory and concepts can be translated into tools for social analysis. Such a translation is necessary at every step to explain the process and to understand, tease out and identify the evidence and the path for change and development. This is why the book became of interest not only to the World Bank, but to the larger development and academic communities. The Bank's Editorial Committee initially doubted that such a book would sell. But it was sold out quickly. Oxford University Press asked to issue a second, revised edition, which was later translated...

**FREIDENBERG:** I got it in Spanish too, thanks to you.

**CERNEA:** ... into Spanish, yes, for Latin America. Then the Chinese translated it and printed a large number of copies. Surprisingly, a group of researchers in Indonesia translated it into Bahasa, without even informing me until after it came out...

**FREIDENBERG:** Really?

**CERNEA:** And after that a group of young Japanese anthropologists voluntarily translated it and published it in Japan, at their expense. The latest edition came out a couple of years ago in France, published by Khartalla. Thus, the book gained worldwide dissemination and usage. It became a textbook in very many classes on development.

**FREIDENBERG:** That's how I've used it for my courses.

**CERNEA:** An international textbook.

**MOVING FROM PIECEMEAL PROJECTS TO CRAFTING  
SOCIAL POLICY**

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes. Well, it did very well and contributed a lot. Now, your long trajectory of working for the World Bank as an anthropologist sets you as a model for practicing anthropologists who are most interested in learning about the impact of anthropological thinking within a development organization. Many anthropologists such as myself might teach or work in development anthropology but we are not employed by a development organization. I am curious in how you'd compare practicing anthropology in and out of the Bank.

**CERNEA:** The first thing I learned is that the life and work of a practicing anthropologist in a sophisticated financial agency is tough and rough. This is not an easy line of work. But it is exciting, a type of work which can gratify you with a sense of accomplishing tangible results. For me, it goes beyond even the satisfaction of teaching, however high I do hold the vocation of teaching. It goes far beyond the satisfaction of writing articles or a book and never knowing whether it has languished on the shelves or has influenced anything. I must say also that the World Bank proved to be a great place to work for an anthropologist. Not that the Bank was easily receptive or unbiased toward anthropology, or that it was, or is, a perfect organism.

**FREIDENBERG:** Like any institution or organization.

**CERNEA:** ... sometimes more, and sometimes less than other institutions. And I've been candid and critical about the Bank's deep weaknesses. But by its nature and its responsibility in alleviating poverty while promoting development, it is in constant search of tools to increase its effectiveness. The main point for me is that sociological knowledge, anthropological knowledge, is capable of making what the World Bank is doing more efficient, sometimes also protect against egregious errors, both in country situations when the goals are adequate and in country situations when certain settings need to be changed. I didn't see anthropology as a simple provider of "fixes," or the position of the anthropologist as one in which you must accept what you are told and simply help to execute it: I saw it as an active position of participating in the formulation of policy, and in the conception – that is crafting – of development interventions.

**FREIDENBERG:** Which at that time, was not the predominant way of thinking about the role of anthropology. Anthropologists usually were called at the end of a project or when a project didn't work out. Is that correct?

**CERNEA:** Exactly so. In fact, even worse: in the first 2–3 decades of its existence, the World Bank had been totally ignorant of what non-economic social

science can provide and do for development. Most managers and staff had no social training whatsoever. When told about sociology or anthropology, they were skeptical and dismissive. When in early '70's one or another consultant anthropologist was occasionally invited, his "province" was ex-post impact evaluation. Sometimes, a bit better: *ex-ante* impact assessment. But even this better "role" was also kind of incongruent, disjointed from the rest of project preparation, because it was rarely based on teamwork and joint-team thinking, that is – thinking together with the rest of the technical and economic specialists who prepared the development intervention. In ex-post, the hope was that at least the next intervention would possibly benefit from the lessons of evaluating previous projects.

Most development agencies declare that they "learn by doing." However, too often they're "advancing" by forgetting what they've learned.

**FREIDENBERG:** That's very well said.

**CERNEA:** And therefore it is important for the social scientist to be present in every single stage of the process and discuss goals, orientation, policy matters, and not only techniques and short-term fixes. A sociologist's successful contribution to a single project may be great, but nevertheless remains a discrete, piecemeal success. But a successful social contribution to formulating a policy document is a multiplier, a serial success. I did not arrive to that understanding easily or early, it took me time...

**FREIDENBERG:** Of course.

**CERNEA:** ... but in *Putting People First* (and in other writing after it) I had already argued that it is not sufficient to work on projects alone: the social scientist has to *participate in the crafting of policy*.

By the end of the '70s we just begun to influence Bank policy. I'm proud that, over time, I was able to place on the Bank's books several key development policies that translated sociological-anthropological knowledge into prescriptions for development agencies and recommendations for governments. One well known example is the policy concerning involuntary population displacement and resettlement. This policy was adopted by the Bank in February 1980, after about 18 months of intense in-house work, research, arguments, lobbying. This wasn't easy. It took fighting and diplomacy to get it adopted. Soon thereafter, in 1982 our Sociological Bank Group was instrumental in getting enacted the first policy statement on indigenous populations living in areas covered by World Bank financed projects, for which Robert Goodland in particular fought tenaciously. Again, these were socially innovative steps: no other development agency at that time had any policy on involuntary resettlement or any policy on indigenous populations. Shortly thereafter we got adopted a first policy on cultural property protection, when Bank financed projects were sited in areas with such cultural artifacts.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes.

