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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
Reviving Critical Agency in Times of Crisis

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Introduction: Community Development in Context

It is now well established that community development is a historically situated, ideologically contested and contextually specific practice, which cannot be considered meaningfully outside of the material conditions in which it operates and is produced and reproduced (e.g. Shaw 2008). This is especially important amid growing concerns that the ethical and democratic project which made community development distinctive has been significantly ‘hollowed out’ in many parts of the world, despite its re-emergence in global public policy debates (Shaw and Mayo 2016).

In general terms, a number of rationalities can be identified which have been deployed, historically, to justify community development in theory and practice: As policy intervention (performing particular functions for diverse state agencies); as social and political practice (with a particular commitment to cultivating democratic engagement among marginalized communities of place, identity or attachment); as professional identity or occupation (legitimized by certain ethical values within particular institutional frameworks and codified in associated training courses); and as approach or process (based on a participatory methodology) (Taylor 2011). These meanings, and the balance and overlaps between them, play out differentially across time and place, producing different arguments, subjects and audiences for the supposed “benefits” of community development.

In fact, one of the perennial difficulties associated with community development is the way in which competing justifications can be deployed interchangeably, so that lines of coherence and distinctiveness become blurred. For instance, policy interventions that may actually undermine democratic engagement and empowerment are routinely justified by reference to professional discourses that assume such values as given; or a “community development approach” is employed under conditions that may actually obscure or ensure predetermined outcomes. As Meade et al. (2016: 1) point out, one of the causes of such slippage is that those who lay claim to community development are both “united and divided by a common language”, with ample scope for key claims and distinctions to be lost in translation. As a pragmatic response, some practitioners have learned to engage strategically in “doublespeak”—presenting one version publicly, while practicing another—in order to preserve some sense of professional and personal integrity (Marston and McDonald 2012). Notwithstanding the recurrent challenges of maintaining some semblance of conceptual coherence, its potential for interpretation explains why community development is continually claimed with equal enthusiasm from left to right.
of the political spectrum. Certainly, appeals to the “medicinal” properties of “community” continue to provide “a discursive resource of almost limitless potential” (Schofield 2002: 664). In austerity-driven contexts, for example, it can supply a plausible alibi, or vindication, for a declining public welfare system (De Fillipis et al. 2010; Beresford 2016; Meekosha et al. 2016).

The starting point for this chapter then is that community development is intrinsically—even, constitutionally—ambivalent and contingent. Historically, and in diverse contexts, it lies at the intersection of a number of competing demands and interests: from government, to strengthen or legitimate policy-making through democratic engagement; from state institutions, to deliver policy within political and budgetary parameters; from professional bodies, projecting and protecting established values and practices; from diverse community interests, some expressed, others latent. As a consequence, it hosts a complex combination of democratic aims and managerial objectives.

On the one hand, and over time, community development has been popular with governments of different political persuasions as a response to particular changes and crises: nation-building (Popple 2015); reconstituting civil society (Bilon et al. 2016); fiscal, legitimization, law and order (Butcher 1993), security and representation (Jessop 2015). On the other hand, it has also provided a valued public space in which ordinary people “act together for the purpose of influencing and exerting greater control over decisions that affect their lives” (Kenny 2016). Of course, changing political, economic, cultural and social conditions played out locally and globally mean that the problems and prospects for communities alter significantly and differentially over time, thus reconfiguring the parameters of what constitutes community development.

Since the 1960s “the community solution” has been an important component of the policy repertoire in the UK—and elsewhere—partly or precisely because of its utility in addressing a range of policy problems, either as a distinct strategy itself (i.e. as policy) or attached to other relevant policies such as housing, health, education or social care (i.e. in policy). Its popularity arises from its general potential for responding to wider changes that require a new set of social relationships between the state, the economy and civil society, and its particular potential to solve pressing social problems in both the short and longer term. Broadly speaking, therefore, it can accommodate a range of different, sometimes competing, rationalities. This enduring capacity to adjust and respond to diverse and changing demands has granted it a “survivability” which remains both an asset and a liability.

