

Book review

Understanding Community: Politics, policy and practice

Peter Somerville

Bristol & Chicago: Policy Press, 2016 (Second edition), 356 pages, £23.99 (Pb)
ISBN 978 14 4731 608 4

Andy Yuille*

Lancaster University

This second edition of *Understanding Community* shares the highly accessible, user-friendly format of the *Understanding Welfare* series to which it belongs. It is suitable for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and researchers setting out to explore the tensions and conflicts that communities of various kinds might experience under a capitalist system, across a range of fields of practice. It covers a lot of ground and pulls together a huge body of literature, inevitably skimming the surface to some extent, but providing a full bibliography and extensive use of endnotes to help guide those who want to dig deeper into the many facets exposed in the text. Each chapter begins with an abstract, is clearly broken up with self-explanatory sub-headings, and concludes with a chapter summary, a set of discussion questions and suggested further reading. The language is accessible, jargon is notable by its almost total absence, and on the whole it provides a clear exposition of complex theoretical issues and empirical cases. It is mainly UK-focused, often drawing on in-depth examples from that country to illustrate theoretical points, but it also gains international resonance by drawing here and there on cases from the USA and other parts of the world.

This is a timely and important contribution in the context of successive waves of roll-out and roll-back neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) that have left both actual communities and the concept of community squarely at the forefront of UK social policy, with citizen participation and community empowerment the new orthodoxy. In the current climate of continuing cuts and ever-deepening austerity, the UK is experiencing multiple and conflicting turns to community, for example as co-producer of erstwhile state services on the one hand, and as refuge from and alternative to a governing regime with little apparent concern for the wellbeing of many of its citizens on the other. And while the rhetoric of community engagement, rights and development is internationally commonplace, the practices are often shown to be more about obscuring, shrinking and marketising state responsibilities and concomitantly burdening communities and individuals with responsibilities, risks and costs (see for example Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kisby, 2010).

The book is divided into two parts, roughly speaking covering theory and theory-in-practice respectively. Part One explores the concept of community generally, and specifically what community might mean and how it might operate under capitalist

conditions. Chapter One opens up two central concepts – firstly, a general definition of community as a group of people with common attachments and a common recognition of those attachments; and secondly, ‘the beloved community’ as an ideal but achievable form of social grouping, towards which the rest of the book is oriented, with each successive chapter engaging with how we might be able to move towards this ideal from our current situation. It also explores how and why communities may be more or less exclusive, and the impacts this may have on poorer working class communities. Bourdieu is introduced as one of the book’s theoretical guiding lights.

Chapters Two and Three embed these notions of community more firmly into the class-based, capitalist context of contemporary society, continuing to work with Bourdieu and introducing Marx as the second major theoretical influence. Chapter Two sketches out the effects of capitalism on community, from the production of class and inequality to the more recent fragmentation of working class solidarity, concluding that community and capitalism are essentially incompatible given the latter’s reliance on and production of relations of exploitation and domination. However, community cannot exist in a vacuum, and the relations of class and capitalism inevitably interpenetrate actual communities. A review of community development literature highlights the failure to recognise this interpenetration as the main (though far from only) criticism of approaches to community development that seek to effect change at a local level without addressing wider political and economic structures. A radical approach to community development is advocated, and worker co-operatives are introduced as a bridge towards a more equitable, just and humane mode of organising, especially as part of broader-based, multi-stakeholder community co-operatives. Chapter Three then explores the special case of the relationship between political community and capitalism, unpacking notions of freedom and state power, and introducing neoliberalism.

Chapter Four focuses on neoliberalism as the most common contemporary instantiation of governmentality (and some foreshadowing of this might have been useful in Chapter Three, where state power was presented as arising in a fairly unqualified way from the control of the means of violence). This chapter explores the ways in which communities and citizens are shaped by governments in such a way as to make them governable and depoliticized. However, it also points to the scope for community resistance and the limits of governmentality. The importance of the role played by front-line workers or ‘street-level bureaucrats’ is also flagged up here, which, along with community co-operatives, co-production, and scaling up local action, are themes that frequently recur in the second half of the book.

Part Two takes these broad understandings of community in contemporary capitalist society and applies them in specific fields: economic development, learning, health and social care, housing, and policing. It explores how community is ‘imagined, invoked, summoned, projected, constructed’ (p.121) in each of these fields of policy and practice and the implications that this has both for the field and for community. Each field is examined in the context of its place within an overarching capitalist system, but with its own distinctive sets of positions, actors, rules and relations. In each case the field-specific problems, tensions and conflicts arising between community and capitalism are explored, taking in vast sweeps of literature and illustrated with in-depth case studies. The recent-historical and contemporary analysis sometimes verges on the bleak, but examples of resistance, liberation and hope are always found, and signposts towards less exploitative and dominance-based modes of social organisation – stepping stones towards a beloved community – are always provided. Other recurring themes include the blend of care and control, coercion and consent, and constraining and enabling found in each of these fields, and the wide variations in practice on the

ground – and the positive and negative implications of these - under the umbrella of the same policy.

Some of the Part Two chapters do more to engage with specific ideas of community than others, although this could be because community is 'invoked' in different ways in different fields. The chapter on policing, for example, provides a very clear impression about what community policing is and how it could be contrasted to other forms of policing, and what the role of a formal policing agency could be in what the author views as more positive and more negative social arrangements. Likewise, the chapter on health gives a clear sense of the problems, potential solutions and limitations involved in defining and doing community health and social care. In contrast, the chapter on learning does not firmly establish what the relationship between institutional learning and community learning is, nor does it explore in detail their respective roles. For me the key distinction of institutional learning as a field, and community learning being anchored in a particular habitus, is not as clearly expounded through this chapter as the earlier framing of the book's coverage suggests. There are also fields which are notable by their absence from Part 2; domains such as the environment (in particular local green spaces) and culture (in particular libraries) have also been the focus of substantial interest and controversy in relation to the ways in which they have 'imagined, invoked, summoned, projected [and] constructed' community in recent years.

My main criticism of the book as a whole is that I felt at times that the author has used community as a tool to analyse, unpack and unpick capitalism, rather than the other way around. This means that the book often comes across as a manifesto for establishing the beloved community in the face of the depredations of capitalism, rather than something that is intended to help the reader to understand community *per se* as the primary object of investigation. The wealth of case study material sometimes seems more geared to supporting the overall thesis of the book (that capitalism is anathema to community in general and the beloved community in particular) than to a nuanced exploration of how actual communities in practice resist and respond to their situations, how they make more or less liveable worlds in a variety of ways. I would have liked a less totalising perspective, an analysis that acknowledged the messiness, complexity and multi-dimensionality of community in dimensions other than its relation to capitalism. At least, a metaphorical footnote flagging up that 'other analyses are available' would be helpful, especially if the book is to be used by students who are new to sociology, politics, and social policy. But perhaps this criticism is more fairly directed at my own expectations and perspectives than at the book itself. As billed on the back cover, it intends to 'offer a clearer understanding of community in capitalist society' – and it presents this 'big picture' analysis very effectively.

*Correspondence address: Andy Yuille, Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Department of Sociology, Bowland North, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YN.
Email: a.yuille1@lancaster.ac.uk

References

- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds., 2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, London & New York: Zed Books.
- Kisby, B. (2010) The Big Society: Power to the People? *Political Quarterly*, 81, 484-491.
- Peck, J. & Tickell, A. (2002) Neoliberalizing Space. *Antipode*, 34, 380-404.