**CERNEA:** Then the Bank adopted the policy of opening itself up to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I wrote and published in 1988 the first World Bank paper on NGOs and local development, which became the basis for articulating the Bank policy statement adapted soon afterwards. It required Bank staff to work in developing countries together with local NGOs. By its original bylaws, the Bank was mandated to work with governments, not with NGOs. Surely, this important change in Bank operations did not happen only because of my and my Bank colleagues' work. This change was a result of the growth of the civil society's organizations and their influence in the United States and in Washington, D.C., in the immediate vicinity of the Bank and the U.S. Congress (who periodically asked for NGOs' feedback before it approved the replenishment of IDA's funds). However, "the reformers" inside the Bank played a very important role in recognizing the role of the NGOs. The papers we wrote – and had the Bank approve and publish – accelerated the writing of the Bank's NGO policy. However, my sociological argument in the study I just mentioned was not driven by the increasing clout of American NGOs as pressure groups. My argument was the inherent development necessity for the Bank to involve the organizations emerging at the grassroots of developing societies, as opposed to the Bank continuing to work for development only with governments and formal bureaucracies.

**FRIEDENBERG:** Most interesting! And have there been other policies in which you introduced a sociological or anthropological perspective?

**CERNEA:** I was also directly involved in writing up the Bank's formal policies for the forestry sector, and in water and irrigation. For the forestry policy, I argued the need to use various units of social organization as supporting actors, for alternative reforestation strategies. In the water policy we argued for water user associations. This has had a great impact. When I arrived at the Bank, water user associations, for all intents and purposes, did not even "exist" on the Bank's map and in Bank irrigation projects, despite their presence on the ground in so many traditional societies. We changed this. I commissioned three successive review studies from outside social scientists of Bank irrigation projects, with the explicit requirement that they contrast the projects' lack of data about the social structures of irrigation systems in developing countries with the rich information available in anthropological monographs about irrigation in the same countries, say, in Indonesia, in Pakistan, Thailand, or other countries. The resulting reviews were circulated and discussed with agricultural divisions' staff, particularly with irrigation engineers. Then I invited several well known sociologists and anthropologists (e.g., Walt Coward, Fran Korten, Robert Chambers, David Freeman, Norm Uphoff, and others) to give seminars for Bank staff on traditional water user societies (WUAs). Gradually, our argument gained traction.

The social structures of irrigation systems began to be understood. The design of new irrigation projects ceased to be exclusively technical and, step by step, provided for the involvement of irrigators' associations. Looking back, I can say that from the late '80s until now, no single new irrigation project financed by the Bank has been designed without including organizational provisions for the incorporation of farmers' own water users associations. In some countries, for instance Pakistan, we succeeded in getting the Government to issue legislation for recognizing the WUAs as juridical persons, and thus being eligible for credits.

These were cultural and policy changes in the Bank's thinking, and its mode of operation, which we accomplished through the integration of social recommendations and knowledge into policies and project work. The content of our contribution to such development projects was what I'd call activist social analysis, activist planning. Or with another term, it was *social engineering* in the best sense of this concept, necessary for creating full-fledged irrigation *systems*. This left behind and replaced the old type of projects that dealt only with building the physical infrastructure for water conveyance.

#### **Recognizing Culture Upfront in Induced Development**

**FREIDENBERG:** And more recently you've been working on developing a policy for the preservation of cultural heritage.

**CERNEA:** Indeed. I became engaged in this topic before I retired from the Bank, but then was called back to the Bank and asked to write a study and a policy paper, addressing the general principles of work in this area but focused primarily on the cultural patrimony of the group of countries of the Middle East and North Africa Region, the area of a distinct Vice-Presidency in the Bank's structure. This was a policy-cum-strategy study that articulated a relatively new argument for an agency such as the World Bank: namely, that the preservation and management of the cultural heritage and "cultural sector" must be seen and treated as "intrinsic" to and necessary for a comprehensive development paradigm, not as a "luxury option", a marginal activity extrinsic to development.

The strategy that I wrote was vetted thoroughly, discussed extensively in-house, and eventually formally adopted by the World Bank as a strategy to guide project investments. This was the first ever institutional strategy adopted by the Bank to cover an entire world region in assisting countries financially for the preservation and management of Cultural Heritage. It was a "first" also for us, the sociological-anthropological community of the Bank, a breakthrough. It was published as a short book in 2001 – titled *Cultural Heritage and Development: A Framework for Action* (soon followed by a French edition). The strategy was distilled in fact from a much longer, and much more critical in its assessments, study that I wrote for internal Bank analysis and staff discussion of the policy and economic issues involved. I still have to publish that full study.

Both the study and the published strategy developed and introduced some new concepts, including the concept of a “*cultural sector*”. My effort was to demonstrate that the “cultural sector” has the same five basic characteristics as other “sectors” of a society’s structure and economy, and functions in many ways similar to other sectors of the economy. This new concept was the bold bridgehead for integrating the cultural patrimony sector in the general paradigm of a country’s development.

