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Review

Akwugo Emejulu, (2015) *Community Development As Micropolitics: Comparing Theories, Policies and Politics*, Policy Press: Bristol, 182pp, Paperback: £22.

I approached reviewing this book with considerable interest. Having been active in community development in one form or another for about 50 years, I had observed the changing nature of the relationship between what was happening under the umbrella of this term in the USA and that in the UK with both intellectual and practical curiosity. When I first started serious work in community development, (and indeed before that as a postgraduate student), disregarding literature from UK writers who drew on their experience as colonial administrators, most of the literature available to us originated from the USA, dominated by the-then more radical – or so it seemed – methods of Alinsky which challenged the rather more mainstream books which reflected in their authors' eyes the notion of community development as one of the three methods of social work. Even the two influential reports emanating from the Gulbenkian Foundation had to dig hard to find a significant UK-based canon.

This changed with the advent of the Home Office funded Community Development Project (CDP) which produced at national and local levels a cornucopia of reports. Although one of the stimuli for the CDP was the Johnson-era War on Poverty in the USA, the CDP developed its unique quasi-Marxist analysis which did not find a strong resonance in the USA: some inner urban projects did also develop a – for the USA – radical analysis, but these were generally set in a pluralist framework and the US literature continued to be largely dominated by work in rural and agricultural extension projects both in the USA and in US-sponsored projects elsewhere in the world. Stimulated perhaps by the CDP's publishing and certainly by the lack of homegrown literature, the UK Association of Community Workers (ACW) sponsored a series of solid and wide-ranging Community Work texts, published by Routledge. At the same time, the Community Development Journal moved from being a rather old-fashioned journal reflecting the colonial origins of its founders to being an

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international and internationalist journal drawing on experience from many political contexts. By the 1980s, US literature and practice appeared to have only a very marginal interest for UK practitioners and academics and, if anything, the flow of insights tended to have been reversed.

Does this provide the basis for some kind of comparative analysis between practice in the two countries? Emejulu clearly thinks so as, in a wide-ranging and deeply researched account (based on a close reading of 121 texts), she takes three key contextual periods in the emergence of community development as a practice – 1968-1975, 1979-1985, and 1992-1997 - to demonstrate how a range of discourses could be found within both countries, albeit to differing degrees, which have been central to the language and practice of community development in each country. These discourses are, in approximate chronological order, the Democracy, Power and Poverty discourses, the Populist, Partnership and Empowerment discourses, the post-Marxist and Realist discourses, the Revitalisation and Coalition discourses, and the Transformation discourse. Most of these are dismissed as Emejulu as being not true to the key values of social justice such as equality and respect for difference, but also because they implicitly or explicitly create a democratic deficit, 'defining local people as deficient' with 'professionals mediating, regulating and controlling other people's development of agency.' The only discourses which escape this fundamental critique (and then not always completely) are the Democracy, Empowerment, Coalition and Transformation discourses. These shun the language of capacity building, focus on 'the need for democratisation of pubic spaces', recognise the importance of both process and outcome and act in solidarity rather than within a hierarchy of roles where the organiser sits at the apex and the 'community' is organised below.

This is a profoundly thoughtful book, challenging and at times controversial, and I wish I had time to read it again before writing this review. It has some weaknesses, however. It sometimes descends into caricature for the sake of making a political point, it over-generalises on occasions and at times it is just wrong in its account. To take one example, the reference to ACW, originally established by some very mainstream social work academics, being essentially a bunch of Marxist fellow-

travellers would have some neighbourhood workers literally turning in their graves. The analysis of the CDPs and their focus on the state (p.47) is also partial and ignores the very considerable volume of neighbourhood work and the focus on community which almost every local project engaged in. Many community workers will, I am sure, take issue with the way in which their practice has been categorised as patronising or, worse, serving the interests of those wishing to exert political and social control over local communities.

I end with two oddities. Given the huge amount of (particularly UK) writing about the nature of the state in capitalist society, it seems strange that the first major conclusion Emejulu draws from her analysis is that community workers both sides of the pond 'must mount a meaningful defence of the state'. Which state is that? A capitalist state? A workers' state? The second oddity is the title – yes, community development is, as she says, a political project, but to relegate it to the level of micropolitics appears to undo much of what she has argued for the proper place of community development in the mainstream of political struggle.

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