

BOOK REVIEW:

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM OF COMMUNITY WEALTH AND SOCIAL CHANGE, BY RICHARD RAWSON (RAWSON INTERNET MARKETING, 2023)

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Empowering Communities: Creating a Sustainable System of Community Wealth and Social Change, by Richard Rawson (2023) is not just a book to read but also a profound and passionate call to action. With stark clarity, the writing unveils the escalating wealth inequality that has woven itself into the fabric of changing American society since the 1970s, creating a chasm between the haves and the have-nots.

The book's multi-pronged narrative closely resonates with the prevailing discourse in the field of public administration and the understanding of public policy impacts across different levels of society and government. It also provokes a critical evaluation of collective action toward equitable change in our rapidly changing and increasingly polarized society. This book review delves into the book's core themes, strengths, potential areas for improvement, and its potential value for various readers and stakeholders.

The heart of the book's argument lies in the concept of community wealth, a historically radical yet contemporarily intuitive proposition that suggests more shared prosperity where each member of a community has equal access and opportunities for growth, enrichment, and even prosperity. This compelling path forward is rooted in economic solidarity, a concept that resonates with the spirit of unity and acceptance captured in Sly and the Family Stone's (1968) "Everyday People." This song reminds us that everyone has something valuable to contribute, regardless of the differences in our identity and background.

The discourse of the book begins by framing the alarming condition of the current American economic structure – a system where the top 1% reigns supreme over the bottom 90%, an unprecedented concentration of wealth, which ostensibly threatens the democratic ethos of equitable opportunity (Hanauer, 2020). The author further proposes a compelling path forward rooted in economic solidarity, presenting a new economic narrative focused on mutual support and collaboration. He enthusiastically extends an invitation to become not just participants but active contributors to an equitable transformation within local communities, which are the backbone of the U.S. economy and democracy.

This vision aligns with the message of unity and acceptance found in Curtis Mayfield's (1965) "People Get Ready," a call for unity among all people, regardless of race or religion, urging us to come together and work towards a brighter future where everyone can live peacefully together without fear or prejudice. Also, the principles of solidarity economics expounded within the pages are reminiscent of those supported by foundational pillars within the notion of the field of public administration emphasizing equity, efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

The book is divided into sections that guide the reader through historical context, conceptual frameworks, practical strategies, and real-world applications. The initial chapters (1-5) offer a detailed examination of the escalating wealth inequality in America since the 1970s. Rawson draws parallels between the current era and the first Gilded Age, highlighting the alarming concentration of wealth among the top 1%. This historical analysis provides a foundation for understanding the systemic nature of economic disparities and the need for urgent and comprehensive reform.

The subsequent chapters (6-10) delve deeper into the concept of community wealth, advocating for a shared prosperity model where each community member has access to growth opportunities. This section highlights the significance of economic solidarity and introduces a narrative centered on mutual support and collaboration. It also explores the significance of financial literacy and personal financial stewardship, offering practical advice on setting financial goals, managing debt, and investing responsibly.

The following chapters (11-15) present passionate and profound actionable strategies for building community wealth, particularly focusing on asset

ownership, identifying community influencers, and engaging in grassroots activism. This section also discusses the importance of local enterprises, cooperative businesses, and community land trusts as pillars of economic empowerment. Rawson argues that financial education is crucial for equipping individuals to navigate and establish their financial sovereignty. The clear emphasis on increasing financial literacy, together with responsible stewardship of our resources, closely echoes the spirit of Marvin Gaye's (1971) "Mercy Mercy Me," a powerful plea for environmental awareness that was released long before the environmental movement gained traction.

The final chapters (16-18) further provide real-world examples of successful community wealth-building initiatives. Case studies such as the Cleveland Model, the Mondragon Model, and the Portland Model serve as inspiring blueprints and guidelines for replicable success in other local communities with similar contexts. These examples are not just vignettes of hope but demonstrate the tangible impact of local empowerment and collective action. The book aims to offer practical policy recommendations, such as supporting small businesses, equitable housing policies, and investments in public goods and services. However, the discussion on government roles and public policies could be expanded to address potential obstacles and practical implementation.