It’s always important to create a conceptual basis for an argument of this nature. I argued that, logically, it wouldn’t be consistent to recognize the presence of a cultural dimension in every economic sector and in every project (a proposition already accepted in the Bank) *without* at the same time recognizing also the presence of a cultural sector and of its specific weight and needs. That argument, of course, went against the grain of long entrenched practices in development work, because since its creation the World Bank, as most other development-finance agencies, did not concern itself with the cultural patrimony and didn’t address or support it as a sector in development.

**FREIDENBERG:** Absolutely. We on the outside know that all too well.

**CERNEA:** Implicitly or explicitly, a bureaucratic and institutional dichotomy had been reified conceptually at the international level: the World Bank was to deal with development, while the cultural sector was the business of ... UNESCO<sup>4</sup>. That was the bias, the misconception we were up against. Only in the last decade or so has the cultural sector been recognized by the World Bank – and yet, not fully – for its possibility of enhancing a nation’s development as well, not only for its intrinsic historic, cultural or tourism value.

The World Bank’s President, Mr. Wolfensohn, played a most important role in raising awareness of the relevance of this sector for the development paradigm and in placing it on the Bank’s agenda. I was fortunate to collaborate closely with him in the last part of my time at the Bank. To overcome the entrenched resistance of many Bank economists, including of many Board members, Mr. Wolfenson brought in heavy intellectual artillery to support our internal argument: he invited Amartya Sen to deliver two special lectures to the Bank’s Board, on the “role of culture and cultural heritage in development”. Amartya also gave several seminars to Bank line managers and staff economists. He had to virtually spoon this argument into the minds of many in the Bank.

**FREIDENBERG:** On this particular topic?

**CERNEA:** Yes, on the particular topic of culture, and on others sides of social development and social policies. Mr Wolfensohn supported not only including the “cultural sector” in the Bank’s development work, but also wanted to turn the Bank much more to social development issues in the broader meaning, as

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<sup>4</sup> UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

opposed to just economic growth. In fact, Jim Wolfensohn surprised me, and many in the Bank, from the first weeks of his arrival. Here was a full-fledged Wall-Street megabanker, parachuted by the White House at the top floor of the World Bank, to “manage” ... what? Development? Poverty reduction ? Work in the Third World countries ? What would he ever know about these things?” we all asked ourselves, bracing for narrowness and fearing the worst. We kept a very close watch on what he was uttering and doing in the first meetings with Bank staff.

Soon after his arrival, I had an opportunity to approach him directly, during a small ceremony, one of the initial receptions. He warmed up to my button-holing him. In fact, I had provoked him, starting by saying that I noticed that in one of his speeches he used an unusual, taboo term in the Bank, the concept of «social justice», and asked what he meant by it. His response was unexpected: “I wanted to explain the notion of *mitzvah*, if you know the word, he said, and the closest I could come to it was ‘social justice.’” He then asked me what was I doing in the Bank, and why did social justice puzzle me. When I explained, it was his turn to be surprised. “Listen, he said, when I came here I was given a huge stack of briefing books, but none ever mentioned that the Bank has a Senior Adviser on social matters and social policy. This is not an intellectual place. I need your help,” he said. So I began to quickly inform him on social work in the Bank. He listened carefully a bit, then stopped me, and demanded that I put my issues on paper and send him a detailed account. I did, and didn’t clear my paper with my then managers. In the paper, I was candid about what the Bank had or had not done in terms of incorporating social criteria and goals in projects and policies, and about what the Bank had yet to do. I also deplored the chronic absence of sufficient Bank staff specialized in social sciences, and tendencies in the Bank to marginalize social issues. He turned out to be more receptive than I could hope, shockingly so. His office contacted me and asked that I organize a special meeting on the issues I raised, bringing with me one sociologist staff member from each of the Bank’s five regional Vice Presidencies.

The meeting was unique, compared to my entire prior experience with the institution’s top managers. It went very well: he listened, never interrupted, as he was reputed to do. At that very meeting, he decided to create a special task force to analyze the social development orientation of the Bank, for him and, he said, “If it’s good, for the Board”. Our task force worked some three months, produced a documented report critically de-constructing the Bank’s performance in our field, and made numerous far reaching recommendations. In turn, Mr. Wolfensohn kept his part of the deal: he threw his support behind it, brought the Task Force report up to the Bank’s Board of Executive Directors. We made a good case, I think, but also largely due to his backing, the Board approved all our recommendations. This open up a process, not just some fleeting discrete measures, a process that led, *inter alia*, to the better institutionalization of social work, social knowledge and social

objectives in-house, and in Bank policies and projects. It led as well to a considerable increase of the number of sociologists and anthropologists hired as Bank staff. In relatively short order, it also led to the establishment of the Social Family inside the Bank – “Family” in the Bank’s vernacular is an organizational term, a structure across departmental and region-based boundaries

**FREIDENBERG:** Oh, I see.

**CERNEA:** So today we have a “network” of social specialists across the Bank, the “Social Family.” Also, following another recommendation that I had made much earlier already, a central Social Development Department was created in the Bank for the first time, within one of the Bank’s policy Vice-Presidencies. Significantly enough, I had made that proposal in writing to the Bank’s senior managers in 1987, and to a prior “reorganization Task Force,” a full seven years *before* Mr. Wolfensohn arrived at the Bank. But it wasn’t embraced at that time, remaining unimplemented and lingering in some files.