Table 3.1 highlights a number of common aims for community development in UK policy, which have operated independently or together over time, and the broad strategies deployed to address them. These aims and strategies have acquired different degrees of validity in specific contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<td>Improving decision making</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
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<td>Improving service delivery</td>
<td>Consumer research</td>
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<td>Reducing public expenditure</td>
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<td>Legitimizing policy</td>
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<td>Incorporating local politics</td>
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<td>Managing civic engagement</td>
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<td>Building community resilience</td>
<td>Self-help</td>
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Table 3.1 Community Development Deployed in the “Invited Spaces” of Policy
Improving decision making over matters that affect people’s lives is a standard justification for community development interventions in many places, and consultation has become a common strategy at global and local levels. For example, people are endlessly invited to “have their say” on matters as amorphous as global climate change or as specific as local budget priorities, through a range of media. Aside from practical questions about who participates, on what basis and with what level of understanding or power, this kind of approach also tends to foreclose on wider political questions as to how problems are framed, alternative readings of them and indeed potential challenges to them.

At its best, improving service delivery could signal genuine collaboration or, indeed, co-production: “part of a communal solution to public problems” (Durose et al. 2015: 139). This would take into account those well-developed critiques of existing welfare models that have consistently failed to address demands by user groups for “recognition” and “redistribution” (Fraser 2000), and arguing for a more participatory model of social policy (Beresford 2016). On the other hand, “improving service delivery” can simply become a code for cost cutting and rationing in times of austerity. In any case, the normalization of certain kinds of targeted “need” in policy formation tends to favor a particular distribution of power, thereby ruling out alternative definitions which may emerge from a genuine exercise in consumer research.

Community development as a means of reducing public expenditure relies on participation as a resource, to facilitate changing relations between the state and civil society. For example, substantial reductions can be achieved through the provision of voluntary labor to replace public sector jobs in a variety of services—from libraries, to health centers, police services and schools. Such strategies rely to some degree on seeking community endorsement for policies that may not otherwise be popular. Conferring legitimizing status upon “the community” can be a very effective means of progressing political programs, adding value to service-delivery outcomes by enrolling public support. In effect, the logic of empowering volunteers may also disempower and de-legitimize professional expertise, further justifying reductions in public expenditure. In this sense, a narrative of empowerment and participation can be projected in order to advance a policy agenda which is actually “designed to reduce state welfare services and depprofessionalize workers” (Needham 2013: 101). An effective legitimization strategy can also involve the incorporation of local politics through the co-option of key actors, the creation of “consultative elites”, the manufacture of consensus or the facilitation of franchise arrangements through which all important terms and outcomes are already set, with little room for negotiation or change—a form of “localism without politics” (Davies 2016: 18).

An interest in civic engagement strategies can signal “citizen-led spaces . . . for democratic enhancement: autonomous from government, yet accountable” (Durose et al. 2015: 146). However, potentially democratic spaces are eroded when strategies are framed in such a way as to shift the balance of responsibility from the public to the private spheres, recruiting the “good community” as social entrepreneurs or volunteers while disciplining the “bad community” through various forms of punitive surveillance and management. Such deficit models operate more or less covertly as a form of discipline by normalizing personal responsibility as the dominant moral and political imperative, irrespective of wider structural explanations. Disciplinary control may also be reinforced and internalized through strategies for building community resilience so that individuals and groups engage in self-help: “empowered to realize their potential, through their commitment to play a part in the self sustaining community” (Schofield 2002: 668). And in the move towards privatized solutions, the promotion of asset-based community development can actively reinforce this model by translating legitimate political questions such as “what do we need and how should it be provided?” into the merely personal question “what can we offer?”

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It could be argued then that contemporary conditions pose existential challenges for those practices such as community development which were conceived within a social democratic framework that validated critical forms of professional and democratic knowledge, and whose normative orientation was to social solidarity and justice. Transposed to neoliberal times, and stripped of much of its traditional social purpose orientation, it is hardly surprising that community development struggles to maintain its political legitimacy and professional coherence. Contemporary debates about the status and locus of community development need to take account of these new and complex reconfigurations of policy and practice.

