

Book Review

**Shaw, M. and Mayo, M. (Eds.) *Class, Inequality and Community Development*,
Bristol: Policy Press, 2016, 260pp, ISBN 1447322460**

Shaw and Mayo's book promotes the centrality of class analysis as a platform for liberatory community development. Recognising class-based, structural inequality is, in the editors' view, basic to resisting and subverting a community development agenda that serves a retreating state and which tends to reach out charitably rather than transformatively, masking and reproducing structural inequalities in the process. The contributors to this volume build on this argument and provide case-studies which highlight the class-informed roadblocks to liberation and the tensions and possibilities generated by class-conscious, anti-neoliberal and counter-deficit approaches to community development.

While the book is wide-ranging in terms of the geographies and contexts it covers, the thread that binds the volume together is its solid message that the class-inequality-community development equation is about politicising not only the reading of and acting on the world, but also the understanding of how community development is being shaped by the asymmetrical world we live in. As equality continues to be threatened by a global value system that is soft on the accumulation and concentration of wealth and power to the detriment of the collective good and to the sustainability of communities in general, depoliticising and overpsychologising community development is tantamount to active participation in and effective legitimisation of a global, predatory economic model that has eaten into the ideal of solidarity and social justice. Adopting a neutral stance to community development, I would argue, has to be interrogated for its unethical content and potential for skating over and legitimising the immoral, social, economic and cultural status quo.

Recovering an 'understanding of the politics of contemporary community development' calls for a deep analysis of the role of the state in neoliberal times.

Increasingly, the apparatus of the state are generating consent around political processes and legal frameworks that favour transnational capital and power. Elsewhere, (Borg, 2017) I have illustrated how, through a global network of appeasing states, the world economic order has weakened social cohesion and the value system that had supported it, sacrificing the dignity and humanity of millions of citizens and workers on the altar of competitiveness, flexibility, growth at all costs, balanced and surplus budgets, austerity measures and stability (read labour pacification). While neoliberalism has evidently become today's 'common sense', community development is caught between such hegemony and a counter-current which needs to be analysed further for its anti-hegemonic content. I am referring to the shift to far-right politics, with strong anti-neoliberal, nationalist, nativist and xenophobic rhetoric. Against such a backdrop, the volume under review not only offers the reader an opportunity to revisit social-class analysis as a tool to understand the world that is, but also provides a series of community development episodes that can help equip the reader with insights into how community-based activists can navigate polarised waters while revisualising a world that is not. Thanks to Shaw and Mayo, the editors of this volume, we have a collection of reflections on action which serves as a reminder that savage capitalism does have its detractors, that the collateral damage of predatory economics can be reversed, and that fatalism can indeed be transformed into liberatory action. At the same time, we are also reminded that occupying government and infiltrating the corridors of the state by community organisers does not necessarily translate into an automatic guarantee for substantial transformation of the authoritarian state apparatus, especially with regard to class-based struggles. Also, as aptly illustrated by a number of chapters, institutional and structural barriers to equitable access and participation persist as states stubbornly refuse to acknowledge hegemonic discourses, ideologies and attitudes that fashion and reproduce discriminatory policies and actions.

The struggle for accessibility, as illustrated by this volume, implies socialisation into political ecologies that challenge atomisation, fragmentation, single-issue gigs, narcissism, 'false generosity', 'cultural invasion', colonialism, and bureaucracy. To synthesise, accessibility, as understood by the contributors of this book, implies community development projects which: are relevant, immediate and close to the

communities' generative themes; reclaim solidarity by interrupting cycles of stigmatisation, demonisation, and the blaming of victims for their predicament; transform vulnerability into an opportunity to engage critically and act transformatively; affirm experiential knowledge as powerful knowledge; refrain from turning community development into assistentialism; achieve concrete results through cultural sensitivity, alliances, border-crossings and intersectionality; are informed by educational processes that serve consciousness building as a platform for action; are built on a deep understanding of what shared leadership and collective action mean; can distinguish between initiators of projects who are authoritative as opposed to authoritarian; and refuse to romanticise the communities that they work with.

While acknowledging that education is not a panacea to the economic, social and cultural ills of society, the role of education in addressing social justice is unquestionable. Zooming in on education as a potentially powerful liberatory tool within communities, the book tackles the challenge of preparing both educators and citizens for the possibility of leading and participating in communities of imagination and transformative action. Participatory, community-based initiatives, based on cognitive justice and ranging in scope from research to learning and action, constitute familiar territory to educators who are committed to education for freedom. This volume adds to the richness of the foregoing tradition by providing multiple illustrations of how educational initiatives can be truly embedded in community struggles for living with dignity and how empowerment can be achieved through educational processes that lecture less and do more. One story that impressed me is that of the residential Adharshila Learning Centre based in Sheopur, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. A particular feature of this school is that students do not use textbooks; instead, children produce knowledge collectively through interviews and conversations with the elders, by conducting scientific surveys on local plants, water resources, electricity consumption and other community issues, through concrete action within the community, which includes farming and knowledge dissemination and, in the case of doing democracy, writing newsletters and participating in knowledge acquisition through labour and action, such as organic farming where students spend two hours learning by doing, which includes community mobilisation through

dissemination of information. This story has all the ingredients normally associated with curricular processes that nurture transformative value systems by experiencing them, promote solidarity by doing solidarity, encourage community by creating curricular experiences and pedagogies that are communal, social and collective in nature, and resist passivity by embracing the pedagogy of active participation, creative and critical thinking, cooperative learning and project-based, collective action. As a curricular specialist, who has dedicated the past thirty years struggling against transmission and consumption of knowledge, such projects provide me with concrete curricular and pedagogical models for social change.

To conclude, I consider this book as a loyal compendium to the *Rethinking Community Development* Series. It includes a range of international examples, it promotes critical thinking, it includes a range of topical and timely perspectives which are cross-disciplinary, and it brings together new and established voices. Those who are looking for further enrichment in democratic practices should find this volume most helpful.

References

Borg, C. (2017). 'Reclaiming Social Europe in the Shadows of a Global Predatory Economy'. In *Arraiolos Malta 2017. 13th Meeting of Heads of State of the Arraiolos Group*. Malta: Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies.

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