Sue Kenny, Jim Ife and Peter Westoby (2021)
Populism, Democracy and Community Development.
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Abstract

The book explores the relationship between the current growth in populism, the crisis within liberal democracy, and the implications of this for communities and the practice of community development. After an introductory overview the book is comprised of 14 individually authored chapters. The chapters are presented in 2 parts: Part 1 offers a framing of the macro issues; Part 2 explores populism and community development in different contexts.

This book is part of the Policy Press 'Rethinking Community Development' series. The editors introduce both the series and this book as providing "a critical re-evaluation of community development theory and practice", drawing on current development and different practices across the world. Previous books in the series have included:

- Environmental Justice, Popular Struggle and Community Development. Edited by Anne Harley and Eurig Scandrett.
- Ethics, Equality and Community Development. Edited by Sarah Banks and Peter Westoby.
- Funding, Power and Community Development. Edited by Niamh McCrea and Fergal Finnegan.

The editors in summarising the book argue that it sets out to explore the structural, social and political contexts within which community development functions, and that this will help us understand the current manifestation of populism, which in turn may be construed as a contemporary crisis of liberal democracy, neoliberalism and perhaps hyper-capitalism. To this end the book has 14 chapters with each written by different

author(s). The chapters are distributed into two distinct parts: Framing the Challenges, and Populism and Community Development in different contexts. The book editors note that there is limited literature on the relationship between populism, democracy and community development, so this work is an early contribution to the debate

The Introductory Overview suggests that populism is driven by the poor economic conditions of working-class communities, which leads to distrust of established leaders. As a response these communities may look for new strong authoritarian leadership to sort out the problems. The result of these trends is less democracy, hostility towards minorities, and a retreat to petty nationalism. The final manuscripts for the book were edited in April 2020 as the Covid pandemic was beginning to unfold. The editors predict that the pandemic may lead to the further growth of populist tendencies.

A number of themes are explored by the chapter authors:

- The impact of neoliberal agendas that refocuses social welfare from a rights - based agenda to that of productivity.
- The promotion of a 'them v us' binary view of society built around class, gender/sexuality, ethnicity, religion and nationality. The role of social media in spreading populist propaganda is suggested to be an increasing phenomenon in this process.
- It is noted that populism is not a single model. There is both right wing and left wing populism reflecting exclusionary/inclusive agendas.
- Community developmental itself has various models, ranging from autonomous large scale power focused organisations, to smaller scale depoliticised groups often operating as clients of a managerialist local state.

The authors explore a range of responses to these themes. However, I think we should be wary of trying to find a simple 'one model fits all communities' solution. At a general level there are commonalities, such as the need to identify the actual cause of local problems, the need to create local informal learning processes, develop alliances, link local struggles to national campaigns, and making creative use of new technology. How

all this works out in practice will probably vary considerably depending on local traditions, needs and opportunities.

Another focus for the book is the deterioration of democracy. This is positioned as the decline of liberal democracy v the rise of populism. Again, I think there is a danger of oversimplifying the debate. The nature of politics varies across countries. As already stated, populism is not a single monolithic entity, and neither is liberal democracy.

It is more important to explore what we understand democracy to be, and how in changing times it can be made more effective and resilient. There are challenges here. As the authors point out community development is generally based upon the principles of a participative citizenry with increasing 'power to the people' as a key goal. This remains true, but we should note that right wing populists argue for this as well (albeit from a different ideological perspective).

The individual chapters cover a range of subjects. In Part 1 the discussion takes us on journey from populism to its impact on communities, and then some possible responses including popular education, social media and Alinsky. Part 2 looks at community development in US, populism and environment in Latin America, democracy in the UK, community engagement in Finland, community organising in Hong Kong, counter hegemony, and the Aksi 212 movement in Indonesia.

In conclusion, the 14 chapters cover a lot of ground. As with any collection of edited chapters there is the strength of a discussion covering a diverse range of subjects, contexts and analysis. This is though, balanced by some contradictory positions, the difficulty of matching specific micro examples to the broader macro arguments, and transferring the experience of one country to another with different traditions and structures. This often leaves the reader to draw their own conclusions, which may be a good thing.

Overall, this is an important book that feeds into the current debate around the growth of populism, poses questions around the nature and future of democracy, and potentially about how we may recover from the Covid pandemic through building a better future,

rather than simply recreating the recent past. Community development has the potential to make a significant contribution to this process, but to do so it has to free itself from its often limited ambition, and in some contexts client status. How do we go forward to create progressive community-based agendas, embed community-based critical informal education processes, build autonomous and powerful community organisations? This book raises useful questions and sometimes points us towards possible directions of the way forward. However, the path still has to be travelled, and it may be a meandering path with some dead ends and alternative routes. One of the outcomes from reading the book is the feeling that currently we are ill equipped for the journey.

Rod Purcell

Rod Purcell has many years experience as a community development worker. He was Head of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow, board member of the International Association for Community Development, and Chair of the UK Federation for Community Development Learning. He is author of several books and co-editor of the Radical Community Work Journal. His most recent book (with Dave Beck) is *Community Development for Social Change,* published by Routledge.