**FREIDENBERG:** The time was not right yet.

**CERNEA:** Not at all, I’d respectfully disagree. The time had been right for it at that time too. That institutional step was long needed and was ripe earlier, but management’s ears were not open to listen. Finally, we got a president who listened and heard, who embraced the idea of a more powerful social capacity in house, and who agreed to create the central Social Development Department, with social policy development and enforcement functions and with authority for assessing quality of most important bank operations, from a social viewpoint. Noteworthy, and little known, is the fact that in the last round of top management discussions about the legitimacy of creating such a new central department, there was still a resistance from important quarters. For instance, even the representative of the powerful Office of the Bank’s Chief Economist and Senior Vice-President for Economics opposed the decision. Wolfensohn overruled him. The Social Development Department was created.

As I said already, life and work in the Bank had not been easy. It has been a continuous fight against technocratic and econocratic biases, and against open dismissal or benign ignorance of social and cultural variables. But even benign ignorance becomes malign in its effects. It becomes toxic when it is allowed to rule over the crafting of development interventions. Blindness to cultural variables can ruin a development project and cause pathological effects.

#### ARGUING AGAINST REDUCTIONISM AND BIASED MODELS

**FREIDENBERG:** Against whom did you have to argue most when you were speaking up as a social anthropologist in the World Bank?

**CERNEA:** Well... Introducing a body of social knowledge within an organization which was essentially an economic and financial fortress required multiple voices, not only mine. It was the sum accomplishment of our growing group of Bank anthropologists' and sociologists' determination. The Bank has been and is still dominated by a staff corps trained in economics and infused with the theory, reasoning models, and methodology of economics, which is indispensable, but which has its biases as well. I didn't argue against economics. I admire economics, have studied economics myself, and plead from my sociological perspective for better quality economic analysis. I argued, however, against economic one-sidedness, against economic reductionism.

Let me give you an example. You know how some economists have been raving about the idea that the ultimate key to everything in development is "to set the prices right. Set the prices right and everything else will follow", they said. I fought that idea repeatedly because, however important prices are, there is much more to successful development. One of the things I did was to write an article for *Finance and Development*, the journal of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. I wrote that as critical as prices may be, arguing that "getting the price right" can fix everything was no more than "an econo-mythical idea", a gross simplification. I wrote that this was a convenient but reductionist lens, which justified ignoring or obscuring other factors in development. Even markets themselves are not just "prices", they are a complex web of relationships and a socially and culturally constructed economic institution. You cannot imagine now how difficult it was to get this article published, and how harsh or dismissive were the comments I received back, written on the copies of my submitted article. But lo and behold – and here is a tribute to the Bank, which is an open place for ideas and for arguments – the article was eventually published. My critique of this "econo-mythical reduction" was printed verbatim in the IMF's<sup>5</sup> journal.

**FREIDENBERG:** Oh, really!

**CERNEA:** To put this episode in more general terms: I think that sociological/anthropological knowledge cannot assert itself without engaging in intellectual battle against embedded biases that vitiate the understanding of social structures and culture.

**FREIDENBERG:** And becoming an interlocutor requires working "in the belly" of such development organizations. Or at the top, as you eventually did. But getting involved, hands on. Not simply musing from academic distance. Otherwise you're not there to carry on a dialogue, to give back as much as you get, or more....

**CERNEA:** Exactly.

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<sup>5</sup> IMF – International Monetary Fund.

**FREIDENBERG:** ... and you end up talking only to people who think like yourself.

**CERNEA:** Yes. You have to work with the people who manifest such biases. And you have to find allies. It's an entire strategy at work. Again, we're speaking here not just about my own work, Judith ...

**FREIDENBERG:** I know.

**CERNEA:** ... but about many other colleagues who work in the Bank or have worked in the Bank, very good anthropologists and sociologists themselves. I am happy that I made it possible for many of them to join the Bank, directly in many cases. But once they joined, most of them became fighters for the same goals. So what I'm telling you is the story of sociology and anthropology within the Bank, not just my own personal story. And our collective push was not simply from a growth in numbers but a growth in the power of argument. I have in mind colleagues such as Scott Guggenheim, Gloria Davis, Maritta Koch-Weser, Bill Partridge, Sandy Davis, David Butcher, Ashraf Ghani, Ayse Kudat, Cynthia Cook, Deepa Narayan, and many, many others, who worked tirelessly to make social knowledge a recognized and important part of the Bank's approach to development.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes.

**CERNEA:** We also brought in eminent scholars and colleagues located outside the Bank, in universities, whom we involved in studies and project consultancy assignments. We made their added inputs necessary *and* possible by being inside the Bank, demanding and creating more demand for such skills, which exceeded the so to say "supply" capacity of the Bank's in-house anthropological and sociological staff.

**FREIDENBERG:** You yourself trained a cohort and became a leader of the Bank's social anthropologists, who carried out the implementation of social policies.