Kenny (2016: 49) highlights prevailing tensions between “those who advocate for professionalization of community development” and those who argue for a more “organic” practice. In a period of austerity, it is not unexpected that professional interests and bodies are keen to reassert the distinctiveness of community development values and argue boldly for further consolidation of professional status (e.g. Crickley and McArdle 2009; McConnell 2015). Others consider whether the enforced de-centering of professional expertise might not have something to offer in (re)imagining a more equal and democratic form of community development (e.g. Meade 2012). Some advocate for a “new professionalism” (as distinct from professionalization), with greater downward accountability through enhanced user participation (e.g. Banks 2004). In parallel, there is an increasing move towards differentiation and deregulation of community development within and between different contexts, the implications of which are not yet clear. For example, community organizing models, predicated on more “organic” models of practice imported from the US and elsewhere, may unsettle the status of professional practitioners in new and interesting (and potentially alarming) ways (De Fillipis et al. 2010).

Notwithstanding the longer-term outcomes of such debates, in a context of professional vulnerability there is evidently a strong temptation to project an “imagined identity” which asserts progressive professional agency, despite constant evidence to the contrary. Marston and McDonald (2012) argue that such “naive conceptualisations” of professional identity in the face of significant challenges reflect a “triumph of agency over structure” simultaneously depoliticizing the field of practice and reifying the “heroic agency” of the professional practitioner. As Meade et al. (2016: 2) contend, however, community development is characteristically “situated somewhere between rhetoric and reality, actuality and aspiration” and its intrinsic ambivalence needs to be accommodated in debates about professional identity, whatever the particularities of context.

In this section I have argued that community development is not a singular or exclusive set of concepts and practices, but has been associated with different political projects, policy rationalities and professional claims. The choices and dilemmas this poses for practitioners in the current context are explored in the next section.

Changes and Challenges for Community Development in the 21st Century

Across all of our engagements most practitioners reported that they are operating within a top-down environment, with externally determined outcomes and short timescales for CD interventions. They reported that there is little space to nurture independent community activity or to analyze implications of decisions, programs or policy directives and that grassroots holistic approaches are rare. Practitioners felt that their CD skills are underutilized, with key processes missing and that they are often driven by fear and job insecurity. In addition, practitioners feel that there is a general lack of
understanding of the complex skills involved in community development. Practitioners feel undervalued, under-resourced and over-stretched.

SCDN 2015

These are the principal findings of a survey of over 300 community development practitioners across Scotland conducted by the Scottish Community Development Network (SCDN 2015). It echoes similar findings elsewhere in recent times (e.g. Henderson and Glen 2005; Tett et al. 2007; Community Work Ireland 2015; Bilon et al. 2016) and suggests a growing disjunction between “professed virtues” and “real behavior” (Bourdieu 1998). The situation described above certainly presents significant challenges to a practice so heavily predicated on the skilled agency of the practitioner, however designated. If community development is to revive a sense of critical agency, there needs to be a candid assessment of how and why it has become so seriously compromised. One of the most critical shape-shifters of community development has been the localized impact of global structures and processes of power.

It is claimed that neoliberal globalization has come to constitute the “context of all contexts” (Peck and Tickell 2002) and is now pervasive across the world, albeit in different forms and with different effects in different contexts. In a sense, therefore, national and local contexts are to a significant degree secondary or subsidiary to the logic of the globalized economic order. Dominant discussions of globalization, for example, emphasize the limited power of nation states in comparison with the hegemonic power of international corporations (Beresford 2016). This is neither to suggest that governments are completely powerless, nor that neoliberalism is deterministic in any simple sense. Clearly not all currents and developments can be attributed to a singular motive force. But it does direct attention to the way in which “turbo capitalism” has transformed the field of practice across difference and distance in previously unimaginable ways.

A characteristic of neoliberalism is its fluid, multidimensional and hybridized nature: its extraordinary versatility in working with the social, cultural and institutional grain of diverse contexts in order to enact and reproduce itself. Neoliberal governance regimes within liberal democracies, for example, tend to operate through relatively open and democratic networks more or less strategically and invisibly as “vehicles for the construction of new governing rationalities” (Davies and Pill 2012: 2202). In modern welfare regimes, the introduction of market “solutions” has in some cases been the unwelcome and unintended consequence of democratic struggles by user-groups over “choice” in welfare (Beresford 2016), and “the commodification and outsourcing of welfare and social services to the market” (Meekosha et al. 2016: 144). In large parts of Africa the emergence of the “green economy” has facilitated a withdrawal of the state from environmental management and protection “backed by neoliberal reforms that normalize market-based approaches for effective environmental governance” (Westoby and Lyons 2016: 65). In all corners of the “developing world” neoliberal reforms have helped fuel unprecedented levels of global investment in the extractive industries, with profound consequences for local populations in the global North and South (Maconachie and Hilson 2013).

