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Beyond Sectoral Values: Radical Organisational Responses to Human Need

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Abstract

In this time of successive crises of austerity, poverty, and the Covid-19 Coronavirus, this article offers a critical reflection on community-based practice, professionalisation of the community development sector, and the limitations imposed on radically-inclined organisations and activists who become entwined with funding criteria and imposed outcomes. Anarchist literature from Graeber (2011) and Kinna (2021) form a central theoretical lens from which to approach the topic, whilst Beck and Purcell (2020) support a critical assessment of the complicated cycles many community collectives or organisations go through as they become more intimately connected with the state. Three Edinburgh-based informal groups - Autonomous Centre Edinburgh (A.C.E.), Edinburgh Helping Hands (E.H.H.), and Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh (M.A.T.E.) - serve as brief case studies of radical practices, whilst the author's own employer, the Tollcross Community Action Network (T.C.A.N.) is assessed in terms of anarchistic influence on practice when viewed in relation to state-imposed practice outcomes.

Professionalisation and Participation

As community-based practitioners, activists, and educators in Scotland, many of us are registered or associate members of the Community Learning and Development Standards Council - the Scottish Government funded body for 'people who work or volunteer in community learning and development' (C.L.D.S.C., 2011; C.L.D.S.C., 2021). Steered by its own members via, for example, committee structures, elected members are also responsible for regulating and assessing who holds membership status. As a standards and regulatory agency, the governing team asks that C.L.D. practitioners 'ensure that their work supports social change and social justice', and encourages us to develop 'an understanding of political, social and ecological

sciences to [enable] wider insights into the inter-connected realities of people's lives' (I.A.C.D., 2018, p.5).

Given my roles as a part-time academic, Community Education graduate, and experienced community worker, much of my own professional practice - and indeed, my activism - align quite closely with the C.L.D.S.C.'s established frameworks, and their prescribed values for professional competence. For those unfamiliar with the framework, these include striving towards collective and collaborative action, fostering positive relationships with those around me or whom I support, and managing as best I and my colleagues can with the resources at our disposal, however limited or abundant they might be (C.L.D.S.C., 2021). I would stress therefore that this contribution is not an attack on the professional body responsible for our sector via its partnerships at the state level, nor is it a condemnation of the people working to make a positive difference to the lives of those they support. Rather, it critically considers the limitations of the C.L.D.S.C.'s values and C.L.D.'s relationship to the state for undertaking truly radical practice - particularly that of far leftist and anarchist traditions (see e.g. Donaghey, 2020; Grubacic and Graeber, 2020; or Solnit, 2010). It does so by asking two key questions: (i) To what extent do learner-centred approaches prevent participant-led practice? and (ii) How far can an anarchist-influenced organisation push against state-imposed remits without its values being co-opted?

As Kinna (2021) emphasises, 'in anarchism, the potential benefits of a breakdown [a crisis] cannot be specified in advance', thus, rather than arriving with a pre-prescribed set of actions, 'the transformative potential of crisis relies on the responses it provokes'. In addition to connecting this contribution to my own organisation and interpreting 'crises' not merely as disasters but as opportunities for intervention and solidarity, the paper outlines the struggles many community-based groups face in sustaining practice or remaining true to their agreed aims. Autonomous Centre Edinburgh (A.C.E.), Edinburgh Helping Hands (E.H.H.), and Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh (M.A.T.E.) will, therefore, serve as examples of the formation and evolution of radical practice.

The Premise

First, I want to explore the key agendas involved - those of the C.L.D.S.C., the Tollcross Community Action Network (T.C.A.N.) with its evolving anarchist influences (in particular, anarcho-feminism), state-associated funding bodies, and, most importantly, community members. There has been no shortage of accounts of community activists operating both 'in and against the state' (a term formulated by the London and Edinburgh Weekend Group, 1980), with the central premise as to whether individuals or collectives are able to utilise state funding, or their position as state employees with any resources it brings for purposes and outcomes of greater benefit to the community than those imposed by the state. At its root, this conflict revolves around how 'revolutionary socialists might reconcile working in the public sector with their radical politics' (ibid.).

