

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2006

Review of *Civic Communion: The Rhetoric of Community Building* By David E. Proctor

Brett Zollinger
Fort Hays State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Zollinger, Brett, "Review of *Civic Communion: The Rhetoric of Community Building* By David E. Proctor" (2006). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 811.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/811>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Civic Communion: The Rhetoric of Community Building. By David E. Proctor. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xii + 167 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. \$69.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

David Proctor advances the concept of “civic communion” as both a useful heuristic and a process. As the former, it supplies the community researcher and development practitioner with a “lens” for understanding the community scene. As a process, Proctor argues, it constructs and reinforces community. He defines civic communion as “community-coalescing events that establish and open an ethical rhetorical space for creating, crystallizing, and organizing community-building talk,” those “collective moments of intense, yet transitory praise for community . . . [and] moments of enthusiastic praise for local community structures.” His book sheds social interaction/constructionist light on the phenomenon of community.

Proctor applies the concept to understanding community processes and events as diverse as local festivals, strategic planning, community conflict, collective memory through historical documents, and the “spirit of community building.” Though not necessarily an ostensible goal, Proctor’s study convincingly reaffirms the view that interdisciplinary frameworks are the most useful for good community research and community development, weaving together as it does the disciplines of communications, sociology, anthropology, community development, and community planning. Case studies of Great Plains community events and processes provide rich community historical and sociocultural description using a triangulation of method in the tradition of such rural community ethnographers as William Cottrell and Ray Gold.

As an active researcher and planning facilitator in the same region of the Great Plains that Proctor has studied and served, I find his concept of civic communion particularly useful for conceptualizing a somewhat intangible aspect of community development, “spirit.” Practitioners know that a “cookbook” approach to community development may significantly enhance the chances for successful community building processes and outcomes, yet there is no guarantee of success. Much of the robustness of remote rural communities results from a set of local actors radiating a spirit that asserts, “We are still a great place. We must remind ourselves of it, and we must show others the same.”

On a critical note, Proctor seems to exceed the capabilities of the heuristic device he offers when he uses a community conflict to argue that civic communion is embodied by contentious as well as consensual community building moments. This counters the definition that civic communion is a reaffirmation of a certain community identity, including the ready acceptance of particular beliefs, values, and ideals. Civic communion is not well suited as a conceptual framework for understanding how conflict between community factions contributes to successful community building. Civic communion *is* well suited as a heuristic to examine competing factions’ clashes in values, ideals, and definitions of reality.

As a final caution, civic communion does not necessarily enhance community revitalization. Instead, because of its tendency to reaffirm the status quo, it can serve as a barrier to the social change necessary for revitalization of a struggling rural community. Proctor only briefly addresses this implication.

In sum, Proctor’s book is a perceptive contemporary account of rural community and rural community development processes in the Great Plains, with applicability beyond this region. Moreover, he has added a valuable tool to our kit of heuristic devices for facilitating community development processes. **Brett Zollinger**, *Docking Institute of Public Affairs and Department of Sociology, Fort Hays State University*.