Within this still unfolding global trajectory, the distinction between “concrete and abstract neoliberalism” seems especially relevant to community development in many contexts (Lauermann and Davidson 2013). In the UK, and elsewhere, concrete neoliberalism is seen, and lived, through the market-disciplinary and regulatory field of practice: the domination of market-based rationalities, the competitive contract culture in the voluntary sector, intense performance and measurement regimes, and the commodification of community engagement. Abstract neoliberalism, on the other hand, refers to the way in which such precepts actively
construct a neoliberal subjectivity, or common-sense view, which acts to foreclose on any other way of understanding the world, thereby further reinforcing its reach and power. 

The symbolic importance of abstract neoliberalism lies in the extent to which it manipulates how different aspects of social reality are imagined, framed, described and discussed. For example, “delivering democracy”, “community branding” or “streamlining the deliverables” may appear to be unwelcome but relatively innocent expressions of various kinds of concrete policy imperatives. But, crucially, they also constitute a symbolic process of enacting power: simultaneously calling it into being and reinforcing its validity by delegitimizing all other ways of talking and thinking. There is increasing pressure within diverse community development contexts to identify with neoliberal ways of being: to use the language of the boardroom and the advertising agency even when it is totally inappropriate or potentially injurious to the expression of diverse democratic concerns; to facilitate market competition when it would make more sense to cooperate over limited funding sources; to comply with managerial regimes people know are harmful to their work; to relate to those they work with as “customers” with “choices” they know to be fictitious.

Lauermann and Davidson (2013:1285) describe this intensive managerial turn as “the performativity of fantasy”, arguing that the work of maintaining the fantasy, together with the implicit silencing or denial of real alternatives, is as important as the fantasy itself. In community development terms, such maintenance work comes, over time and imperceptibly, to dominate the practice environment to such an extent that active educational engagement on open-ended and respectful terms with marginalized communities around a range of relevant issues may come to be unconsciously normalized as an optional extra, a minority interest, even a guilty secret—not the real work (e.g. Tett et al. 2007). The consequences of this for professional identity are clearly significant at both personal and institutional levels.

Perhaps the ultimate significance of the “performativity of fantasy”, however, is that it acts to preclude economic analysis and depoliticizes the market as the key (f)actor in determining people’s material conditions, and the choices available to them. In this process, certain kinds of decision are reframed as merely technical rather than as serious “matters of contestation between values in the political process” (Durose et al. 2015: 140). This sundering of the economic from the political also has a decisive impact on the conditions for democratic participation, rendering the demand for community development ideological in the strict sense of “masking the real economic relationships and conflicts that exist” (Levitas 2000: 190).

It is apparent that power works at and through different levels—from the macro to the micro, the political to the personal, the global to the intimate—and that it operates in diffuse ways through culture, language, identity formation, relationships and behavior as much as through politics and the economy. Gramsci, Foucault and others have taught us that we are not only objects of the exercise of power but also, and critically, potentially subjects in the exercise of hegemonic power (e.g. Foucault 1980; Gramsci 1981). Governmentality, for instance, has become a key theoretical construct for understanding a form of power that sets out to structure the action of others, to control “the conduct of conduct” as it were (e.g. Rose 1996). The uncomfortable truth may be that in some critical ways these managerial technologies of power have actually conferred a renewed legitimacy on community development in facilitating, regulating and enacting the new neoliberal governance regime, invoking progressive community development tropes such as “empowerment” and “participation” for its expression.

