

Book review**The Community Development Reader:
History, themes and issues**

Gary Craig, Marjorie Mayo, Keith Popple, Mae Shaw and Marilyn Taylor (editors)
2007. Bristol: Policy Press

To have critical educators producing a book of this calibre is indeed a breath of fresh air for those of us involved in the daily practice of community development. While examining the different phases through which community development has evolved in relation to particular political contexts, the thread of criticality is woven through the whole book. It confronts the vision of those who wish to 'instrumentalise' community development to maintain the status quo of capitalist oppression and provides a counter argument to those who wish to reduce community development to pathological therapies of individualistic wellbeing and self esteem.

The Reader examines the relationship between theory and practice through an analysis of a wide range of community development practices over the last forty years. While recognising the wealth of literature and experience that exists around variations on the theme such as community work, community education and regeneration, the Reader consciously does not embrace all of these dimensions. Nevertheless it reaffirms the importance of "real empowerment in the pursuit of social justice as the basis of community development," (21). In defining the aim of community development it quotes the Budapest Declaration (2004) which envisages the "...twin underpinning values of social justice and a desire to change power structures in favour of the 'excluded'", (10). It is within this framework that the Reader presents a wide range of themes under the umbrella of community development reflected in a variety of practices and settings.

At first glance the book can seem quite dense but the structure facilitates the reader to navigate their way. It is divided into four sections with the first an introduction written by Craig who states that the goal of the book is to "...reassert the identity of the occupation of community development in a UK context," (17) as it has suffered and continues to suffer from a series of attacks and manipulations since its creation in the 1950s. It is a contribution for reflection on "...the ambivalent and frequently hostile relationship between community development and the state, and the latter's attempt to use community development as a tool to 'manage' urban deprivation and dissent," (18). This ambivalence can be verified in all the historical contexts referred to in the book albeit with different nuances and degrees of intensity.

Section two, "In and Against the State: 1950s to the late 1970s", discusses community work practice during this period of de-colonisation. In the colonies community development was used by the colonising power to control local people but with "the winds of change sweeping across Africa" community development realigned its focus to control unrest "at home". The contributions in this section analyse community development techniques implemented by the colonisers and reutilised "at home"

under the fallacy of neutrality, but in truth intensely political in sustaining the status quo. Other contributions analyse active participation in processes of radical change that challenged the status quo.

Section three, “In and Against the Market: mid-to late 1970s to early 1990s”, situates community work in this new context where the market becomes a key player in state activities and consequently influences community work. This period is characterised by a reduction in citizens’ rights substituted by an ideological position of “individual self-help...the cult of the private” (112). While on the one hand this period saw a clamping down on collective resistance movements of a political confrontational nature, with the miners strike; on the other hand different approaches to community work and the role of the community worker emerged. During this period Bryant perceives an attempt at incorporating communities into statutory managerial structures thus reducing considerably their power to contest. (140). It is a period when policy reinforces the “individualisation of social relations, the competitiveness between categories introduced in order to reduce overall state expenditures in the name of respect for difference” (183). The flip side of this policy results in “the loss of the capacity to mobilise communities for action through struggles for power” (183) forcing community development into a phase of redefinition.

The emphasis in this period is around organisational structures of different community groups and how the community worker engages with these. A quotation from Croft and Beresford perhaps sums up the struggles of this period, and arguably of any period in relation to community work, social change and power where they argue, “power is generally not something that is handed over or can be given. It has to be taken.” (168). It is against this backdrop of community development and the struggle for a radical shift in power in the capitalist society that the Reader enters the present political context.

The final section is entitled: “Between the state and the market: the mid-1990s to the 2000s”. The authors refer to the new lexicon for community development which during the Blairite Labour period used the terms “partnership”, “choice”, “performance” and “targets”. Communities were invited to take on local services and in so doing were considered active citizens. More recently the Coalition Government introduced the “Big Society” with the rhetoric of modernisation of the state which basically entails unloading government responsibilities on to local communities who do not have sufficient resources to deliver them. The lexicon in this case comprises of “consumer choice”, “empowered civil society” where certain groups are responsible for all kinds of social problems that have created the so called ‘broken society’. Taylor sums up these thoughts affirming that, “...while power is increasingly invested in global corporations, responsibility for welfare is pushed down the line to local, community and individual level, with risks borne by those least able to bear it,” (293).

Other contributions in this section discuss the downgrading of education to training, the shift from government to governance and the diffuse use of the term community. All of these aspects aim at neutralising any form of radical community activity that might challenge the status quo. On the other hand Taylor affirms that, “...many communities have made conscious choices to take on responsibility for local programmes and diversify funding in order to retain their independence, assert their

own ownership of community interventions and ensure that new resources meet community needs,” (294).

The challenge here is for communities not to be lured into substituting the state and become absorbed in bureaucratic administrative activities. Should this occur they run the risk of distancing themselves from engaging in the struggle to radically change the oppressive systems that control our society.

Depending upon the political stance of those who wish to implement community development, it can be used as an instrument of promotion or contestation of the status quo. The book aligns with the latter and argues in favour of community development as an instrument for strengthening civil society. It also contends that community development can serve as a stimulus for local people in their communities to exercise control over political agendas whether local or indeed global. These agendas are generally decided out-with local peoples’ control by people who do not identify with the struggle for change. The Reader also reaffirms the importance and indeed the need for community development to combat the dominant cynical and fatalistic tendency that blames the victim for the situation of oppression in which the majority of the world’s population is condemned to live.

The Reader concludes with an afterword by Mayo. It brought to mind my personal experience at work at the moment. I work in a housing association and my job title, from “community regeneration programme officer”, has now become “customer service partner”. Tenants become “customers” and communities “clients”. Their participation is controlled and channelled through top down mechanisms, created by people brought in from the private sector, none of whom have any experience in community development. This is a new form of manipulation of community development giving the impression of participation but with the ultimate goal of eliminating any form of challenge to the status quo.

The Brazilian writer, Leonardo Boff, invented the term ‘hamburgerisation’ of global culture referring to the cultural imposition of the American way of life on Third World countries and indeed the world! In the present context of community development with the dominant focus on “business” and “financial sustainability” independent of the state, communities are forced down the route of “social enterprises”. To paraphrase Boff we could now talk of a ‘tescoisation’ of community activity! Perhaps more than a “site of struggle” community development is becoming a “site of resistance” in order to survive!

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