

Book Review**Community Development: A Critical Approach
(Second Edition)**

Margaret Ledwith (2011) Polity Press: Bristol

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This second edition of Margaret Ledwith's *Community Development: A Critical Approach* offers a critical and searching review of community activism and theory that is clearly positioned in the contemporary era of global economic, social and environmental crisis. As Ira Shor notes in his foreword, Margaret Ledwith has a great capacity to 'model the approach she recommends, wonderfully merging conceptual and practical matters in relation to community development' (p.x). As such, it offers a very accessible introduction to those new to the ideas and approaches of community development, while also challenging experienced community development workers to re-engage with the critical pedagogy of Freire and Gramsci, as well as a wide range of community development literature in a searing analysis of the current global political and economic crisis. The easy writing style, stories of community development and practical focus of this book belies its sharp theoretical analysis of power and poverty. The discussion of community development theory and practice is embedded in a detailed statistical analysis and a structural analysis of praxis that is rooted in a critique of neoliberalism and global poverty, as well as developing a transformative orientation for greater equality, social justice and human flourishing – Kemmis' (2009) 'aim to live well' (page 78). This discussion draws on a lifetime of experience, deep knowledge and profound sense of care for people and community development.

From the opening thoughts of the book, the core processes, values and intentions of community development are introduced in the shape of five vital dimensions of community development that are outlined as a living process to guide the reader through the book. The discussion is underpinned by an urgent call for community development to reclaim its radical and sustainable agenda in a manner that has social justice and participatory democracy at its core. The stories of activists, including Margaret's own experiences, run throughout the chapters of the book, highlighting the local and global connections of community solidarity that unite people across the world in community struggle. These are underpinned by an emerging critique of the changing political and social contexts of contemporary society characterised by managerialism, individualism and consumerism.

This imperative for resistance and empowerment is clearly outlined in the discussion of the political context of the ‘Big Society’ conception of the UK and neoliberal globalisation of chapter one. This gives a clear indication of the urgent need for community-based politicisation, radical transformation and empowerment. Chapter two focuses on the practice of community development, outlining an approach that draws on the pedagogies of Friere and Gramsci. This chapter moves from the radical analysis of policy and theory in the previous chapter to give a practical ‘how to do’ guide to community profiling and a model of critical praxis that is then applied to critique child poverty, human rights approach and anti-poverty practice in the UK. Chapter three continues this blending of practical advice with critical analysis, with an introduction to the work of Paulo Freire and practical ideas about how to use story or narratives of liberation with community groups.

Chapter four focuses on a research-based approach to organising in the community through Emancipatory Action Research, outlining how its research processes fit the ideological base of community development in its co-creation of knowledge and cyclical participative model. Its application is illustrated in the analysis of the Scottish Community Development Centre’s ABCD approach and Saul Alinsky’s People’s Organisation. How the dynamic relationship between reflection and action forms the focus of collective action for change is discussed in Chapter five by drawing on the theoretical ideas of Friere, Boal, Giroux, Gramsci amongst others. This theoretical basis of participatory democracy in action is then applied to the experiences and insights of the Adult Learning Project and Learning for Democracy Group in Edinburgh, the Migrants Rights Centre in Dublin, the Women’s Forum at the Beijing UN Intergovernmental Conference and the Bolivian Social Movement, before offering a framework for local/global action (page 129)

The power of ideas is discussed in Chapter six, drawing on a critique of Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and role of intellectuals, which is linked to Thompson’s concentric PCS (personal, cultural, structural) model to make critical connections and suggest practical possibilities for community development. The critique of Friere and Gramsci highlights the need to situate critical pedagogy in a local context and moves the discussion onto an analysis of the contribution of contemporary theories of feminism, class and environmental justice in Chapter seven. Chapter eight outlines a searing analysis of social justice and equality, by drawing on an informed and diverse range of critical theories which are then applied to stories from community experience - such as Frankenberg’s (1997) analysis of the accumulated ‘unearned privileges’ of whiteness (page. 178) which is embedded in the practices of Diane Warner, a black university teacher in a nearly all-white university. This blending of theory and experiential insights is powerfully used throughout the book, building towards the Freirean-feminist-anti-racist pedagogy that is the subject of Chapter eight – in and of itself an unwieldy title that does not capture the simple complexity and power of its

argument about social justice and the needs to reclaim the radical agenda in community development.

This is a very accessible and readable book that is based on a detailed knowledge of statistical research, critical theory and community development experience, which is used to critique current state policy and develop an evidence-based argument about the structural implications of inequality in our society. While this obviously locates the book in this era, it is carefully contextualised and supports its claims by drawing on a diverse range of policy, statistical and qualitative research studies from local and global scales. It blends a variety of styles from critical analysis of policy, theoretical insights, practical advice and stories and experiences from community-based practice in a thoughtful and profound analysis of community development that engages and challenges the reader.