Drawing upon actor network theory, McGrath (2016: 3) highlights the ways in which this field of action is constructed not only by human behavior but also by non-human elements or “actants”. The role of “evidence”, for example, is often decisive in constructing “what counts as knowledge and its influence on policy and practice” as a formidable absent presence. Such
“neosocial” techniques of government come to name, frame and regulate the parameters of practice with little or no discussion or debate, becoming instantiated and projected as the dominant narrative. In this sense:

- good practice guides, transferable models and evaluations are not simply neutral tools but governmental techniques that represent and help constitute governmental spaces and subjects in particular forms. Such [forms] help enroll residents into the programmatic aspirations of government and its agents.

_McGrath 2016: 6_

At the same time, information management systems, many incorporating algorithmic elements which are calibrated in favor of particular outcomes, collect and project standardized forms of knowledge which enable central control of multiple and diverse local projects and contexts, thereby “managing the risk associated with having varied stakeholders involved in governance relations” (McGrath, 2016: 13).

From his analysis of key government policy documents in his own practice, Schofield (2002: 665) further concludes that “community” has itself become a key construct in the formation of such managerial processes. He examines how managers, in particular, “are actively constructing and mobilizing the discourses of community and making these conducive to the political aims of government”. His critical point is that, far from government responding to the voices of communities, as envisaged in progressive versions of community development, the contemporary “community” of policy is largely constructed to conform with particular government strategies. Perhaps the greatest contemporary challenge to progressive community development, therefore, lies in its renewed legitimacy as a “soft technology” of power.

Such strategies have coincided with the rise of “networked governance” in public policy, specifically “the differentiated policy model” (DPM). This model focuses less on structural power and more on the mechanics of “co-ordinating resources, empowering citizens and/or enrolling them in new political subjectivities” (Davies and Pill, 2012: 2202). This approach has obvious attractions for addressing the range of rationalities identified in Table 3.1 in an era of retrenchment, since it reinforces the case for efficiency savings by making “residents’ own destinies synonymous with the programmatic aspirations of government” (p. 679). So, for example, while “participatory budgeting” may appear to offer a more democratic process of claims-making at local level, there is typically no means by which to challenge overall budget levels, the role of the state, inequalities in wealth distribution more generally, or the politics which have created them. This is a good example of a franchising model of community development that acts to incorporate or neutralize any democratic potential for contentious politics; in which communities are invited to make their own “incisions”, often against their own interests.

As Allen and Cochrane (2010: 107) argue, it has become increasingly difficult to pin down the “institutional geography of power and the decision making processes that shape political outcomes”, never mind influencing or challenging them. On one hand, power has increasingly been centralized upwards so that what remains begins to resemble a kind of zombie-governance while, on the other, a downwards retreat to competitive privatism has acculturated citizens into a form of self-help which may disempower them in democratic terms. What is integral to these re-scaling processes in the UK in particular is the “reframing and recalibration of the welfare state” and “the blurring of public–private boundaries” in the context of “crises, crisis-management and post-crisis recovery” (Jessop, 2015: 485).

This section has argued that, as community development becomes officially inscribed into a form of disciplinary technology, practitioners are at risk of becoming silent, invisible instruments
of state power with limited potential for professional agency. This fear is palpable in the findings of the SCDN research cited above, and in much anecdotal evidence. And concerns about the diminishing critical agency of practitioners and communities in this parallel and alien universe of performativity are well grounded, not least because, as programmatic images of community proliferate and penetrate further into policy, any alternative democratic imaginary recedes rapidly from view. It may even be that, as Davies and Pill (2012: 2202) argue, the space for an “authentically inclusionary and democratic collaborative governance movement may be passing” while the institutional architecture remains stolidly in place. If this is the case then it clearly poses serious challenges, but it may also offer new possibilities for the future. Actively identifying with communities who legitimately feel alienated from uninviting local democratic processes could be one very concrete expression of a renewed community development paradigm.

This is not to suggest that political control that is exercised so extensively from the center can simply be wished or negotiated away, but rather that, where the active cooperation of a diversity of actors and groups is central to the dominant political project, this presents opportunities for unsettling or disrupting its power. In addition, if power is negotiated in dispersed and myriad places, then this may open up new democratic spaces in which to contest existing arrangements, as social and political movements have demonstrated over time. These struggles and the “dangerous memories” they hold may offer some important “resources of hope” for the possibilities of reviving or cultivating a more democratic disposition (Williams 1989).