Though the organisation was founded through a community investigation involving a range of informal community groups, charities, and other organisations such as Edinburgh Central Church, T.C.A.N. has remained non-affiliated and, since I came into post, the remit of our work has expanded rapidly beyond an informal signposting service or a support group. We've now opened a universally accessible clothes bank, created a massive free library, partnered with local ecological groups to offer fresh produce to those accessing our partner organisation's foodbank; those once accessing our group have joined as trustees and - like an increasing number of charities (Campbell, 2019) - are in the process of gradually moving from state-funding to a community donations model. We've become openly queer in our practices, family-oriented with childcare provision, offer multilingual support, pushed back against referral processes (which can be understood as a form of gatekeeping), and now host a digital drop-in cafe, all the while prioritising the safety and well-being of everyone involved with the network. How then can an organisation born out of a community develop in a sustainable and organic manner that sincerely supports those in its geographical region as directed or requested by local folk, without becoming absorbed by state-imposed remits, bureaucracy, or falling into practices that merely espouse theoretical forms of inclusion and empowerment rather than authentically embodying them?

'I've Heard It All Before'

Any societal crisis - political, environmental, military, a pandemic – shakes our lazy assumption that our leaders are really in control. In that moment of both vulnerability and clarity, we have a rare opportunity to evaluate our political systems, to be truly human, and to decide how we want to live. The realisation that no-one is better positioned to command or protect the rest acts as a psychological release mechanism, open[s] the way to self-reliance' (Kinna, 2021).

The story, as observed by Beck and Purcell (2020), often goes like this: local people experience a struggle, at first in isolation, before connecting with those in the same position or others who are sympathetic to their plight. At times, this occurs during a sustained experience of marginalisation, though in others a 'crisis marks the peak in a disruptive process' (Kinna, 2021) - pushing community members to take action during a particular moment (e.g. social or economic crises; or in the run up to a Bill being brought before Parliament). Informal organisations are established, sometimes by those wishing to assist the oppressed or marginalised, though ideally groups are formed by and for those affected by 'X' issue. The intention, generally, is that the shared lived experiences of a given community can inform movements to challenge or address an inequality, the power of their stories harnessed to persuade others of the injustices and oppressions they face. Despite suggestions by Jun and Lance (2020), history demonstrates that aspirations for genuinely horizontal power sharing are rarely achieved in the medium to long term - even with the best of intentions. In this, the 'anarchist view is that government[s] institutionalise unwarranted and repressive hierarchical divisions between leaders and [the] led' (Kinna, 2021). Therein, due to vast disparities in social, political, and economic capital, amongst other factors, a band of leaders - elected, or who simply assume such positions - start to engage as the face of the affected community. These individuals gain further social capital through member support (however splintered), achieving not insignificant recognition through public prominence.

From there, these individuals start to form relationships - supportive or adversarial - with people in positions of economic or political power who may offer to form alliances (e.g. elected representatives may take on the issue, raising it in the various

halls of power such as Council Chambers or Parliament), whilst others with knowledge of community and Third Sector funding opportunities might encourage the group to produce applications to bodies that can provide the financial capital to support some of the group's goals. However, very few funds come without conditions, so support is often offered at the cost of some sway over the organisation's conduct or practice, and usually requires some kind of return on their investment that benefits the investors. Increasingly, the neoliberal and capitalist doctrine has pushed this towards participants gaining qualifications or other criteria such as superfluous and easily manipulated data around contacts - either way a debt is incurred (Graeber, 2011). Inevitably, this dilutes or distracts from the collective's original aims, pulling their energies in competing directions in a trade-off to remain sustainable. As radical or reformist as an organisation may have been, or as determined as participants once were to an earlier cause, so often the organisation becomes intertwined with the state; co-opted, and coerced from their original agenda. Those who remain committed to the organisation's ambitions then face a dilemma - stick it out and try to embody the 'in and against the state' approach by working to steer practice towards the shared aims - or, perhaps typical of the political left, a new organisation is formed, and the cycle repeats.

