CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer 2021

Linsey, McGoey, (2019) *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World*, London, UK, Zed Books, Paperback, 384 pages, ISBN: 9781780326351, £12.99

I met Linsey McGoey in Dublin in the spring of 2019, where she was presenting a very informed and compelling account of the way in which philanthropy benefits the super-rich, with a particular lens on the Gates Foundation. Her interest then, as in this book, was the way in which the optics of familiar 'truths' are in fact *deliberately* distorted to suggest the opposite of what is *actually* the truth. For example, it is not just a happy accident for the super-rich that most people don't see through the official narrative of 'philanthropy', but a predictable outcome of the way in which knowledge is *managed* to hide the real truth. This concern with what she calls 'strategic ignorance' is developed more fully in this book. *The Unknowers* is a stimulating and provocative read which offers challenging insights for work with communities.

The author is an associate professor of sociology and Director of the Centre for Research in Economic Sociology and Innovation at the University of Essex. She has had a long interest in the relationship between knowledge, ignorance and power in the modern age - in particular, how 'strategic ignorance' functions to silently support those whose interests are best served by organised obliviousness. An essentially historical account, with contemporary examples and resonances, she offers a reappraisal of the work of Adam Smith and other enlightenment thinkers, to show how their legacy has been misappropriated by free marketeers. She points out that Smith, for example, frequently called for government controls to restrict the formation of monopolies and landlordism, a conveniently forgotten fact. Although she acknowledges that strategic ignorance is a cross-partisan phenomenon, this book mostly focuses on tactics of ignorance deployed by the political right. She has also co-edited the *Routledge Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (2018) the cover of which asserts that 'not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance is the death of knowledge'.

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I first began reading *The Unknowers* the day after the 2019 UK elections when, against the backdrop of a damaging European referendum battle, and over-optimistic projections that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party would break through in the end, a Conservative government was elected with a majority of 80 seats - their best result since 1979. The Labour Party suffered their worst defeat since 1935, causing consternation, recriminations and soul-searching; and producing a crisis on and for the left which will undoubtedly endure for some time to come. Amidst charges of electoral fraud and worse, the unanticipated Tory landslide not only ensured that exiting the EU was now a *fait accompli*, but it also served to embolden an increasingly potent and present politics of the right, whose frames of reference continue to expand (from anti-immigration to conspiracy theories to covid control) in both public and subterranean ways. In Scotland, the UK election results bolstered determined demands for Scottish independence. Into this political minefield crashed the wrecking ball of the Covid-19 pandemic. Any of these developments might have provided classic case studies for the author, but especially the Covid crisis with its claims, counterclaims and consequences.

McGoey's definition of 'strategic ignorance' is as follows:

> ... situations where people create or magnify unknowns in an *offensive* rather than a *defensive* way, to generate support for future political initiatives rather than to simply avoid liability for a past mistake. (p.3)

In other words, it's not just about covering your back, but about manipulating what's in front in ways that distract attention.

As she points out, 'there are enormous financial rewards in harnessing and magnifying the uncertainty and unknowns around us to achieve different financial and reputational advantage' (p.5). An early example she gives of strategic ignorance as a political tactic is the way in which, for example, the UK and the US are presented (and viewed) as having 'free market' economic systems, whilst 'in reality both nations have often been strongly protectionist', but 'government protections have not been evenly applied.

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Typically, it is wealthier individuals and large corporate monopolies which benefit the most from state protections'. This deliberate distortion of the truth does much to reinforce the prevailing narrative of 'public' welfare as a cash cow for the poor and/or feckless, which so distorts our moral and political landscape.

In his seminal text of 1958, *The Social Division of Welfare*, Richard Titmuss was similarly concerned to expand and correct public understandings of 'welfare' in the UK context. In addition to 'social welfare', he sought to highlight two less 'visible' forms: 'fiscal' and 'occupational'. This referred to the ways in which the tax subsidy system, and occupational benefits operated to silently and disproportionately privilege the middle and upper classes. The Titmuss formulation has been subject to critical re-workings over time and context, but perhaps the most relevant addition to his framework, and to McGoey's argument, is that of 'corporate welfare' which is rendered almost entirely invisible (Farnsworth, 2012). This refers to the substantial state support directly received by private sector organisations, including multi-national corporations with little or no loyalty to British taxpayers.