**CERNEA:** Well, training was part of how I saw my job. In the initial years I tried to bring on board a lot of sociologists and anthropologists as consultants for various assignments and as staff. That was fine and effective. But then, when we started to and succeeded in formulating policies adopted by the Bank, those policies themselves created an operational demand for such skills.

The development of policy became a multiplier of our message. We didn't have to argue again, again, and again on a piecemeal basis for each project: "please do a social analysis on displacement; or do a social analysis of the indigenous population". Because dealing with involuntary resettlement or indigenous populations in ways mandated by the Bank's policy, the staff was guided to and compelled to bring in such skills. It was also important to create alliances and foster cooperation with technical specialists, engineers, irrigation specialists, foresters, as well as economists. Sometimes the technical specialists, the natural

resource specialists, the water specialists, the urban technicians were more open to collaboration and to contribution of social knowledge than the economists. But I also had very many colleagues, economists, who cooperated and contributed enormously.

#### OUR STRONGEST ALLY: THE FACTS

**FREIDENBERG:** In a sense you have already referred to the next question, but I'm going to ask it anyway to see whether you have other comments on it. Your emphasis on the sea of cultural variables and development might have not suited some of your colleagues at the World Bank. Were you able to instill a culture of recognition of the social variables at the Bank?

**CERNEA:** We've discussed that, but I'll add that our social argument was not just abstract, theoretical; the empirical evidence, the facts, were our main argument.

When I went out to do project work, the empirical realities, the positioning of facts on the table of what we called the issue-meeting, were the most important ally for me in many projects, as well as in policy discussions. It was crucial to be able to demonstrate, for instance, that the facts of life (and not, say, an infatuation with the idea of cooperatives) required that Bank staff and Bank projects explicitly begin to address the social organization of irrigation end-users, even though Bank irrigation projects had not previously done so. Facts in hand, I pointed out, for instance, the need to recognize the importance of family systems, women's associations, community composition, and tenure patterns structured along customary lines as opposed to a culturally simplified image of formal modern ownership over land.

Empirical facts carry great weight in the Bank's culture. Our ability to "deal in facts" and not just in esoteric arguments, helped us win battles about the social and cultural dimensions of projects.

The intellectual dialogue was another side of the same coin. We constantly had to fight various biases, for instance what I called in my Malinowski Lecture, the econocratic, technocratic, and comodo-centric biases. The World Bank had projects which were called Coffee Development in Kenya. You don't develop coffee, you assist the Kenyan farmers in growing coffee. It's not "livestock development" in Chad or in Senegal; it is assisting the agro-pastoral population to enlarge its capacity to raise livestock. So you have to shift from the focus on the commodity to the focus on social actors. This is how we constantly emphasized the role of culture, of social institutions, and of organizations. And it has been, and remains, a hard battle. It's a bit easier today because now in the first years of our new century the ascendance of the concept of culture is amazing. This type of

recognition of cultural issues and cultural concepts did not exist ten or fifteen years ago, especially not in the World Bank.

### FIGHTING DEVELOPMENT'S SOCIAL PATHOLOGIES

**FREIDENBERG:** You have worked in many domains during your career, but now I'd like to focus on two other domains within development anthropology to which you've made important contributions. One is the theory, policy and practice of population displacements and involuntary resettlement. The other is the argument for linking the protection and management of cultural heritage to the paradigm of inducing development. We've discussed some of this before, but could you, please, expand on your work and experiences for advancing these two domains?

**CERNEA:** Rather early on in my tenure at the Bank, I became interested in the issues of involuntary resettlement. Some of my colleagues attributed this choice to my personal experience as a displaced person. This is partly true, but it wasn't the only reason. Forced population displacements for projects' "right of way" also emerged as a major pathology in development projects, and was likely to become larger. My life experience enabled me to understand it perhaps earlier than some others, and my values drove my personal involvement with it.

In a broader sense, before coming to the Bank, I had seen development failing in Romania. I had seen people being promised much and being given very little. Even being deprived of what they had. So I understood what failed development can mean and what the pathologies of social change can bring on people: suffering instead of progress. In the Bank's operations, forced displacements entailed by necessary development projects appeared to me as one of the most poignant contradictions of development. Moreover, such displacements were happening on a different, much larger scale than in my prior experience. So I became deeply engaged in it. I also asked for help from other colleagues. One of them, to whose memory I want to pay much tribute, was David Butcher, who worked at that time in Rome, at FAO<sup>6</sup>, but had been previously involved in the major displacement caused by the Akosombo dam and reservoir in Ghana. I invited him to come to the Bank for a month to work with me on preparing operational guidelines for displacement. Another is my good friend and colleague, Ted Scudder, a world-level scholar of dams and resettlement.

Population displacement is one in a broad spectrum of pathologies which accompany development. No social change can happen without social costs. The problem is to minimize these negative costs and to not throw them on the shoulders

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<sup>6</sup> FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

on those who can least afford to pay for them. Thus, from the outset, I worked to preempt or ameliorate the effects of forced population displacement within interventions financed by the World Bank.