Examples from the Scottish Capital

The phrase 'the wartime spirit' is a familiar shorthand term used to define the social cohesion and shared sense of purpose that is said to have prevailed in the UK in the 1940s. Anarchists use the term 'mutual aid' to describe a similar idea of co-operation. (Kinna, 2021)

Written, as this paper is, in the context of community development practice and radical leftist activism, where can we identify authentic attempts to practise the central tenants of anarchist-style practice? To take three examples from the same context as T.C.A.N., one explicitly named as an anarchist body, and two more recent groups (one pre-pandemic, one formed during), the following brief accounts consider the Autonomous Centre Edinburgh (A.C.E.), Edinburgh Helping Hands (E.H.H.), and Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh (M.A.T.E.).

(a) **Autonomous Centre Edinburgh (A.C.E.):** Operating a 'child friendly and wheelchair accessible' venue, (A.C.E., 2021), the current incarnation was formed out of the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers Centre[1]It is run on 'a non-hierarchical basis: no bosses, no managers and all decisions are made collectively centered on its monthly assembly' (Reid, 2016). In essence, A.C.E. is a community centre for radical community groups, supporting Sisters Uncut, SCOT-PEP (an associate group of the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe), and the Edinburgh branch of the Green Anti-Capitalist Front. Pre-pandemic, A.C.E. hosted a drop-in service run by the Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (E.C.A.P.), as well as the infoshop, the Autonomous Archive and the Scottish Radical Library (A.C.E., 2021). At present, though the centre is closed to the public, Oficina Precaria run a free 'Food and Resources Bank', offering 'non-perishable food, toiletries, hygiene products, baby clothes and toys' on a non-referral basis with folk permitted to take whatever they need. Breaking with common models for support, the groups stress that there's no need to provide any paperwork or "proof of status" [typically required] for immigrant or DWP status.

(b) **Edinburgh Helping Hands (E.H.H.):** Although now defunct (McKenzie, 2021), between 2014-2020, E.H.H. provided free sports sessions in housing schemes across Edinburgh[2], ran food collections outside local football stadiums, and brought together 'hundreds of volunteers' to offer 'a working class and progressive politics' (Slaven, 2019; see also Harris, 2019). E.H.H. (2019) were explicit in their D.I.Y. ethic to practice and solidarity, stating that '[w]e reject the state funded poverty industry. Helping Hands receives no state funding. We rely on support from the communities we work with'**.** With the

[1]Founded in 1981, at one point the centre was known as the Broughton Unemployed Workers Centre (A.C.E., 2021).
[2] Sessions operated on a weekly basis across Craigmillar, Muirhouse, Wester Hailes, Moredun and Leith (Slaven; 2019).

founders boasting significant social and sporting capital, a multitude of celebrities became involved, helping either with publicity or guest delivering coaching sessions. Given recent evidence of child abuse, men's football has finally been recognised for institutional abuse of power, sexualisation, and the subsequent legacy of suppression and trauma have come to light decades later (much of it on the back of the B.B.C.'s [2021a; 2021b; 2021c] *Football's Darkest Secret* investigation series), E.H.H. have publicly emphasised the safeguarding practices they engaged in, with background checks and professional support in place to ensure all participants were protected - illustrating the maintenance of very specific state relationships.

