Repoliticising democracy, community and the state

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We have to think through what we mean by politics. The Third Way challenges the idea that politics is about conflict and change. The world around us is changing so fast and so dramatically that all we can do, perhaps, is keep up with it in the best way we can. Or is politics still about grabbing hold, criticising, challenging inequalities of resources and power, thinking differently about the future.

The first part of this quote from an article by Jane Franklin in the Feminist Review expresses well the way in which politics has come to stand for the consolidation and management of consensus in, first Blair's and now Brown's, Britain. To this end, pursuit of the kind of 'inclusive politics' advocated by New Labour elides any potential divisions amongst 'stakeholders' who seem to exist in some parallel power-free universe. It also highlights precisely why the answer to the question posed in the latter part of the quote is so difficult yet so necessary to address. In a sense it is the politics of politics to which we must turn our minds if we are to begin the process of reclaiming social purpose in

our work; to think differently about the future.

It seems to me that there is currently a profound crisis at the heart of all democratic projects, particularly those which are funded and enacted through the politics of the state, such as community development and adult education. This crisis stems directly from neo-liberal economics and the Third Way politics which attempts to manage it. The result is a version of politics which simultaneously depoliticises democracy and de-democratises politics. This has been achieved in part by a political strategy which has decentralised responsibility whilst simultaneously centralising power in support of an increasingly managerial form of politics. Community participation has been a central component of this strategy and its professional advocates (particularly community-based education and development practitioners) the, albeit unwitting, handmaidens.

I want, therefore, to consider participation in two ways which are interconnected. The first is participation as an instrument of so-called modernisation – particularly through the governance and social inclusion agenda. The second is participation – and democracy itself – as a subject of modernisation. Finally, I want to look at the potential for challenging the politics of modernisation both within and outside the politics of the state and reasserting a social purpose agenda for engaged adult education.

Participation as an instrument of modernisation

The rationale for modernisation draws on a fusion of managerial and broadly democratic discourses: change, efficiency, effectiveness, quality, choice and 'what the public actually want'. This fused discourse of New Labour is an example of what is described as 'talking left, walking right'. In policy terms it expresses a commitment to 'putting the people first' in various kinds of governance regimes, including partnerships of various kinds, whilst simultaneously exercising decisive control over the outcomes.

Modernisation is presented as a smart and necessary response for both an ever more demanding public and a fast changing globalising world. Of course the subtext of this intensely depoliticised agenda is privatisation, managerialisation, fragmentation of public services and a loosening, in policy and the public mind, of the boundary between what is public and what is private; what is right and what is responsibility; what is cause and what is effect. Commenting on the silencing power of the modernisation discourse, Scourfield notes the way in which it 'weaves together and elides diverse assumptions to create a seemingly incontrovertible narrative', and one which is presented as politically neutral – 'what matters is what works'.

At the same time, to propose any pro-public sector alternative is to be accused of being anti-modern and old-fashioned, a denier of choice, out of touch with what the public actually wants, a dinosaur and so on. In this way the agenda is controlled ideologically in the sense that people become apologetic, silenced or embedded in its logic without realising it until it's too late.

A significant dimension of the modernisation discourse is the imperative of finding ways to re-invigorate communities as a surrogate or substitute for the now severely depleted public welfare system; to induce participation as a means of 'community empowerment'. The attendant consultation culture, which is prescribed through various legislative frameworks, is one such strategy. In this we see what has been described as the 'bureaucratisation of politics' with disastrous consequences for the wider political landscape. To construe community empowerment in such narrow terms is surely to beg the question: empowered to do what and with what degree of real power?

Third Way Politics and the recycling of community

Community has been continuously recycled in policy for the last 40 years or more. But there is something qualitatively different in its most recent guise. Ruth Levitas argues that community has been the central collective abstraction for New Labour both discursively and practically. Discursively because it distinguishes

New Labour from both Old Labour and New Right ideas (it sounds and looks different), and practically, in policing the divisive effects of the market through the crime and disorder agenda and in legitimating the extraction of unpaid labour through active citizenship and volunteering.

This goes some way to explain the limits placed on 'power to the people', a misleadingly populist expression of current government policy, for when the people have acted politically in defence of their own interests and against government priorities (stock transfer, PFI funding, privatisation, closures of various kinds, industrial action) they have in most cases been derided as 'too political' and therefore undemocratic. This kind of hypocrisy has understandably taken its toll on what communities understand by local democracy. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that some community groups are becoming so incorporated as to be almost indistinguishable from the state in their objectives. For example, consider the major Rowntree Report last year Community Participation: Who Benefits? in which researchers looked at who is involved in new structures aimed at governance in two English local authorities. What they found is what many of us already know from experience: very few people are involved and those that are tend to be involved in everything, sometimes to the exclusion of others. What they also discovered was that such a 'consultative elite' was in fact created and reinforced

by those very structures and processes established to promote participation. They concluded that institutional partners essentially want community representatives to 'deliver their communities' to policy; as they summarise the approach: 'quick fix, consultative elite, imposed agenda'. And too often those community representatives oblige with the assistance of various kinds of community-based workers. One serious spin-off of this managerial approach is an unhealthy preoccupation in communities with the business of the state at the expense of developing those issues which are of most local concern.

