

# Politics, power and community development.

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2018

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Critical and Radical Social Work. The definitive publisher-authenticated version HARMS SMITH, L. 2018. Politics, power and community development. Critical and radical social work [online], 6(3), pages 429-433 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986018x15388225942229>

REVIEW: Meade, R.R., Shaw, M. and Banks, S. (Eds). 2016. *Politics, power and community development*. Bristol: Policy Press.

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This book is a collection of writings forming the first of a series on '*Rethinking Community Development*'. The series is intended to challenge readers of various disciplines to critically rethink what community development means in theory and practice. The timely series, introduced by this volume, promises to be of great value to theorists and practitioners alike. What has been theorised and practiced as community development clearly requires a 'critical re-evaluation' so that revitalised understandings may inform more relevant and contextualised approaches. This first book of the series explores *Power, politics and community development*, and their interplay within various internationally situated contexts. The editors express the hope that the critical orientation of the volume will prove to be a "politically useful and emboldening resource" (Meade et al, 2016, p.1). This it certainly achieves.

In examining the politics and ideologies underpinning community development, the various chapters centre on themes spanning its regressive or progressive potentials. They critique the conceptual and practice failures of community development and simultaneously invoke hope for work towards social justice, change and transformation. This is consistently achieved by providing historical analyses of various contextual applications of community development and then foregrounding successes and potentials for progressive achievements.

The authors represent both breadth and depth of scholarship and practice from across the world. They include Scholars from Social Sciences, Law, Education, Social Work, Community Organisation, Development Studies, Geography and practitioner/activists in Community Development, Youth and Community Work, Disability, Gender, Research and the Human and Non-Human Environment.

What stands out about this volume is its critical engagement with the discomforting issues all too familiar to those of us working and theorising at community practice level. The contradictions associated with the radical and struggle potential of community practice within constraints of state and funding ideological frameworks of status quo maintenance, are generally underexplored.

In the first section, '*Thinking politically*', taken-for-granted concepts and terms are scrutinised and challenged. The development paradigm with its ideological underpinnings in the colonial project of 'civilisation' is acknowledged to have masked exploitation and appropriation. It is critiqued for its emphasis on market integration within the hegemony of neoliberal economics, rather than being understood as a process of struggle and conflict.

The first chapter in this section is an introduction by the editors, describing themes and providing brief summaries of contributions. They describe ambiguities in and contestations around concepts such as 'community' and community development and trace their problematic origins, while arguing that politics itself is an organising concept in these understandings and practices. They highlight the centrality of neoliberalism as an ideology and acknowledge other important axes of oppression. A dialectical approach is suggested whereby the politics of current neo-liberal community development is problematised and where practices are understood as 'historically situated, ideologically contested and contextually specific'. They argue that this plurality of understandings opens it to critical inquiry and promise of a progressive nature.

Other chapters in the first section deal with the politics and contestations around *Community and Development* as concepts (Newman and Clarke, 2016). Community development as attempt to

control rather than liberate and to transform 'backward' populations by former colonial powers, and then later as neoliberal technologies, are contrasted with the radical politics of Freire (1970) and other liberatory approaches. The tensions and ambiguities of *facilitation and leadership* roles and how these might reflect efforts to support self-determination on the one hand and more sinister maintenance of Western power in post-colonial contexts on the other, are explored (Kenny, 2016). Suggestions are made to democratise community development towards social movement practice. In India, Community development has been redefined as the progressive *Community Organising*, a more political, collectivising process that redefines power relationships (Jha, 2016). This chapter describes how collective community mobilisation and organisation has been able to transform those suffering multiple and intersecting identity oppressions and social exclusions.

In the second section, '*Practising Politics*' the focus is on examples and case studies of community development practice in various contexts. In Taiwan (Chen, 2016), locality-based community development is described as a strategy to contest neo-liberalism and enhance collective welfare, equality and justice through creating new spaces for cultural and community activities. Next, a thought provoking and critical description of the role of philanthropy in community development in an Irish context, is provided where it is shown to be able to work towards progressive outcomes (McCrea, 2016). Although many funding foundations attempt to minimise dissent against capitalism, examples are given where activists in such situations challenge injustices. Philanthropic funding may provide freedom to resist, where state funding proves hostile to dissent.