The guidelines I proposed to Bank management in '79 aimed, first, at professionally compelling Bank staff and borrowers to consider and contain the negative effects of population displacement on the people displaced. Second, our aim was to persuade the World Bank itself to take responsibility for displacement in projects it finances, rather than claiming that this is only a secondary local problem, to be dealt with by local authorities with local means. And third, we wanted the country governments themselves to not treat people who have to be relocated as disposable goods. On the contrary, governments should recognize that the people affected by the project have ownership rights, entitlements, and aspirations, and they need to be dealt with properly, protected against adversity and restored to a life at least equal and desirably better than what they had before.

Indeed, the social guidelines we prepared were approved by Bank management at that time, personally by Robert McNamara, the president, and enacted in Bank policy, as an Operational Manual Statement. This opened up a new era in Bank history for such displacements and relocations as integral parts of the projects approved and financed by the Bank itself, rather than being left as social debris to be mopped out by the weak local administrative authorities in the given project areas.

Our policy opened up, in fact, what became a new era for development-caused displacements all over the world, because the World Bank was the first international agency to adopt formal policy guidelines for displacement operations. In 1980, no other multilateral or bilateral development agency had such guidelines. The Asian Development Bank formally adopted such a policy only fifteen years later, in 1995. Nor did the OECD<sup>7</sup> countries – which includes the world's twenty-five most developed countries, each with its own bilateral aid agency – have any such policy guidelines. It took more than a decade for OECD and those agencies to recognize the legitimacy and timeliness of the World Bank's policy. In 1991, OECD's Development Assistance Commission invited me to Paris in several rounds, and I wrote at OECD-DAC's request the social policy guidelines on involuntary resettlement for the bilateral aid agencies of OECD countries.

This is why I'm saying that the Bank's policy became a landmark in normatively codifying the social issues of development-displacement worldwide. In addition, it became a landmark for the Bank internally as well, in more than one way, because it opened up the door for writing and enacting other social policies. Indeed, these followed: the indigenous people policy, the cultural artifacts' policy, and so on. The recognition of social issues in projects moved gradually far beyond population displacement.

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<sup>7</sup> OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes, indeed. We discuss and teach about these policies our students...

**CERNEA:** I worked on these issues during most of my quarter-century tenure in the World Bank, and I continue now too, after my formal “retirement”. I am quite pleased with how this new body of specialized social theory and body of research and planning methodologies about population resettlement processes have evolved and constituted during the last 20 years, and with the enhanced skills of this field’s practitioners. Today we are very far ahead compared to where we were in 1980. There are now countless international conferences, seminars, workshops all over the world dealing with such issues, and university courses and curriculum. I have expanded my own work in this field and elaborated a model called the Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model for Resettling Displaced Population, which was first published and applied in the early ’90s. Currently, numerous researchers and scholars in all continents are using this model which became the leading theoretical model in the field.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes, by now it is very widely studied and employed, indeed.

**CERNEA:** From the correspondence I receive, I learn that it is being taught widely, students are writing dissertations based on the IRR model, and academic textbooks or development handbooks reprint and recommend it. The analysis of impoverishment risk, along the IRR framework has spread to many project preparation or evaluation studies, and the resettlement policies of ADB, AfDB, and IDB<sup>8</sup> recommend it. This illustrates the proposition that analytical tools we develop as applied development anthropologists or sociologists can become practical, widely used tools.

**FREIDENBERG:** Definitely.

#### THE CONTRADICTIONARY NATURE OF CHANGE

**CERNEA:** Now, what is the significance of embracing the IRR model? Beyond the domain of displacement, as I said before, I think that the issue is recognizing the *contradictory nature* of inducing change, of any development. Contradictions and unintended consequences bedevil us, throughout. In inducing development, unintended consequences are the rule, not the exception. Therefore, we must always be prepared to look out for them. This is what ongoing monitoring and evaluation are all about: they are not just routine accounting requirements in projects. In our case, the IRR model analytically introduces the concept of risk. It

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<sup>8</sup> ADB – Asian Development Bank; AfDB – African Development Bank; IDB – Inter-American Development Bank.

demands answers to an unpleasant question: what are the potential social hazards of this particular intervention?

This is what social risk analysis is all about. Identifying the risks at the project's beginning equips development practitioners and development institutions far better to deal with unintended adverse consequences, with perverse social pathologies. These are not just the displacement itself – this is well known in advance! – but its unintended and unacceptable pauperization effects. And I'm proud that I proposed this model early in the '90s, when the concept of impoverishment risk was not yet in the mainstream of development thinking. Today, in 2003, if you open any statement of a development organization, you will see that *risk management* is on their banner. Ten years ago, such risks and the people's exposure to impoverishment risks existed as well, but were not at all central concepts in the resettlement literature or practice. And I find it very positive that risks are openly recognized now.

There's still a lot to do. For instance, I'm now writing another study, and preparing an edited volume of studies, focused on the compensation principle in displacement. The forthcoming book will have a challenging title: "Can Compensation Prevent Impoverishment?" A first, short version of my study has already been published in UNESCO's International Journal of Social Sciences (2003): it criticizes the international and national practice on compensation for displaced people, and challenges the economic theory behind the compensation principle. I argue that compensation, which has long been seen as the main remedy for displacement and expropriation of assets, is in fact structurally incapable of achieving the policy goal of restoring and improving the livelihood of the people who are displaced. Compensation is insufficient by itself: it must be complemented by investments, and by ensuring that the people uprooted by the displacing projects also directly receive some of their benefits.