At the same time, non-conformity is not to be tolerated; communities must be turned into accomplices or destroyed. There is little interest in dissenting citizens. Reviewing the Scottish situation, Chik Collins of Paisley University, who has documented partnership working over the last two decades, concludes that a new kind of turbo co-option is happening – often with the active collusion of the community development establishment. He argues that communities are being actively recruited, not just for the usual legitimation task which community participation is always in danger of fulfilling, but as a kind of vanguard of neo-liberalism – softening up those areas where resistance to the market might be expected to be greatest and neutralising any potential conflict. Not only must communities become allies, but they must learn to see any alternative as

'conservative', against the forces of modernisation; as an obstacle to development and competitiveness and the rewards it brings. This suggests a systematic colonisation of community interests which is predictably divisive, driving away more 'awkward' activists and giving pride of place to the usual suspects – the community stars who emulate their masters. It also pre-empts potential alliances with like-minded politicians or policy makers, who are similarly derided as old-statist conservatives.

One critical effect of all this on the local political landscape is that the role of the state (local and national) as a legitimate political actor is erased in the formulation of the state as simply one enabling stakeholder alongside all the others - including private enterprise. What emerges (or is deliberately manufactured) is a kind of corporate consensus which neutralises differences of interest and of power. In this neo-corporatist system, those conflicts which are seen to have hindered development in the past must be neutralised: 'axes of domination' come to represent 'axes of identity' along which social consensus can be brokered through state mediated partnerships. What is of course routinely excluded from such pseudo-democratic negotiations is discussion of those structural economic conditions which create and perpetuate injustice:

When the economic dimension is missing, ignored or denied, the demand for community tends to become ideological in the strict sense of the word. That is, it masks the real economic relationships and conflicts that exist – or itself becomes the subject of conflict. (Levitas, 2000)

This is not community governance but government through community – the dispersed state presented as a more democratic alternative. Ironically, therefore, more involvement could mean less democracy.

What emerges is a view of how democracy, and the role of politics itself, is understood within the managerial state. Democracy could and should be a political process through which what constitutes social justice is negotiated and argued over by different political interests and through which the market itself is subject to scrutiny. Under New Labour this relationship is completely inverted and social justice becomes just another policy framework through which democracy can be delivered. This is to turn cause and effect on its head. Democracy cannot be 'rolled out' through a range of managerial procedures but must constitute a political process of deliberation and negotiation between different interests, enacted from below by changing sets of activists, and which is just as likely to produce dissent. Practitioners should be free (freed up!) to act as agents of democratic politics rather than simply as instruments of policy.

It will come as no surprise that there is little ground for optimism on this count.

For example, recent research in Scotland shows that the opportunity for funded practitioners to work with independent community groups on issues other than those prescribed has been squeezed out almost entirely by the funding regime in which workers are employed. In fact, the logic of specifically-targeted intervention may be to exclude the explicitly stated wishes of community groups because they do not match those all important outcomes - the antithesis of real empowerment.

Community-based adult education and development has been centrally implicated in the transformation of the welfare landscape – some would say as a significant carrier of the new welfare order – as a key agent of the modernisation agenda: facilitating partnership working, enacting standardised standards of community engagement, involved in capacity building around pre-determined outcomes, managing the audit and measurement culture. For some, this may offer the kind of status they have always wanted. However, many practitioners are beginning to understand that not only have they been compromised by their role as agents of modernisation, but that their own sense of professional identity and social purpose is simultaneously being dismantled – along with their capacity to challenge it.

The hollowing out of democratic participation

As participation has become synonomous in policy terms with the modernisation of governance, it has also itself been subjected to the modernisation process – as has its professional advocates. By this I mean that professionally supported democratic participation has substantively changed, some would say almost beyond recognition; that it has been hollowed out to such an extent that what remains is a rather shaky edifice, a shell under which shelters all kinds of dubious interests. Certainly constant reorganisation and funding crises have sent it in different directions. There is now a question as to what makes it distinctive at all.

There has always been a dynamic between process and purpose in community education and development work, provoking intermittent but earnest debate about the relative importance of one over the other. Transmuted into 'capacity building' in too many cases, however, community development has become reduced merely to process as a set of transferable skills, clinging to an increasingly unconvincing set of generic values which can be applied to a wide range of competing, sometimes conflicting purposes. This causes confusion for community development particularly because its sacred values, to which it has claimed exclusivity, have been appropriated for a quite different agenda. In this sense, professional discourses have to some degree contributed to the current predicament. For example, when community

empowerment is official government policy it is time to create some critical distance rather than seek shelter or approval. In a recent report Together We Can (a typical Third Way formulation) the authors claim that 'New Labour's coming to power in 1997 can be seen to a degree as an attempt to apply community development principles to large-scale planning'. The inclusive 'we' of the title implies a mutually convergent project. This is based on a consensual view of politics and seeks to draw upon community development to facilitate that process. However, if the pursuit of consensus becomes a means of suppressing or obscuring differentials of power and competing interests and purposes, then it's bad for community development and worse for democracy.

