



Michael J. Fabricant and Robert Fisher (2002): Settlement Houses Under Siege: The Struggle to Sustain Community Organisations in New York City. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 360 pages.

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This is a fascinating book – clear, incisive, a lesson for our times. It focuses on the history and recent experience of Settlement Houses in New York and uses this as a vehicle for an analysis of the political economy of welfare agencies. I wanted to send copies to politicians and policy makers worldwide who, whilst claiming to support social inclusion, community regeneration and equal opportunities, formulate policies that fragment societies and oppress poor and vulnerable people.

The book provides a cogent critique of social services in the changing political and economic circumstances of the U.S. Fabricant and Fisher argue in detail the consequences for agencies in the not-for-profit sector of the drive to privatise all services, reducing them to targeted, output-led operations, based on tight controls and commercially-oriented practices. The increasing dependency of not-for-profit organisations on state funding, with the narrow aims and limiting structures that accompany it, is in conflict with agencies' objectives of promoting healthy communities. This dependency distorts the historic mission of Settlement Houses and other community-oriented agencies to foster civic engagement, community building and social cohesion.

Part 1 considers changing historical economic and political trends and their consequences for not-for-profit social service organisations. It develops a clear and convincing argument about the effects on social services of unstable finance in a privatised context: pushing to narrower definitions of services with bureaucratic rather than person or community centred goals. It identifies within the privatisation of welfare 'a political rationale for shedding government social responsibility' and discusses public distancing from social issues at a time when global capitalism is responsible for profound social change and damage.

Whilst the particular focus is on the history of New York Settlement Houses, the questions it raises are fundamental to academic and practical understanding of the role of social services in improving the lives of the most vulnerable members of communities: 'the settlement house offers an especially important prism through which to view the findings of a contemporary inquiry ... a benchmark to strengthen social capital or networks of poor neighbourhoods'.

The link is made between major - and increasing - economic inequalities and the breakdown of social cohesion, between the right-wing emphasis on private, individualised responsibility and the erosion of community. The structural consequences of market forces and privatisation for societies, as well as for particular organisations, are considered.

Funding mechanisms and stringent compliance criteria shape the experience of staff and users, circumscribing their ability to provide effective services. A depressing scenario is set out of two different Head Start initiatives run by the same agency, which had different requirements in food services, salaries and benefits - overlapping but impossible to integrate. Services for the 'mentally retarded' are described which have failed and risked bankruptcy.

Without harking back to a golden age, the book presents a convincing and urgent case that the current arrangements for contracting services - characteristic of U.S. policy but with variants in many countries of the world - push inexorably to fragmented services and undermine social and community health: 'Settlements may manage dozens of programs and contracts, none of which grounds them better in the community.'

Part 2 draws on interviews with more than a hundred social service and non-profit agency staff in New York, to illustrate their experience of these processes, the contradictions they struggle with and their attempt to maintain a holistic vision for healthy communities in a hostile, undermining environment. They describe the day-to-day realities of working in organisations pushed to the limit and beyond by unrealistic, changing and contradictory expectations and increasing regulation:

'It seems to be the war on poverty has now changed to the war on the poor.'

'A constant juggling act.'

'Something's got to give and it usually does.'

'Feel sometimes I don't know what I am doing.'

'I can't meet the constant demands because I have so much on my plate.'

Part 3 attempts to rethink the purposes and practices of not for profit social services, considering how agencies can continue their project to fulfil 'the early settlement promise and hope: service provision and social activism as gifts to and foundations of a just community.' It offers a sound basis for maintaining strategic vision in unstable and hostile circumstances, restating principles of collaboration, alliance, social action and community building.

My only disappointment with the book was that this section did not do more to draw on the rich international literature on community development, participatory democracy, social cohesion and inequality. The radical, progressive leadership needed to take forward Fabricant and Fisher's framework for practice will only be possible if the global analysis so convincingly set out in the early chapters draws fully on this global experience.

Settlement Houses under Siege is a detailed, well-grounded and exciting text for students in social work, community education and development, health and environmental studies. Policy-makers and planners throughout the developed and developing world should note its arguments for social justice and empowerment through social capital and community development. We should all try to convince the politicians.

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