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BOOK REVIEW

Rekindling Democracy: A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space

Cormac Russell

Cascade Books, 2020, 284 pages, ISBN 978-1725253636, £27 paper (Kindle edition available)

Review by Steve Flatt

Psychologist, business manager, academic researcher and Solution Focused Practitioner

For some time now there has been a growing awareness around the inadequacy of top down interventions in many aspects of our lives both nationally and internationally. Cormac Russell provides a great antidote to the top down, expert driven approach to community life.

Back in the 19th Century Rudolph Virchow said,

“Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale. Medicine, as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution: the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution. The physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and social problems fall to a large extent within their jurisdiction.”

Olshansky (2017) makes another rather more wry observation about the way medicine goes about its business,

“As soon as the disease appears, attack that disease as if nothing else is present; beat the disease down, and once you succeed, push the patient out the door until he or she faces the next challenge; then beat that one down. Repeat until failure.”

There is a real irony in these statements. Cormac Russell's book makes a great effort at pointing out and signposting new and better ways forward. Both quotes illustrate today's responses to difficulties in our lives – a top down expert driven process that ignores the skills, qualities and ability of communities to manage their own difficulties if given the chance.

Russell is seeking, with lots of evidence and stories to show it, that communities consistently know what is best for them, especially when they get together to discuss possibility. He notes that they frequently have all the necessary resources to solve their difficulties in their own unique and effective way. He carefully acknowledges the role of institutions and experts in the process of re-igniting community action and life, and clearly illustrates a both/and approach, but with a much more facilitative paradigm.

Russell is a clear and easy-to-read writer and his style draws the reader into a world that is possible and probable but that still requires some imagination and consideration of preferred futures. His level of experience and breadth of knowledge is considerable. He provides huge amounts of evidence for more effective ways of working while at the same time drawing us in with human stories of success that evoke emotion that are pleasurable and painful, embarrassing (as a professional) and delightful (as a member of a community).

This book crosses the boundaries of all professions working with people and communities. If, as a professional, you have worked largely with individuals in the health, education, law or political arenas then this book will provide you with an utterly different view of what is effective and open your eyes to possibility. If you are already working with communities or helping others develop community-based organisations run by the people for the people, then this book will potentially offer new ideas and tools to help you think about how to be even more effective.

For Solution Focused practitioners this is a logical step from individuals and groups to community working in an SF paradigm. Although Russell does not use phrases that we as SF practitioners might recognise, the drive for a preferred future, possibility and growth is undeniable in his writing. His clear desire to facilitate others underpins his thinking and it is clear, despite Russell probably never having heard the phrase, that he wishes to leave, 'the smallest possible footprint' in the lives of the communities he has worked with, continues to work with and write about.

I would recommend this book to anyone who values connection with their community and wishes to enhance the place of community in the world today. Russell observes that so much of our lives have become commodified in order to make money and 'grow the economy' and then points out the ultimate futility of this approach as it benefits the few at the expense of the many.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book. It touched on so many of my own thoughts about the way we currently structure our lives and exist together (or not) on the planet today. It gave me more foundations upon which to build my own way of working while, at the same time without Russell insisting that his is the new way. Indeed, it is rather the reverse, he acknowledges Socrates famous statement "I know only that I do not know" and admits it was sometime before he put aside his own certainties and began exploring the territory "with real curiosity and humility, and by invitation". Sound familiar?

I was reading another book at the time, *The Wealth of the Commons* edited by David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, a compilation of 73 essays that "describe the enormous potential of the commons in conceptualising and building a better future". It critiques current systems of governance, at local as well as national levels, in much the same way that Russell does and provides information from 30 different countries. The two books very much complement each other.

However, I prefer Russell's writing as he takes a much more personal view that feels real and reachable for the individual reader without being overwhelmed by the panoramic view of the *Wealth of the Commons*. Thank you, Cormac Russell, for a great book full of possibility and more ideas for a better future.

The reviewer

Steve Flatt is a psychologist, business manager, academic researcher and Solution Focused Practitioner living and working in Liverpool and across the planet.

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