Reviving the Democratic Disposition

The increasing impact of neoliberalism across the globe means that the complex interplay of democratic, economic and managerial rationalities described above now defines to a greater or lesser extent the parameters and practices of community development. It is, historically, within the interstices of such competing rationalities that practitioners have sought opportunities to establish some coherence between ethical values and everyday practices (Banks 2004). While community development in many contexts has been largely contained within the “invited spaces” of policy, it has also emboldened diverse populations to make claims in the “demanded” or “popular” spaces of politics, often at odds with policy (Cornwall 2008). Arguably, it is within the dialectics of this position that community development as an expression of the democratic disposition is at its most effective (Shaw and Martin 2000).

This chapter has argued that community development has been subjected to the “modernization” processes associated with neoliberalism which have hollowed out its democratic potential, that it has been the subject of such processes, active in facilitating and reinforcing their power, and that it has to some degree been subjectified by a web of relations, including economic interests, political priorities, policy frameworks, professional models and influential texts, documents and management systems. Seeking out opportunities to “work the spaces of would-be hegemonic projects” of the sort described above in order to pursue more progressive goals of development or democratization may begin to offer scope for practitioners to become active subjects in challenging the inevitability of reductive models of practice (Clarke and Newman 2016).

Community development has always been a contested field and, as such, requires a skeptical outlook in order to keep that contestation alive: a state of mind which is always ready to question the taken for granted and to articulate and engage with the distinction between progressive and regressive traditions, models and purposes. Such conscious skepticism, however, can easily slip into unconscious cynicism or demoralization unless it is informed by sustained critique: a methodical habit of doubt, which systematically interrogates practice by reference to theoretical
understanding, and vice versa. To do this in the company of like-minded others begins to form a basis for rebuilding collective confidence and potential resistance.

Community development is always most hopeful when it is animated by the experiences and insights of diverse activists, groups and movements struggling for social justice. The focus of such movements tends to reflect or anticipate the changing political culture of the time, constituting potentially incendiary elements that can ignite alternative imaginaries from below. New antagonisms and sources of solidarity are produced while others appear to decline because of changes in material conditions, political contexts and wider social and cultural developments—and these elements are inextricably linked. In some vital respects, for example, democratic life has become significantly enlarged in recent decades by struggles over identity and difference: around gender, race, sexuality, the body, the mind, the emotions (e.g. Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992; Campbell and Oliver 1996; Butler 2011). At the same time, mass labor struggles have generally been less in evidence. In particular, the struggles for social and democratic inclusion by previously excluded groups—for the right to claim rights—has extended our understanding of the relationship between the personal and the political; between demands for recognition, redistribution and representation; between horizontal and vertical political ambitions; between the cultural and economic spheres of production and reproduction. Such struggles could also be said to have enlarged the community of equals in significant ways, and amplified the potential sources of solidarity in community development contexts.

However, moving from the margins to the mainstream creates new dilemmas in relation to potential co-option and manipulation, as many groups historically involved in struggles over welfare have found to their cost (Beresford 2016). For example, in the UK, arguments on the basis of equality are cynically deployed to justify savage welfare cuts to services for disabled people which will severely restrict their capacity for the kinds of social and political agency so intensely fought for by the disability movement and its allies (Campbell and Oliver 1996). In mental health, similarly, progressive developments that emerged from the anti-psychiatry and user-involvement movements, such as “well-being” and “recovery” models, are in danger of being appropriated and instrumentalized for economic purposes (Hanlon and Carlisle 2009). Nonetheless, such groups continue to “work the spaces” of policy—both the “invited spaces” and the “demanded spaces” of their own making. The Disability History and Mad History movements, for example, have sought to show how material circumstances and conditional rights are directly connected to historical subjugation and exclusion (O’Donnell 2008). Inevitably, these efforts in turn produce new tensions and real challenges, as the political and practical support required in order to realize their democratic potential can at any time be withdrawn on the basis of a spurious self-help rationality.