Now, this is much easier to claim than to accomplish in practice. It means another major change in the theory and policy on resettlement. It will take much criticism and battle against the existing patterns and legal frameworks to convince governments and development agencies that compensation alone is almost always utterly and intrinsically insufficient to reconstruct the livelihoods of those displaced. I started this argument a few years ago, in a book on *The Economics of Involuntary Resettlement*. Several eminent economists – Ravi Kanbur, David Pearce, Timothy Swanson – as well as some anthropologists, have responded and pursued these ideas. But the issue is huge and it will take much more research and argument. This is my current-and-next battle...

**FREIDENBERG:** I think it's an important one.

**CERNEA:** Yes, it is huge, and the battle is only beginning. Many more need to join in it ...

Now, to speak about the second topic you asked me, cultural heritage. As I mentioned before, this is another very important territory for development

anthropology. The argument is that the cultural sector, the cultural endowments of any country, are a resource for development, not a liability. This sector creates resources and generates both economic gains as well as educational and spiritual gains. Such gains are also part and parcel of development. You cannot develop without education, you cannot have respect for national and individual identity without respect for national and world patrimony, and you cannot separate development of material assets from cultural development. Social development includes cultural preservation, cultural management, and cultural education. This is why I enjoyed the opportunity to work on this issue for the World Bank even after retirement, and to write the study to which I referred earlier, and the operational strategy which was formally adopted by the Bank on cultural heritage.

#### SOCIAL RESEARCH ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

**FREIDENBERG:** You also worked, after leaving the Bank, for the CGIAR<sup>9</sup> and specifically for promoting within the CGIAR international network anthropological and sociological research. What did you do there?

**CERNEA:** Indeed, another sector in which I became considerably involved over the last few years is the system of international agricultural research, the so-called Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). This is the consortium of international agricultural research institutions responsible for the creation of miracle maize, miracle rice, miracle wheat, and so on. In 1998 I was appointed to the Science Council of CGIAR as its first anthropologist and sociologist, continuing for almost six years now.

**FREIDENBERG:** Oh, that I didn't know. Great.

**CERNEA:** This Science Council is the body that reviews the "quality of science" and the "relevance of science" practiced and generated in all the 16 International Agricultural Research Centers- the research centers in which the Green Revolution originated: CIMMYT and IRRI, and also ILRI, the Water Research Institute, CIFOR, ICARDA, ICRISAT<sup>10</sup>, and so on.

From my Science Council vantage position, I tried constantly to support the work of those anthropologists who were already working in one or another of the international research centers, and to raise the social components of agricultural research to a much more important role in the overall activity of the CGIAR.

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<sup>9</sup> CGIAR – Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

<sup>10</sup> CIMMYT – International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center; IRRI – International Rice Research Institute; ILRI – International Livestock Research Institute; CIFOR – Center for International Forestry Research; ICARDA – International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas; ICRISAT – International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics.

Indeed, although social research in some of the centers has achieved important breakthroughs and makes constant contributions, social research is still recognized far less than commodity research, or research on natural resources, or biophysical and genetic research. And this, despite the fact that social research deals with the central actor of agriculture: the farmers. Some of our colleagues feel that social research in CGIAR is treated not as mainstream research but as a “servant to the biological sciences” and a poor cousin to economics. I am mentioning this only to stress, once again, that in many institutional settings anthropologists and sociologists still have to struggle uphill for asserting the type of knowledge that in fact is vitally needed for effective performance by those institutions. As a result, social science in CGIAR has to rely more on known theory rather than on expanding new research on farmers behavior and organizations under changing world market conditions

**FREIDENBERG:** And developing theories out of that?

**CERNEA:** Not necessarily always aiming at developing theory, but responding to new development challenges to agriculture and farmers with better knowledge.. My work in CGIAR’s Science Council led to scheduling an international conference on social research in CG, which we collectively organized at CIAT<sup>11</sup>, in Columbia in 2002. We put into discussion the entire state of the art of non-economic social research in CGIAR. A conference of this scale had not been held in the system for at least ten-twelve years. Extremely illuminating. Together with a colleague, Amir Kassam, we will edit and publish a volume of studies on these issues, some from this conference, which I believe will help to move social issues more to the forefront of the CGIAR system. We already have a nice title for this book: “Researching the Culture in Agri-Culture.”

**FREIDENBERG:** So, you have been working on several domains at the same time, and all after you “retired” from the bank?

**CERNEA:** Perhaps indeed I spread myself over too many areas. Yet CGIAR has been a worthy area to work in, in fact replicating in part some of what I did when I began working in the Bank I think that development sociologists and anthropologists should pursue more aggressively the potential for *social* research as a component of the research ongoing in a variety of international and national research centers, in various so to say “non-social” domains. Agriculture is only one of these domains, in which numerous scientific centers would benefit from social research inputs.

**FREIDENBERG:** You were awarded prestigious awards both from the institution where you have worked most of your career, the World Bank, as well as

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<sup>11</sup> CIAT – International Center for Tropical Agriculture.

in the field of anthropology. You received the American Anthropological Association's Solon T. Kimball Award for Anthropology and Public Policy in 1988 and the Bronislaw Malinowski award from the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1995. Tell us why you believe you are quoted as a sociologist by the Bank and as an anthropologist by the discipline of anthropology. What can you make of that?

