

**Community Development Journal
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Field Notes

Communities: Globalisation and the Politics of Fear

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“How do we change what we don’t understand?” The words of a community activist as they sat watching a street scene in the East End of London. Over an hour of discussion, perhaps 2,000 people passed by, maybe from 100 nationalities – and just as many languages - were heard.

The conversation raises important question for community development practitioners and strategists at a time when we are witnessing, both locally and globally, a period of rapid social and economic change. Debates on multi-culturalism and ‘super-diversity’ are rife in both the media and academic literature in the UK (Phillimore & Goodson: 2009). Within an international contest we are witnessing often global mass migration – from Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within war zones, from South to North, from Eastern Europe to the West, from the former Soviet Union to new Eastern European EU accession countries and, in Latin America and South East Asia from rural to urban economies.

The speed of demographic change has been compounded by globalisation and the economic down-turn of the last year. For all the talk of a ‘global third way’ – of communities and community economic development as a tool for managing change and the negative impacts of macro-economics on local economies (Giddens 1998; McCabe & Hahn: 2006) what has emerged is the politics – and language – of fear, which has been reflected in the move of centrist parties across Europe and beyond towards the right in terms of migration control and the rise – again – of the far-Right. The language of the late 1960’s has returned – we are being ‘swamped’, ‘over-run’, ‘over-crowded’ and ‘invaded by alien cultures’ – to select just a few international media headlines. More recently, the politics of fear have been reflected in a number of mainstream, mainly American, publications on ‘the Islamification of Europe and the loss of ‘indigenous’ cultural values or “soul” in the words of Bruce Bawer (Bawer: 2006).

Such fears have been exacerbated by the events of 9/11 in the USA, 7/7 in London and the recent Mumbia hotel bombings. Yet, behind such heightened concerns about the growth of extremism across different religious, cultural and ethnic divides lie a series of, perhaps, more deep-seated anxieties that:

- social capital – or the networks and ‘structures’ that bind communities - is breaking down (Putnam: 2000)
- diversity, migration and social change are undermining shared values and ‘community cohesion’ (Cantle: 2006)

- there is a growing 'democratic deficit' – an increasing gap between individuals, communities and established political systems and institutions (Decker: 2002).

In short – we do not understand, or, indeed, may actually fear change at a community level. It is happening too fast to control socially or politically.

It is possible to detect a double-sided policy response to this 'age of uncertainty'.

On the one hand, there has been an emphasis on reconnecting the state and community through, in Western nations, the devolution of decision making to a more localised level: the introduction of adapted South American models of participatory budget setting; investment in 'building community capacity' to engage with political systems and the promotion of active citizenship, community leadership and community 'anchor' organisations. In the economic sphere, there has been a shift to breaking up large state services such as health and housing through legislation, commissioning and procurement procedures, the promotion of locally based providers and social enterprise – again with the idea of reconnecting services with their users.

On the other hand, alongside this empowerment agenda has been a decade of the erosion of civil liberties, increased surveillance of citizens, the introduction of ever tighter immigration control, an increase in the number of asylum refusals and, ironically, an increase in the power of the central state in managing social and community activity through target setting, tighter regulation and an emphasis on an, almost entirely race (rather than class or age) based approach to community cohesion and integration. In a very real sense there feels to be a strong, if not dominant, return to notions of community pathology, of 'blaming the victim' (Cooper: 2008). These people, these communities, do not engage in decision making, fail to act in entrepreneurial ways or refuse to integrate because they are somehow inadequate.

In the politics of fear, it is perhaps unsurprising that the term 'feral youths' (out-of control, feckless and criminal) has gained some media and political credence and, more recently, been applied to whole, poor, communities.

The two handed policy approach may be seen as two sides of the same coin – or the 'carrot of empowerment' balanced with 'the stick of enforcement'. It is, however, important to question whether there is a difference between these two approaches or whether what we are witnessing is a new, possibly unnamed, concept of 'controlled empowerment'.