The cutting-edge topic of financial literacy is particularly emphasized and elaborated on in the writing. The book dedicates comprehensive sections to personal financial stewardship, ranging from setting financial goals to managing debt and investing responsibly for a secure retirement. The suggestions are very pragmatic and come with the understanding that an individual's economic health is a fundamental unit of community wealth. As Rawson argues, wealth is not purely a matter of material acquisition but also a mindset. Therefore, the critical initial steps are to develop a concrete plan and to start with SMART Goals, which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This book promotes an "abundance mindset" and recognizes financial education as critical in equipping citizens to ensure each can navigate and establish their financial solidarity and sovereignty.

Rawson also proposes several local practical policies to drive positive changes, including:

1. Support for Local Enterprises: Encouraging the growth of small businesses through grants, low-interest loans, and technical assistance;

2. **Equitable Housing Policies:** Implementing affordable housing initiatives and community land trusts to ensure access to housing for all income levels;
3. **Investment in Public Goods:** Enhancing public infrastructure, education, and healthcare to create a supportive environment for community development; and,
4. **Promotion of Cooperative Models:** Supporting the establishment of cooperative businesses that prioritize worker ownership and democratic governance.

Based on educational training and understanding of U.S. local government structures, these policy recommendations appear to be viable, intuitive, and potentially effective. For local governments, supporting small businesses and cooperative models can foster economic resilience and inclusivity. However, challenges such as political resistance and bureaucratic inertia must also be considered within local contexts. To enhance practicality, Rawson could delve deeper and provide more detailed strategies for overcoming implementation barriers and engaging local policymakers.

Similarly, the book elaborates on major case studies where collaboration and co-production serve as powerful illustrations of community wealth-building in action. The three notable examples include:

1. **The Cleveland Model:** This initiative focuses on creating a network of worker-owned cooperatives linked to local anchor institutions, such as hospitals and universities. This model demonstrates how anchor institutions can drive local economic development and create sustainable jobs.
2. **The Mondragon Model:** Based in Spain, Mondragon is one of the world's largest worker cooperatives, showcasing the potential of cooperative businesses to thrive in diverse economic sectors.
3. **The Portland Model:** This model emphasizes community-led urban development projects, integrating affordable housing, local businesses, and public spaces to create vibrant, inclusive neighborhoods.

Each of the case studies highlights the transformative impact of community-driven initiatives. These examples offer replicable models for other similar communities seeking to implement similar strategies. However inspiring, the success of these models depends on local context, supportive infrastructure and policies, and robust backing from higher levels of government, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

On another relevant note, while the book leans towards a liberal perspective, it is important to acknowledge the value of community wealth-building principles in a balanced and objective manner. For a more conservative audience, the emphasis on self-reliance, local entrepreneurship, and grassroots activism can be particularly appealing. These principles align with conservative values of individual responsibility, limited government intervention, and community-based solutions. Still, the book's focus on empowering local communities through economic solidarity and cooperative models does not necessarily contradict conservative ideals. Instead, it offers a complementary approach that prioritizes local autonomy and self-sufficiency. By fostering local enterprises and reducing dependency on external economic forces, community wealth-building can contribute to stronger, more resilient local economies.

Furthermore, the book also argues that our contemporary era mimics the same disparities that marked the first Gilded Age's opulence and deeply entrenched socioeconomic divides. Power dynamics are addressed, notably how the ultra-rich maintain their status, skewing the oligarchic systems, and hence harming the current community-building process. Moreover, *Empowering Communities* outlines actionable strategies for asset ownership, identifying community influencers, and engaging in grassroots activism, which are seen as lifelines of societal transformation.

Lastly, real-world initiatives serve as blueprints and roadmaps demonstrating the impact community wealth-building can have. Critically, the book doesn't address much about the role of government or public economy but indicates that while policy can nurture an environment conducive to growth, the seeds of change lie within every citizen's reach.

In sum, *Empowering Communities* is both a historical document and a practical guide. It is a pragmatic, profound, and passionate call across the economic divide, demanding not just legislative change but also a transformation in societal perceptions of wealth, class, and community, as well as in individuals'

mindsets. This book is a reservoir of history, knowledge, inspiration, and guidance for those who believe in a more equitable future and are ready to roll up their sleeves to construct it. This passionate writing not only educates but also inspires action, making it a crucial addition to the growing body of literature that focuses on and unveils critical issues within the field of public administration. As such, it is essential reading for policymakers, community leaders, activists, academics, and anyone longing to be part of a meaningful economic change.

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