

## Book Review

### **Neoliberalism and Urban Regeneration: London's Communities Finding a Voice and Fighting Back (2025)**

**Roger Green and Keith Popple, ISBN: 978-1529243956, Bristol University Press, 224 pages, £27.99 (paperback)**

**Review by Mae Shaw<sup>i</sup>**

This is a book of and for its time. It is both a warning and a call to arms. From the excellent introduction by Marjorie Mayo to the final chapter, we are left in no doubt about the context that faces us all one way or another. This is one of its many merits. We are living in an unprecedented global era and this account of campaigning groups over a decade or more has no illusions about both the limitations and the necessity of collective community action.

As it points out, London is a major global city attracting massive amounts of capital while concentrating power and wealth in the hands of increasingly few. The consequences have seen many communities experiencing extreme shortages of housing and deepening poverty and inequality. The question this book tackles is how communities can fight back in these complex circumstances, drawing on case studies from across London. A key case study is of Deptford, a diverse working-class area of southeast London, where most people have lived in rented accommodation, with nearly 50% in council housing. Despite expressed local concern, Boris Johnson, Mayor of London at the time, agreed a commercial development of luxury flats, prompting an aggressive period of gentrification which began squeezing out local residents. The Voice4Deptford campaign was an attempt to resist these developments, mobilising the local community to challenge the glossy visions advanced by the developers.

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, the authors demonstrate how 'the ruling elite shapes culture for its own advantage'. This dominant ideology is presented as 'common sense', 'natural' and 'inevitable', and contributes to 'enabling the powerful and super-rich to subordinate and exploit the majority.' The many iterations of this group over eleven years of campaigning as it tries to navigate the complexities of property development in London highlights the difficulties of maintaining momentum in circumstances where community voices count for little against corporate power (despite the inclusive rhetoric). As the authors

highlight: 'the impact of neoliberalism is destroying the notion of democracy and representation' - although this isn't necessarily visible. Opinions are sought like never before. But the phoney consultation processes played out at various stages in this process, familiar to many of us, take no account of the real concerns of local people or their lives in this new world. They are deliberately ignored in the slickly performative offers from developers and planners to 'co-design' shared space, for example. That is perhaps to be expected, given their competing interests. A more troubling aspect is the alliance between local politicians and developers which has seen the displacement of many communities through processes of 'regeneration' which have instead created mass private housing estates without adequate social housing or infrastructure.

This also suggests a more troubling aspect of contemporary consultation processes: the deteriorating relationship between democratically elected representatives and those on the receiving end of policy. There is increasing evidence, for example, of local authorities using consultation processes to draw community groups into making their own 'incisions', as distinct from decisions. 'Help us decide how to make cuts' has become almost commonplace across the UK. This raises serious questions about paradigms of community development which fail to consider relations with government as ambivalent, at the very least. The need for strategic thinking has never been more obvious, as has the need for imaginative distance if the 'community consultation cul-de-sac' is to be avoided.

So too is the need to directly involve people on their own terms, as this book insists: the basic work of door-knocking, getting people together in ways that interest them and retain their interest, making connections with and between people. These classic community development tactics need to be rekindled, as this book highlights. At various critical stages, the group also enlisted expert help from sympathetic solicitors or planners to bolster their case and this tactic suggests making alliances beyond our immediate field of practice.

It is now clear that neoliberalism has seeped into every corpuscle of public and private life. That's one reason why this book is so welcome. It starts from that point and attempts to identify the potential for effective collective action in that context, rather than simply complaining about how community views go unheeded. It is clearly dispiriting when activists come and go as their views are ignored, and the tenacity of those who have remained consistently involved

over time is a tribute to their commitment. This book convincingly demonstrates that such dedication is worthwhile.

---

<sup>i</sup> **The author**

Mae Shaw, Concept Editorial Group