

## **Book review**

Fred Powell and Martin Geoghegan, *The politics of community development: reclaiming civil society or reinventing governance?*

Dublin: A&A Farmar, 2004, 290 pp.

If community development is a social movement in the now conventional sense, as Fred Powell and Martin Geoghegan suggest, then it is almost certainly the largest such movement in Ireland. Its practice (particularly the agency of working-class people, of women and of ethnic minorities) connects to key issues of social theory. Its context – the Irish developmental state – has been a central object of interest for Irish academics. And its points of resemblance to Latin American popular movements should draw the attention of comparative researchers.

Yet there has been surprisingly little sociological research on the subject to date, perhaps even less than on other movements. Irish sociology, it seems, still finds it hard to grapple with popular agency, particularly when it does not come in easily recognisable forms. All the more welcome, then, is this book-length study of the subject, which is likely to remain a key point of reference for those studying the area for some years to come.

Powell and Geoghegan's book sits (a trifle uncomfortably) on the shifting terrain between social policy debates and social movements research. In practice, this

means that the book falls roughly into two parts. One (the first three chapters and the conclusion) represents a kind of extended literature review which attempts to situate community development theoretically and historically. The other (chapters 4 to 7) is essentially an annotated survey of community activists (no easy task!), exploring the structure of their organisations, the nature of their work, their relationship to the state and their assessment of partnership.

The authors' main perspective, expressed in the subtitle, can perhaps be summed up as a duality of approaches to community development: is it something generated by the state to resolve problems of neo-liberal governance, or is it a movement from below to which the state has been forced to respond? Both capture some part of the reality, but to hold these two aspects present simultaneously is not easy, and (despite heroic efforts to tie the two together) the literature review expresses more of a top-down approach, while the survey expresses more of a bottom-up perspective.

The strengths of the book can be easily stated. Firstly, a structured analysis of the situation, experience and perspectives of community activists in Ireland is enormously useful to anyone studying the area, the more so given the book's intelligent and informed reading of what activists have to say. The discussions of key issues such as funding, the politics of professionalisation or the decline of participatory structures are handled well and throw light on complex situations.

Secondly, the discussion of partnership goes a long way towards teasing out the ambiguities in activists' relationships to the state, particularly in the context of partnership and its discontents. (As I write, Community Workers' Coop, which facilitated the research, is campaigning against the state's attempts to shut it

down, following the Community Platform's rejection of the last round of social partnership talks.) This material is timely and complements existing work on trade unions and partnership.

Thirdly, the book sets out ambitious theoretical perspectives, and goes some way towards meeting them: to relate community development to debates within social theory, or to set it in the context of relationships between the global (neo-liberalism and anti-capitalism) and the local (community mobilisation around the direction of development) are necessary tasks. While these attempts raise as many questions as they resolve (the national peculiarities of community development in Ireland are noted more than explained, for example), they will certainly raise the theoretical level of the debate.

At the same time, the book has some important weaknesses. Most obviously, these have to do with the interface between the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Thus, while chapter 2 gives an account of rural CD which does allow for some limited popular involvement (or refusal of involvement, as with farm labourers), chapter 3 gives the impression that the "rediscovery" of urban poverty in Ireland was almost entirely the work of elites (academics, religious and politicians).

There is little or no indication that this interest was spurred by the large-scale rise in independent working-class activism of the late 60s and early 70s, or that some at least of this later developed into working-class community development. Nor is there any sense of the extent of grassroots rural protest on toxics issues in the 70s and 80s. Since these groups didn't leave the same kind of paper trail as the elites, their political role is minimised.

This is particularly significant in the case of partnership: one name which I looked for in vain was that of the Ballymun Community Coalition, a group which deliberately set out, in the context of mid-1980s neglect, to “bring the state in” to Ballymun – and in effect initiated a form of partnership from below which preceded the Tallaght strategy. While community activists certainly appear in the text as actors, they do so only within what are perceived as state-created structures.

The role of “organisation from below” in generating Ireland’s unusual form of partnership should not be underestimated, however. It may also provide a key to one of the questions posed by the authors: community activists’ surprising levels of faith in the Irish state despite multiple disappointments, are surely a result of the fact that the state’s involvement is one which (initially at least) responded to pressure from below as well as system needs. As the authors show, partnership on the state’s terms has not produced the results that were hoped for in disadvantaged communities, and the time for alternative strategies may have come.

Despite this and some smaller problems, this is a valuable book, both as a snapshot of the “state of play” of a movement in considerable transition and as an extended reflection on the nature of this movement. Activists and academics both stand to gain from reading it.

*Laurence Cox, Dept. of Sociology, NUI Maynooth*