Although we have been made more aware over the preceding decades by the actions and insights of such movements that different social divisions of power intersect and interact in ways that mediate people’s everyday experience, it has also become increasingly clear that material position continues to have the most decisive effect on life chances (e.g. Piketty 2014; Savage 2015). The obscene levels of inequality that currently persist within and between countries depend upon low-wage/low-public expenditure economies, leaving increasing numbers of people in poverty, demonized in public discourse and virtually excluded from public and democratic life (Wacquant et al. 2014). The re-emergence of social class as a primary explanatory framework for analyzing inequality, and now enriched in some vital respects by the politics of difference and identity, is therefore a necessary and welcome development (Shaw and Mayo, 2016).

Notwithstanding such advances, and the alliances they have forged, it has become clear that for community development there is a widening gap between the position it occupies within
the wider politics of contemporary state power and the democratic disposition it aspires to. It is also apparent that the growing set of contradictions described above is unlikely to be resolved (and may even be exacerbated) by ever-louder assertions of professional status and values alone. Alternatively, working with such contradictions as a key resource for understanding the choices and dilemmas of practice could begin to form the basis of a renewed paradigm. For example, anticipating problems with managerial versions of democratic participation in advance of community engagement would suggest the necessity of working with communities to seek spaces in which to engage strategically towards genuinely democratic ends in “invited” spaces or to strategically withdraw (see Table 3.2).

Enacting a politics of agency in key policy environments may give some groups the kind of leverage that could tilt the balance of power, however marginally, in their favor, and help to build the democratic disposition to demand genuine engagement strategies, or to seek alternative means of making democratic claims upon the state. An informed assessment of local political opportunity structures—enabling political programs, policies, actors or allies—would be crucial to this process (DeFillipis et al. 2010). It should also be obvious that strategic participation or withdrawal are not mutually exclusive, and at best may enhance democratic voice by connecting horizontal democratic processes and vertical structures of power in ways which strengthen both (see Shaw and Crowther 2014). In any case, the active practice of negotiating such spaces can, in itself, offer a form of critical agency, which is positively reinforcing. The development or renewal of models of practice, which assert and inform critical agency, emphasizing social solidarity over individualism is also an important intellectual, educational and political task (e.g. Popple 2015; Ledwith 2016).

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<th>Table 3.2 Spaces for participation</th>
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<td><strong>Strategic participation: the invited spaces of policy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making structures work more democratically and effectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holding politicians and institutions to account</td>
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<td>Ensuring processes have grassroots support: maintaining contact with “constituency”; broadening support base</td>
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<td>Challenging manipulative or tokenistic procedures</td>
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<td>Capacity building for influence in challenging problem definitions and articulating alternatives</td>
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<td>Sustaining a core representative group; supporting group and individual interactions with officials; preventing burnout</td>
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<td>Testing the claims and limits of policy</td>
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Conclusion: Practicing a Politics of Translation and Solidarity

It is apparent that community development as a progressive practice is experiencing a crisis of confidence, as a direct result of the various crises around which it coalesces. However, as Jessop (2015: 487) reminds us, “crises are moments of both danger and opportunity, for political contestation and learning as well as policy learning”. As we have seen, the dangers are manifold, but there is a strong case to be made for a form of community development that focuses on the potential for democratic contestation and challenge, and which it is still in “a pivotal spot” to catalyze (Ledwith 2016: 6). This potential can only be realized, however, if there is a willingness to stretch the boundaries of existing models of practice and to insist, as far as is feasible, that democratic engagement is treated as an open-ended political process rather than a tightly managed procedure. This will require a degree of engaged reflexivity that is realistic about the limits of community development yet open to its possibilities. The capacity to think critically and act politically is mutually reinforcing, and the community development role could be significant in encouraging and supporting marginalized groups to pursue their interests democratically.

It is also important (and potentially enlivening) to become alert to those moments when the contradictions of policy become markedly manifest, and to create the conditions for turning them into opportunities for learning and action. This readiness, or predisposition, to think and act democratically, could be decisive in generating opportunities for communities to “work the spaces of hegemonic projects” to their advantage (Clarke and Newman 2016).