**CERNEA:** Well, I was proud to receive both awards and I regard them as a success for developmental anthropology, for applied anthropology, and for sociology. But the award given by the American Anthropology Association, the Solon T. Kimball Award, is especially significant because it is a rare and overdue recognition by academic anthropology of the importance of the applied fields.

Frankly, I think that mainstream anthropology, the so-called academic anthropology, doesn't provide sufficient support and intellectual recognition of the fields they designate as developmental anthropology and applied anthropology. Academic anthropology looks down on applied anthropology, regards it as peripheral, while in fact it is developmental anthropology that is breathing life into the discipline at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The four-discipline image has long exploded in the way the disciplines are practiced. They have evolved into independent disciplines, social anthropology itself, as one of them, has not gained added visibility in the last two to three decades.

**FREIDENBERG:** Yes.

**CERNEA:** On the contrary, fewer courses are taught and public recognition decreases. Development anthropology, however, has been the frontier, and has gained new recognition for anthropology through its demonstration of how social science knowledge can be useful to society. This is very important. The discipline would be much better off if the "mainstream" anthropologists would recognize the theoretical potential existing in applied work, and put some effort in trying to develop theory and methodologies from this experience.

**FREIDENBERG:** Right. And by doing this, increase social impact.

**CERNEA:** In Europe I was trained in sociology, but the way sociology was practiced in Romania in its glory days before World War II, it had significant similarities to anthropology: it undertook many case studies of communities in rural areas. So, basically my education and self training was in both disciplines and I feel that I belong to both disciplines. For development research and applied work, I constantly advocate closer links and more conceptual mutual borrowing between anthropologists and sociologists.

That said, I believe that often anthropologists display some narrowness of vision, in focusing on decontextualized micro settings, while sociologists who tend to cultivate a broader societal view sometimes neglect the micro dimensions.

I gained enormously in my work, both in the design of project strategies and on the formulation of social policy, from being able to draw from both disciplines.

**FREIDENBERG:** That shows clearly in your work.

**CERNEA:** My work has been influenced by several great social thinkers. One whom I regard as an intellectual guide throughout my career was Robert Merton, whom I knew personally and who supported strongly my sociological work on social policies and social programs. Merton wrote what I think is still the best study on how to use social science for applied work. And he wrote it several decades ago, before the advent of “development sociology” or anthropology when he worked at the Bureau for Applied Research at Columbia University, together with Paul Lazarsfeld.

In sum, I believe that the work that sociologists and anthropologists do, and have to do, in development cannot be separated by a wall, should not be seen as two different types of work. And within institutional settings, they should cooperate rather than regard themselves as two different tribes or two different cultures.

**FREIDENBERG:** Well, obviously you were a catalyst for anthropological careers in the World Bank, in CGIAR, and in other institutions. So this prompts me to ask you what in your view might be the profile of an anthropologist that would be successful, and in contrast, the profile of an anthropologist who would not be successful, within large development institutions such as the World Bank?

**CERNEA:** Development anthropology in my experience is a “contact sport.” I tell this to my students on the first day of class now, at George Washington University, and anywhere I teach. Development anthropology, no less than applied sociology, is a domain where you have to constantly be a militant and fight various obstacles: not only the cognitive difficulties intrinsic to the processes we study, but also the cognitive dissonance of officials and governments, various reductionisms and simplifications, social pathologies and their perpetrators. In other words, the obstacles manufactured by those who either resist change or by organizations or governments who do not recognize the usefulness of social knowledge. In this intellectual contact sport, we must “play offense”, not defense, we must learn to persuade and hold our ground with good arguments and factual proof.

This is why in my other answers I constantly emphasize the importance of standing firm on your scientific position and relying on the body of knowledge that our discipline(s) bring(s) to development, as the ultimate source of our power. It is not possible to assert the cultural dimension of processes which we want to influence, without integrating all their other dimensions, most important – the economic variables. But it also not possible to assert culture convincingly without fighting reductionist views which abstract out the cultural dimensions from their models of social reality. Unfortunately, many people are trained to see only the features relevant to their own discipline and to ignore all the others.

**FREIDENBERG:** Exactly.

**CERNEA:** Economists are too often trained to look at the economic dimension only. Therefore since this is how they are taught, when they come to work in a development agency, many are reluctant to accept or recognize cultural dimensions. For this reason, anthropologists and sociologists must be able to argue convincingly on behalf of their own views against enduring biases or intellectual sectarianism.

And this is why I say that developmental anthropology is an intellectual contact sport: you have to fight. When recruiting anthropologists for the Bank, I always looked for people who have not only brains but who know where they stand and would not embrace just any stand, people who have not only knowledge but also have conviction, and people whose anthropological knowledge is accompanied by a moral dimension. I believe these are essential attributes for anthropologists who want to make a real difference through their work in development.

**FREIDENBERG:** On that note I will thank you on my behalf and on behalf of the Committee on the Oral History Project for this lengthy and intellectually enriching interview. Thank you very, very much.