Participation, engagement – but on our terms. To take a few examples – participatory budgeting, as envisaged in the UK is less communities taking control (let alone influencing) substantive governmental and statutory financial decision making – and is more 'participatory petty cash' – having a say in very marginal spends on issues and services which may or may not be directly relevant to actual community needs. Or again, there is the bureaucratisation

of engagement – capacity building so that community groups can understand governance structures, become ‘better bidders/managers of resources’ and navigate complex regulations – rather than, necessarily, address the issues affecting their lives. The success of ‘empowerment’ is therefore measured not in terms of the impact and outcomes of participation – but within an economic matrix of the number of people who ‘feel’ they can influence decisions within the ‘allowed’ spaces, the numbers attending meetings or the number of recognised organisations in a locality. We live in a culture of research but not learning.

This managerialist approach to empowerment is reflected in shifting languages. The term deliberative, rather than participatory, democracy has come to the fore. But without an analysis of power and power relationships in the process of deliberation. Emphasis is therefore placed on the voices of individual citizens – without a recognition that citizens need to organise collectively and ‘on their own terms’ to gain – and claim – their rights. As Rosie Meade has remarked, not only the state but also “*state funded {professionalized} NGOs are colonising the few political and discursive spaces that might otherwise might accommodate more ‘organic’ social movements*” (Meade: 2009)

If this idea of controlled, regulated or managed, empowerment has any resonance, how has community development responded? Some have seen governmental agendas of communities as a basis for improved democracy and responsive service delivery as an opportunity to enhance the role and influence of community development or ‘critical community practice’ (Butcher et al; 2007). Others, echoing the arguments of the early 1970’s on community development as a means of social control (Bailey & Brake:1975/Curno: 1978), argue that the process has been co-opted by the state. Community development has, for example, become a managerialist tool to gather feedback on, for example, planning applications and physical regeneration initiatives, or promote user involvement in health services. The radical roots and traditions of community development have been lost – though sceptics argue that radical, Freirean, ideas have been more often taught in academic institutions whilst rarely applied in practice (Minkler: 2005). Still others (in the Community Development Journal itself) argue that community development has failed, citing global examples of a reliance on short term funding, poor planning and implementation, the development process being short-circuited or used to impose external agendas and solutions on communities. (See for example: Datta (2007) or Dinham (2007) as just two recent examples of such critiques.)

In other words, community development has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It has failed “*to impact (on) the levels of poverty or people excluded from health, education, housing, sanitation.....*” (Andharia: 2009)

In this ‘age of uncertainty’ – is this the case and what can be done? Is it time to reclaim community development’s radical tradition? Should practitioners be looking to other forms of organising – either models of community organising,

which are not reliant on state funding or agendas (Minkler: 2005) or acting with new social movements (Della Porta and Diani: 1999) operating outside the state and official discourse? Can community development, again to borrow an old phrase (Corrigan & Leonard: 1978) be both 'in and against the state' – promoting awkward rather than active citizenship? Reclaiming radicalism may have its benefits – not least the satisfaction of occupying the moral high ground. But what are the costs? The end of paid community development practice – and are we prepared for this? The loss of any influence the process may have, even at the margins, in political decision making? An inability to keep community on the agenda in a globalised world where power lies elsewhere?

Difficult questions. Whatever the answers, however, they need to be underpinned by three core principles: that community development is about transforming situations of power and powerlessness; it is rooted in the belief that collective action can affect positive change; it is grounded in a vision of social and economic justice. Above all, in this age of uncertainty, it may be about:

- starting where people (and policy) are at and taking an understanding and critique of 'the politics of fear' as a basis for action
- reclaiming the passion of community development. It is not just a managerial tool, not just about inequality – but challenging oppression
- remembering that the basis for the work is an analysis of power – without which we are talking about 'top down' development and 'engagement' but without communities
- engendering belief in positive change: and if community development practitioners do not believe they can work towards change – who will?

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