Farrell and Tandon (2016) provide an excellent example of challenge and transformation of entrenched structural power dynamics in India, where earlier, community development had lacked critical engagement with discrimination. The role of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is interrogated as an alternative pedagogy around gender issues. An analysis of various five-year plan periods reveals increasing acknowledgement of women's agency and political leadership development and a plea is made for community development to be reconceptualised as a politically transformative methodology.

Other chapters in this section include a hopeful description of what a progressive politics for diversity in Australia might be (Meekosha, Wannan and Shuttleworth, 2016). They acknowledge shifting ideologies in social policies, with community and social workers implicated in earlier white supremacist policies and genocidal practices towards Aboriginal peoples. They warn that capacity building not premised on redistribution will fail to bring about social change. The examples of work in disability and in social housing demonstrate how collective identity and dissent may be enabled through community practice. The chapter by Dominguez and Scandrett (2016) on work with indigenous communities in Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazonia around conflict with the extractive oil industries explores problems of dispossession, domination and colonisation. Struggles for environmental justice is discussed through a critique of Community Relations Partnerships (CRPs); Decolonial education as a political question; and the need for mobilisation against oil corporations. A plea is made for Ecological debt to be embraced as a concept for solidarity with all those dispossessed through neoliberalism.

This section ends with an excellent analysis of the role of global institutions (World Bank; IMF and the WTO) and how these institutions construct a context of "disciplined inclusion into the globalised, market-driven development project" (Gaynor, 2016, p.179). The so-called post-Washington consensus as social engineering to maintain the neo-liberal project meant the addition of social safety nets to offer protection from the harshest impact of economic policies and 'building capacity' to mitigate consequences of market driven policies – building legitimacy for the global capitalist project. Earlier structural understandings of underdevelopment were abandoned and poverty was

framed as being caused by internal domestic factors, poor governance and corruption; and poor communities representing a security threat through their violent propensities. These discourses consolidate a consensus for the global market-driven development project. However, the construction of civil society as an (apolitical) partner offers hope for participation and critical engagement and "...it falls to community and civic leaders to reconnect with their roots and, working with their communities, to step outside the globally dominant norms, institutions and frameworks to envision, imagine and articulate alternative social and political projects and futures." (Gaynor, p.191)

The last section, *Politicising the future* comprises three chapters. The first, deals with building critical community politics of identity through the overtly political, disability arts movement (Cameron, 2016). It recognises the power residing in collective identification; seeing disability as oppression and understanding the way in which disability is reproduced in everyday life; and the need to challenge these. Community development is cautioned against using 'politically naïve cultural activity' to bring about social progress and unconsciously entrenching oppressive social structures, but rather to engage critically with perspectives emerging from the disability arts movement to achieve emancipatory potentials.

The chapter on community development and service delivery protests in South Africa (Botes, 2016), or more aptly, 'rebellion of the poor', rooted in people's inequality and deprivation, explores the absence of and potential for community development involvement. It argues that community development should reconnect with discourses and practices of protest politics, albeit at a more local participatory level. The last chapter explores alternative economic models and proposes 'the commons' as an alternative to the market economy and as a way of rejecting capitalism (Kratzwald, 2016). It is argued that current community development attempts to empower people within and remaining uncritical of the existing system. Examples of such co-operative projects are provided, emphasising the importance of self-organisation from below, recognition of the threats from the current economic system, and democratic principles.

The level of critical analysis of the contributions in this volume are excellent, providing the reader with a rich depth of material with which to engage. Some chapters provide greater depth of interrogation and complexity than others, with some seeming to revert to discourses around community development of the very nature critiqued by others. However, the strength of a volume such as this is precisely in the exposure and contradictions in argument and discourses of community development, drawing on the reader's own critical intellectual engagement with and interrogation of the content. Lastly, as this is but one volume in a series, it is recognised that it is not possible to incorporate all relevant geographical or issue-based content. For this reason, it is hoped that future volumes in the series will incorporate more Latin-American and African perspectives than the two chapters from these continents included here.