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Understanding Community: politics, policy and practice (second edition)

By Peter Somerville

Bristol, Policy Press & the Social Policy Association, 2016, 349 pp., £23.99

ISBN: 978-1447316084

Community is a language used to make statements about how life should be lived, or how society should function. It is a language familiar to housing studies, applied as an analytical framework to interpret housing markets, as a guiding rationale for residential design and to describe as an intended outcome of the services of social and market rental housing organisations. But the enmeshment of the concept of community in governmentality, its familiar application as active citizenship and its recruitment as a technology of control has stripped the idea of much of its spirit of humanising change and detached it from an accompanying ethic of care. Housing studies has tended to regard community rather like a suspect device, best kept at a distance, and viewed with suspicion. Despite research, mostly stemming from feminist scholars, that evidences the continuing mobilisation of community as an emancipatory project, what is quaintly called 'bottom-up' community engagement continues to be regarded with cynicism if not disdain.

In the second edition of his *Understanding Community*, Peter Somerville sets out to restore powerful meaning to the concept, rendering it once again a purposeful analytical framework as well as realisable social goal. The distinctive trajectory of the book is signposted immediately by its introductory discussion of what Somerville calls 'the beloved community', whose attachments 'flow from commitments made out of the spirit of compassion', that is 'not pie in the sky, but actually expresses how many people feel that communities should work – in a spirit of cooperation, mutual respect, open-mindedness and democratic decision-making' (p.16-17). The book then falls into two sections, the first dedicated to situating community within an understanding of class and capitalist society, and distinguishing its political traditions from the governmental rhetoric, and the second section that tours

through the applications of the concept in social policy with the intention of stripping away the myths and mystification in each service area. In addition to housing, this section covers community economic development, community education, community policing and community health but these headings are deceptive given the consistent emphasis on solidarity and critique of capitalist exploitation. Somerville's intention here is partly to rescue community from its segregation in the domestic sphere of neighbourly care and unpaid labour, and return it as an organisational form and social policy rationale that applies equally to the formal economy and capital/labour relations, and that is as relevant to professional service providers, as it is to local campaign groups, social movements, clients, consumers or service users. Each chapter maintains a focus squarely on relations of production and consumption and the conflict between use value and exchange value for which community has become both metaphor and call to action. This provides a coherent line of narrative in which community is presented not just as a common attachment but as a form of relational working and relational politics that addresses 'the contradictions arising from the workers' position under capitalism' (p.263).

This is an audacious work, in appearance a text book with discussion points and suggestions for further reading, in reality an innovative application of the theories of Marx and Bourdieu that rekindles enthusiasm and commitment for the organising principles of 'the basic collective idea' as Raymond Williams put it (Williams 1967: 326). Where Williams was intent on reviving an observable, if blurry, working class culture, Somerville is more interested in rescuing a cherished idea from its totemic meaninglessness and reclaiming it as the standard unit of analysis for social policy initiatives. The discussion of housing and community is typical of the focus of the book in its privileging of cooperative housing ventures, and its analysis of the mutuality and political fragility of the tenants' movement in social and cost rental housing, contextualised through analysis the roles of housing as circulating capital, as a social project and as ideological tool of privatisation. Similarly incisive chapters on community development and social enterprise are also of immense value in shifting the critical gaze of housing studies and as impressive in the breadth of their research as in the keenness of their prose.

The emancipatory ideal that drives Somerville's analysis means he is critical of the limitations of coproduction, and even in his favourable discussion of housing cooperatives he promotes the upscaling of local initiatives, and stresses the necessity for wider social movement organising as a step towards collective control of housing. This is important for the project to reaffirm community not as the localism of government restructuring, or the enterprising empowerment of liberal ideology but as a mode and model of social organisation. It is a project that has particular salience to housing studies since it addresses the utopian roots of municipal and cost rental residential strategies and restores some of the rationale behind that idealism. As Somerville says, 'dreams are not necessarily unrealisable' (p. 73), and his review of the political projects of community includes the autonomist experiments in communal living that inspired the Garden City movement in the UK, as well as providing a blueprint for the first municipal housing estates there. He is particularly incisive in situating community within the tradition of the commons, the commune, and, more radically, in the political philosophy of communism 'reclaimed from its woeful legacy of vanguardism, militarism, puritanism, sectarianism and revolutionary heroism' (p.36). In Somerville's work, community sheds its association with the fragmentation and diminution of the public sphere and becomes, once again, a guiding principle for society, a reason to care about how, where and in what housing conditions we live and what needs to be done to bring about real change.

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