

Valuing Every Voice in Community Engagement and Other Social Movements

Reviewed by Trevor G. Gates

Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production. Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (Eds.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 256 pages. ISBN: 0230621031

Social reform movements in the United States have enjoyed a glorious past and a promising future of engaging people in attempts to solve social problems that they find most pressing. Community engagement scholars can look to the history of great American social reformers such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond in addressing issues like poverty, immigration, children in need, and other social environmental issues (Morris, 2000; Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). More recently, social reformers in the Occupy Wall Street movements, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equality movements, immigration reform movements, and other human rights movements have caused a disruption of the status quo by calling into question inequities that are still very much apart of the American landscape. Americans have a great deal to learn about social change, and can look to models outside of the United States to learn about global social change movements that are making a real impact throughout the world.

Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, educational and community engagement scholars at major universities in Canada, highlight promising global movements for social reform in their edited volume, *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*. In the volume, Choudry and Kapoor assemble an impressive number of community engagement scholars that aim to explore the “political context of knowledge production, representation, and relationships between ‘civil society, academe, and social activism’” (p. 7). Authors in the Choudry and Kapoor collection call into question the privileging of social movement “knowledge” within the academy and offer compelling alternative sites of knowledge within a wide range of global organizations engaged in social movements. Given the knowledge being created and perfected within global organizations, social reform scholars have a great deal to learn from “real world” examples of community engagement work that is highlighted within the book.

Choudry and Kapoor organize the volume

into three major sections, which include a major section on knowledge production and presentation between “civil society,” academe, and social activism; knowledge production from unions and other worker alliances; and finally knowledge production within the context of poverty and indigenous people. In the first section, Choudry (“Global justice? Contesting NGOization: Knowledge politics and containment in anti-globalization networks”) calls into question the compartmentalization of global concerns into “issues” yet an unwillingness to challenge capitalism as part of the culprit in perpetuating social inequality. Several chapters in section one deal with lessons learned from anti-apartheid movements, including Desai and Walsh’s “Knowledge and power in South Africa: Xenophobia and survival in the post-apartheid state” and Zidah and Hanieh’s “Collective approaches to activist knowledge: Experiences of the new anti-apartheid movement in Toronto.” Tensions in workplace rights movements, both in North America and throughout the world, are addressed in section two. For example, Bleakney and Morrill (“Worker education and social movement knowledge: Practical tensions and lessons”) critically interrogate how labor union education programs tend to be reactive in nature and use the language of their oppressors rather than honoring the voices of workers. Section three does an excellent job of highlighting how social reform movements and community engagement scholars can learn from the struggles of indigenous people and people living in poverty. Martha Stiegman and Sherry Pictou’s chapter (“How do you say Netuklimk in English? Using documentary video to capture Bear River First Nation’s learning through action”) does a superb job of examining how collaborative learning circles with First Nations, non-indigenous people, researchers, and others were used to address sociopolitical issues faced by First Nations communities in Canada.

There is a great deal to like about Choudry and Kapoor’s *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge*

Production. In the volume, the editors and chapter authors go beyond the typical impassioned view that either discount the role of researchers or discount the perspectives of non-academics. Instead, using a diverse range of case studies, the volume illustrates how the best community engagement scholarship is a collaborative effort that recognizes the importance of various “experts.” Effective knowledge production rarely occurs in a vacuum—instead, real knowledge production is a shared venture that develops in the community, a collaborative effort that recognizes the important contribution of multiple “expert” stakeholders.

Criticisms of the volume will be few, as Choudry and Kapoor clearly took care to avoid privileging certain perspectives over others, and to include a wide range of academic and community experts. However, one particular opportunity was missed. Virtually no content was included that highlighted LGBTQ social reform movements throughout the world. During the last decade, social reformers throughout the world have organized to support LGBTQ marriage equality throughout the globe, including much of Europe, Canada, some of the other Americas, and a growing list of other parts of the world (Nash, 2013; Tremblay, Paternotte, & Johnson, 2011). Scholars and other social reformers have been fighting in the United States and throughout the world to combat workplace discrimination, hate crimes, and other social injustice against LGBTQ communities (Gates & Rodgers, 2013; Georgian Association of Social Workers, 2012; Hines, 2012). While extensive discussion of LGBTQ social movements may have been beyond the scope of Choudry and Kapoor’s goals for the volume, LGBTQ social reformers and engagement scholars may find this exclusion disappointing.

As a whole, however, Choudry and Kapoor’s *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production* represents an important contribution to the literature on social reform and community engagement scholarship. Both practitioners and scholars alike will find the volume to be accessible, engaging, and highly readable. Those interested in global social reform will be excited to read about the impressive changes that are occurring throughout the world. Additionally, educators teaching about social reform and community engagement will find the collection to be helpful in their classrooms, particularly as a supplemental course textbook.

References

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