To definitions of corporate welfare could also be added 'free market protections', increasingly concealed in obscure legal instruments which privilege shareholder interests and corporate bidding processes, and which result in the increased outsourcing to private companies of many functions which would until recently have been considered 'public services'. One thing the Covid crisis has exposed is the true extent of the private sector in the public world despite the 'corporate veil of ignorance' which has been so effectively deployed to keep it hidden. For example, when there were reports of criminal shortages of PPE for care homes in the UK from February 2020 on, most people were unaware that 84% of social care is run for profit, much of it processed offshore in tax havens. Similarly, the chaotic track and trace programme operates not as part of the NHS, but in parallel to it – as a network of commercial, privatised testing labs, drive-through centres and call centres. The argument that the market delivers efficiency is shown for the fiction that it is.

Such serious political elisions often proceed through language as much as action. Language is never innocent, as Raymond Williams (1976) and others have reminded

us. It is always valuable, therefore, to stand back from our familiar understanding of words to see what *work* they are being required to do in a particular context. For example, through corporate sponsorship, cynically coupled with genuine public appreciation, it was possible for a time to frame NHS, social care and other 'frontline' workers as 'heroic angels' rather than workers who sell their labour and who should be entitled to expect commensurate financial reward and working conditions which have been serially denied. If strategic ignorance had not been so effectively deployed, our calculus may have shifted from 'clapping for carers' to 'booing for bankers' (Segal and Chatzidakis, 2020)

Strategic ignorance of the role of the market in 'public' institutions has been increasingly necessary to the success of the neoliberal project pursued by governments across the world. Central to this project is the assumption that 'ignorance is a scourge of the poor and uneducated, rather than a resource of the powerful' (p82). In this case, exposing the powerful must precede any possibility of empowering the powerless.

These insights clearly have much to offer to a critical reappraisal of the claims, contradictions and challenges of community work in the new world of the 2020s. For example, managerial discourses, practices and frameworks are too often legitimised by reference to emancipatory educational 'values' that obscure the reality of market relations and their consequences for inequality and poverty. Drawing on Foucault, Gary Fraser (2020) goes further in warning of the danger that:

> community development emerges not so much as a social profession rooted in the needs and aspirations of communities as a technology of government which is deployed by local states to facilitate neoliberalisation, austerity and the marketisation of public services.

Citing evidence from the Grenfell tragedy, in which safety concerns raised by local people went successively unheard, McGoey argues that local people are often judged to be 'inferior knowers', despite institutional arrangements which claim to validate their knowledge; which encourage people to 'have your say'. The same might be uncomfortably true of those liberatory discourses and policies such as 'community

empowerment', 'participatory budgeting' and the like which litter the professional environment. Unless such notions are 'problematised', as Freire would have it, and located in social and political context, they are in danger of disguising the sources and consequences of real power. The contradictory nature of community work in and as policy should at least be acknowledged, even if addressing the contradictions is much more complicated. *The Unknowers* provides some eye-catching concepts for honestly interrogating the contemporary contradictions and complexities of work with communities: Suspicious attention, conflict blindness, the ostrich instruction, to name a few.

There is particular relevance too of McGoey's arguments for the wider historical politics of community development. Certainly, benign readings of colonial community development would now be radically re-assessed through the lens of Black Lives Matter and similar discourses of wilful amnesia. So too, the framing of 'communities' as deficit objects of benevolent intervention, would benefit from such a reassessment. The 'manufacture of consent', central to Gramsci's formative notion of hegemony is rooted in the ways and means by which powerful individuals and organisations consistently evade consequences for their actions by knowing how and where to spread knowledge and ignorance to disguise their own agency. Rendering power visible is an honourable objective for democratic community development, and one that perhaps needs to be revitalised for a changing political landscape.

In working with community groups consistently bamboozled by corporate language, an old tactic might have a new life: Bullshit Bingo. Here's how it works. 1. Collectively draw up all the corporate or meaningless terms with which people are confronted and expected to take seriously, despite what McGoey would call 'a credibility deficit'. They're not hard to find: quality assurance, learning outcomes, empowerment, partnership working..... 2. Fill in bingo card squares with the best or most often used. 3. Provide cards for participants at all relevant meetings and see how long it takes to complete the set and call it out. Now that could help to cut through the bullshit, restore some small sense of human agency, and make people laugh at the same time!

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