(c) **Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh (M.A.T.E.):** As Kinna (2021) notes, '[a] crisis also taps [into] altruistic habits and practices that are usually [ordinarily] associated with 'caring' occupations like nursing or limited to close family and friends', and it is in this context that M.A.T.E. run their trans- and queer-oriented support (M.A.T.E., 2020; Scottish Trans, 2021; Edinburgh Coronavirus Support, 2020). A mutual aid network, as with T.C.A.N.'s clothes bank or Oficina Precaria's Food and Resources Bank, assistance was offered on an as-requested basis (PinkSaltire, 2021). Partnering with or signposting towards a range of other organisations including S.W.A.R.M.'s[3] sex worker crisis fund, the London Intersex & Trans Community Healthcare Hub's trans healthcare fund, and the Small Trans Library Glasgow's trans grocery and supply fund. Acknowledging the limitations and capacity of their small network, M.A.T.E. have emphasised that, whilst their support is currently for over-18s only, a partnership with L.G.B.T. Youth Scotland means young people can be supported to access dedicated youth support.

Closing Reflections

[3] The Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement.

'Crisis' evokes collapse, disorder and discomfort. But an anarchist approach to crisis is an optimistic reaction to disorder. (Kinna, 2021)

During a recent class led by one of my colleagues, D., she stressed her belief to our students that we, as community development workers, should endeavour 'to work ourselves out of a job'. Though a handful of participants responded with puzzled looks, visibly expressing confusion, others nodded in acknowledgment. The statement is, in fact, what prompted these reflections on my community practice with T.C.A.N.. As outlined earlier, the organisation was founded on the back of a Freirean style community consultation (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 2011) under the premise of establishing a community-led service, intent on supporting community empowerment, political participation, and collaborative practices (all tying in with the C.L.D.S.C. values and competences). Yet, through a combination of determination from our team, and as a direct response to the pandemic, T.C.A.N.'s practice has evolved. Many folk accessing the Foodbank told us they needed clothes so we sought the items out and built up a reserve. People spoke of the need for assistance with managing their energy bills, so we produced a funding application that might yet see us bring in a dedicated paid professional to support folk with precisely that, establishing long term relationships centering on financial literacy and ensuring all support options are pursued. Yet, our debate here has been on whether this approach is merely learner-centred or genuinely learner-led.

When we accept, drawing on Kinna (2021), that a crisis is a moment requiring some form of intervention (be that '[e]conomic crisis, climate crisis, mid-life crisis, [or] a crisis of conscience', often there is a 'hope that the crisis will pass and normality will be restored [enabling] the restoration of business as usual' (ibid.). Yet, as has been emphasised by Singh Dhillion (2020), Solnit (2020), and Spade (2020), the current Covid-19 crisis means that it is unlikely a 'return to normal' will occur any time soon, though, as Campbell (forthcoming, p.18) argues, 'a return to "normal" is surely something few beyond the managerial, landlord, and political classes can sincerely desire'. Let us return, then, to our two key questions: (i) To what extent do learner-centred approaches prevent participant-led practice? (ii) How far can an anarchist-

influenced organisation push against state-imposed remits without its values being co-opted?; and, in my own context, what does this then mean for T.C.A.N.?

As emphasised in Campbell (2020e), '[t]he lack of financial security that often characterises the daily lives of those we support means that access to digital amenities and the associated hardware (e.g. smartphones and laptops) is a luxury few of those we support are in a position to afford', so the C.L.D.S.C. value of effectively managing our own resources and working towards mutual aid relationships with others who have 'X' and we have 'Y' is a vital component to our success. These informal arrangements have been essential to our survival as an organisation, offering freedom to operate best practice based on the social context. That these directives come from our local community rather than state bodies or independent funders is deeply liberatory for practice, and, arguably, permits a more sincere form of empowerment than professional practice may ordinarily allow - yet sustainability in terms of income, resource management, and a secure local space remain key concerns for our immediate future. For now though, E.H.H. (2019) proclaim that, through their practice, '[w]e represent a new approach to [c]ommunity', yet the truth is that such approaches have an intense history, one often ignored within the academic canon for community-based practice, or suppressed as 'unprofessional' by state authorities. An immediate call then for academics is to ensure that core community development curricula include works that deviate into truly radical practice (even when these may not be published through the more respected channels), whilst in practice, we - including the T.C.A.N. team - must endeavor to collaborate and learn from the most radical amongst us.

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