Paradoxically, then, it could be argued that community development workers have become both more prized and more derided in public policy: vital in some respects to “refiguring the territory of government” through the political and economic enrolment of community (Rose 1996), yet highly circumscribed by managerial forms of democratic engagement that severely restrict the exercise of professional autonomy. In this sense, they have been subject to increasingly contradictory messages. This chapter argues for a dialectical approach to these complex reconfigurations of practice: reasserting the relationship between structure and agency (the way in which agency is always embedded in structure and vice versa) and between macro and micro relations of power. Such an approach arguably (re)positions the practitioner as the educational agent in a creative and critical process, and opens up the possibilities for a more coherent and convincing practice (Shaw and Martin 2000).

Practicing a Strategic Politics of Translation

Such an approach also suggests a pivotal role for practitioners as “translators”, mediating between policy and politics. As Clarke and Newman argue (2016: 39):

> the idea of translation requires us to consider how policy is multiply reinterpreted and enacted in specific settings as it moves from national to local governments, from senior to front-line managers, from clients to contractors and so on.

This is not to suggest that translators or mediators are neutral agents, but rather that they occupy a strategic position at the interface of policy and politics which provides “a potential training ground for democracy” (Durose et al. 2015). Not least, such a position can afford privileged access to “the rules of the game” that constitute the contemporary governance regime, which can be “played” to the advantage of marginalized and embattled communities (Hastings and Matthews 2015). In addition, governance arrangements can offer routes through which particular constituencies gain vital access to political resources and experience.
Practicing a strategic politics of translation may also mean acquiring renewed fluency in translating between different levels and scales of action. Community development is arguably in a prime position to help project political values onto a bigger stage. For example, daily experience of exclusion and dispossession through benefit cuts, housing or employment at the local level can become emblematic if translated effectively into wider debates about “fairness”. At the same time, practitioners may find that they have to expand their own vocabularies in order to translate between the rational and the emotional: to hear and amplify those voices speaking to the moment, and to deep concerns and dissatisfactions, and to make the necessary connections.

**Practicing an Inclusive Politics of Solidarity**

Fluency in translation also calls for a renewed commitment to an inclusive politics of solidarity. This concerns the extent to which community development identifies with, and remains open to being animated by, the concerns, aspirations and interests of the people it is meant to serve. Of course this will depend at least to some degree on the extent to which practitioners are willing and able to carve out and facilitate convivial and creative spaces for people to come together in ways which allow them to explore collectively their own concerns and aspirations.

Eleanor Jupp (2012) is perceptive in suggesting that in order to practice a politics of solidarity, practitioners need to distinguish between inward- and outward-looking forms of engagement—and do both. On one hand, sustaining community groups through “sociability and care” (p. 3035) by cultivating collective identity and capacity: building skills, establishing relationships of mutual support, creating solidaristic bonds, developing creativity and critique; on the other, engaging with policy imperatives and “talking with officials” which demands tenacity and perseverance—“the politics of patience” (p. 3038). Her point is simply that people are more likely to sustain interest in challenging power in the long term if they are sustained personally in the short term. Such sustaining practices are probably more necessary than ever to counteract the politics of fear which permeates much mainstream debate.

It is clear therefore that both more expansive and more nuanced conceptions of activism need to be accommodated: more expansive in the sense of looking beyond the bland and restrictive forms which are envisaged in official engagement strategies, and more nuanced in acknowledging that people “do” resistance in different ways (Scott 1990). As Meade and Shaw (2011: 13) argue: “rather than assuming that communities and individuals . . . are pathologically apathetic or disengaged, we need . . . to grasp what captures people’s imagination” and to resist what deadens it.

Finally, in rethinking community development, I would argue that it is vital to resist professional protectionism and, instead, to seek new alliances which can consolidate and amplify the sources of solidarity available in difficult times. Interested allies from diverse backgrounds, professions and disciplines can extend or generate new imaginaries, sustaining a solidaristic form of “intellectual connectivity” which can support and enrich community development in theory and practice (Durose et al. 2015). It remains the case, however, that no other profession is explicitly charged with the task of facilitating democratic participation in community settings, however restricted or manipulated that process may have become. This strategic position still gives community development a distinctive and legitimate role in translating between policy and politics, enlarging and amplifying solidarities, and reviving the disposition for democracy, which politicizes practice. This chapter argues that such an approach may also be decisive in the continuing struggle to ensure that community development survives as the progressive, democratic practice it aspires to be.
References


