

Review of Deiric O’Brion and Mary P. Murphy, eds., *Politics Participation and Power: Civil Society and Public Policy in Dublin*; Glasnevin Publishing, 2013

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This recent book explores a wide range of issues around how civil society in Ireland views, interacts with and influences public policy. It is a curious mix of both the inspiring and the discouraging, the range of initiatives undertaken and the passion of people working in the field is evident, however their acknowledgement that the outcomes are often disappointing is somewhat disheartening.

The different perspectives and differing views of the writers is one of the great strengths of the book. Inherently, some of these viewpoints contradict each other, which means that whilst it carefully articulates the fault lines in debates on public policy formulation and participation, it offers no one answer. Views range from those who claim that the influence of civil society on policy co-opts the voices of those who are genuinely disenfranchised, to the suggestion that civil society has been effectively removed from policy arenas in Ireland. Topics include a critique of how civil society failed to behave as a responsible partner during the economic crisis of 2008, to a questioning of prevailing rhetoric around participation of marginalised and poor people and the challenges of involving the Irish public in science policy. Helena Sheehan’s critique of the Occupy Dame Street movement is one of the most challenging and thought

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provoking narratives in the book, offering a passionate and personal account of how social movements are formed and operate in the age of social media. Paul Ginnell's analysis of consultations with people experiencing poverty also offers a significant critique of policy processes, highlighting that a legislative or policy influence in itself is not enough, but needs to be backed up by institutional and system wide commitment. This is a particularly salient topic for this issue of AISHE which is focused on community university partnerships where the same gap between high level policy and grassroots practice is often evident.

Concluding chapters focus on what can be done, with Mary P Murphy's examination of the inherent potential but also tensions in the formation of a 'community platform' which seeks to articulate a voice for civil society at a wider level. She suggests the need to 'stretch the boundaries of the political imagination' and to 'cherish public spheres and civil society where citizens can deliberate and develop their political imagination' (p.122). The reflections here show that this is not an easy job but a necessary one.

In short, this book deserves a wide audience. The honest reflections and thoughtful critiques it contains bear careful consideration by both academics and policymakers who want to learn the lessons of the past. The one consensus here is that past attempts have had very limited success. In articulating and analysing these attempts, this book takes an important step towards finding solutions to how best to encourage public participation in policy development in Ireland.