

## BOOK REVIEWS

The Settlement House Movement Revisited: A Transnational History

By: John Gal, Stefan Köngeter and Sarah Vicary, 2021.

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Gal et al. assemble a timely contribution charting the transnational history of the settlement house movement, bringing together a rich body of evidence to support place-based approaches to policymaking and poverty alleviation. In their introduction the authors explain how that the settlement house, *“translated the Christina idea of welfare into the social constellation of modern industrial capitalism, made visible and analysed social issues in a scientific way, propagated social reforms and finally strengthened the idea dealing with these social issues within the national state”*. In a series of papers, they shed light on some less explored aspects of the movement, that combined aspects of *“research, reform and residence”* from the establishment of Toynbee Hall in London, charting their diversification *“into several modes operating in distinctive social, cultural and national settings across the world. Highlighting the often feminist qualities of the movement led by reformers such as Jane Addams, the publication makes clear the association of the settlement houses with “the continuous application of knowledge in favour of the people who are affected by the disruptive developments of industrialisation and urbanism”*. The book shares vignettes of the infrastructure which empowered the movement to jointly propagate social reform (across often incompatible ideological settings), through bedding down with the poor. *“Residence required the immersion of residents in the harsh context of their neighbours and it was the foundation for the development of the settlement theory”*.

The middle part of the book is pepper with illuminating cases from the field, that detail how the establishment of settlement houses differed across geographies and contexts of need, making subtle accommodations for religious ideology or modernist doctrine. Interpretations that separated social work along familiar frontlines of case and cause often dictated the nature of engagement with services users, for example in British Mandatory Palestine where founders were tasked with settling impoverished Jews from the Middle East alongside Zionists from Central and Eastern Europe, integrating casework with subtle nation-building. Conversely, St George’s House in London’s East End served to convince refugee community that their future lay in England – equipping service users with skills to demonstrate their loyalty to the crown. The German Settlement House movement must be understood within the reforms of the late German empire caution the authors, indicating how the movement adapted to context, and responded to the specific focus in each. There is focus was overwhelming on young people – forming religious socialists from the milieu – seemingly anachronistically linked to outmoded interpretations promoting the Protestant work ethic. Given the state of flux in German society, these institutions proved to *“social laboratories par excellence” offering a narrative of the transformation of bourgeois identities”*. The German case mentions the uneasiness of early social scientists when thrust into the working class setting. The settlements house as *“experimental centres of democratic education”*, where workers could thrive within what was understood as a *“real industrial university”* is highlighted in particular in the chapter on the university extension. The account raises an interesting dichotomy with the liberal emphasis on *“individual perfectly”* in the Whitechapel example, which contrasted with the desire for networked impacts through a process of *“alternating collective solutions”*, and building social capital in the community by democratising access to education. While the protagonists of these institutions feature heavily across the book, little is known of the beneficiaries, whose accounts could help indicate whether this impact was imbedded in place. For settlement house operating within a strict regime of social class and ascendancy, their legacy in the community is difficult to estimate. The impact of the houses on the evolution of social work and practice cannot be contested however, with social innovations such as legal aid traceable to Poor Man’s Lawyer evenings at the centres, which allowed lawyers to do social work – and granted hitherto restricted female access to legal expertise.

Without doubt the biggest contribution of the movement to date has been the development of ethnographic approaches to evidence gathering, reliant on clear numerical data to support personal evocative narratives. Ground-breaking in their approach to empirical investigation, the settlement houses tested methods across a

broad spectrum of social and spatial scales. The work of Hull House (which built on Booths maps of London) interlinked knowledge production with reform-oriented activism giving rise to an evidence-based policy-making that has resonance with place-based approaches in service delivery today – strategic tools of social work that democratise knowledge towards strategic interventions (Chambon, 2012). The Chicago school built on this work to situate a holistic view of how social capital is accrued in a community – understand that multiple social problems are interlinked and require coordinated support action, to counter rhetoric around individual failure. In order to “*depauperize thinking*” of policymakers, these approaches “*render neighbourhood knowledge knowable*”, mapping the social ecologies of poverty. Confronting knowledge and power to challenges rhetoric of slumming -still prevalent today – begs the question whether the settlement houses were still too remote from the issues at hand, and if those early social workers had truly settled. Numerical approaches to data representation sometimes evoke colonial origins, and without narrative are no better than fictional narratives of slum life that dominated Victorian broadsheets. Indeed, the enduring prevalence of poverty in many of the cities and communities featured in the book highlight the transient nature of the settlement houses, many of which were incorporated into the early social systems of the welfare states which succeeded their creation. The work of Kelley (1986) and others in developing nuanced approaches to mediate relations and test policy approaches in practice has been pivotal in influencing the maturity of social work, and upholding settlement sociology within scientific knowledge production. This body of knowledge has ignited work in the community setting, as theorised by Freire and Alinsky aligning social justice with the politics of place. As the place-based turn in policy reaches new audience through the work of living-labs and networked ecosystems, we are reminded that the social ills that plagued cities and urban settlements a century ago are still with us, as with ideological barriers that inhibit social innovation and investment.

Although conceptually distributed and diverse in their nature, the settlement house movement did not do enough to confront paternalism in urban governance, and found it difficult to challenge ideological framings and religious important that coloured its adaptation in certain cases, while many of the engagement-led methodologies were relegated to the periphery of practice. Now more than ever, a truly-grass-roots application of the concept in deprived neighbourhoods is needed, that can dissolve boundaries between community and government, and invite the participation of market actors to truly enforce a rules-based society where human rights are valued and protected. This book serves as a companion to modern practice, which needs to probe deeper in order to include historically excluded stakeholders in the design of appropriate social services and supports. The book fails to raise any of the concerns in literature around the alienation of certain ethnic groups (along racist lines) within settlement houses, and how the movement did little to help black African Americans address their collective circumstances. Most absent however, is the voice of beneficiaries as co-producers of impact and partners in socially-innovative practice. Without deeper engagement we are destined to repeat the technocratic community planning of the past, through visions of “smart” cities, where decision-making is reliant on closed systems of decision-making, dictated by invisible machinery of big data, and narrow interpretations of same.

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