In a context in which workers are subjected to continuous restructuring, reorganisation and competition for resources, defining purpose actually becomes a handicap, as does a sense of identity with a place or group of people. Endless flexibility is much more convenient! Of course flexibility is not compatible with sustaining the kinds of relationships which promote trust, solidarity and common purpose. There is growing evidence of a lack of time or priority for engaging directly with groups of people on any basis: constrained by the straitjacket of performativity, the real work is increasingly left to casualised, low-paid sessional workers or external consultants. In this process, many practitioners are becoming, and are

feeling themselves to be, seriously deskilled. They are no longer confident about day-to-day door-to-door involvement at the grassroots in sustained educational engagement for social and political purpose, however competent they may have become in managing or being managed by the enabling state. This mutually reinforcing process has resulted in a gradual erosion of that grassroots engagement with marginalised groups which helps workers to remember what they are there for. It is the constant reminder of the persistent reality of inequality and injustice that feeds an impatience for change. The absence of this crucial human link can lead to the kind of ignorance, arrogance and complacency which stifles any notion of engaged adult education. It can also lead to an equally debilitating sense of demoralisation.

Clearly community engagement can be a part of the problem for democratic participation as much as it can be a part of the solution. But it can also signify a potentially dialectical position between formal institutional practices of the state and informal social and political practices of communities – a potentially fruitful position for both communities and practitioners.

Thinking differently about the future: some pointers for purposeful practice

There is no simple way to challenge the current hegemony and we should be clear about what we are up against. But there is a place for cautious optimism

about the possibility of formulating a strategy to challenge its most deleterious effects engaged and committed adult education.

There is, in current policy discourse, an obsession with innovation and change which turns any kind of scepticism into a matter for suspicion if not derision. To be positive and 'smart' is everything. Whilst I do not want to endorse this tendency, I do nevertheless think that we need to develop strategies which consolidate the support of committed but discontented practitioners in a way which takes things forward. The following pointers for purposeful practice are offered as a contribution to what Raymond Williams called 'resources of hope'.

Reconnecting cause and effect

New labour has used language to shape the way we think about cause and effect. In presenting the world in only one way, others are ruled out, become impossible to think about. We need to reassert the fact that poor and marginalised communities are primarily the effects of wider economic and social processes which put them at a disadvantage; they are not the primary causes of their own disadvantage. Community based educational initiatives can easily be deployed to obscure or deny the crucial relationship between cause and effect but they can also provide the basis for helping to highlight and articulate it. Social problems therefore need to be

reframed in political terms – a process which can be very liberating.

Re-engaging with big P politics

There is an urgent need for macro-level analysis – to recognise the way in which macro systems act to structure local conditions and choices, particularly in the context of economic globalisation. Rather than looking down on the poor and marginalised for solutions, we need to look up to sources of wealth and power. We also need to draw on our own theoretical legacy of socialist, feminist and other critiques of our work.

Embracing contradiction

There are inherent contradictions in anything that calls itself community engagement (or even capacity building). Contradiction is a creative dynamic, not a dilemma to be resolved. The practitioner is strategically positioned between (top-down) policy and (bottom-up) politics, as agent of a dialectic rather than agent of the state. Making the critical links between micro and macro, personal and political, public and private should surely be regarded as an important professional 'core skill'.

Working in and against the state

This revives an old argument which, put simply, recognises the ambivalence of relations within the state. This analysis helps us to retain some critical distance. To see the state as an active political agent, not simply a neutral stakeholder

turns it into a site of struggle over competing interests. When community as policy is confronted by community as politics there are opportunities for challenge and change. There is also the potential for developing strategic political alliances.

Taking sides

This means working with people as active subjects in politics rather than as passive objects of policy: working alongside people to make strategic decisions about their involvement in those provided participatory spaces, such as partnerships, which are mediated through powerful interests. But it also means supporting them in demanding spaces in which to take action in their own right; being proactive in offering support for social and political struggles through which solidarity can be developed. This involves arguing for a more open democratic culture with funders, policy-makers, politicians and communities.

Developing critique and counter-information

Rigorous, systematic and assertive critique is required at different levels, and in different forms. This means taking every opportunity offered by our relative autonomy to provide critique at policy level and to disseminate critical ideas about policy. It also means offering counter-information to communities so that they are equipped to

engage in or challenge powerful discourses.

Saying what we mean and meaning what we say

The language of New Labour has consequences for what we think, say and do. Whilst we may be subject to disempowering discourses, we do not need to be subjected by them. We need to avoid managerial language wherever possible because it is insidious in the sense that it possesses you before you possess it. To quote the black poet June Jordan:

you cannot alter consciousness unless you attack the language that you share with your enemies and invent a language that you share with your allies.

The language of managerialism and the market (inputs, outputs, best value, fit for purpose ….) is alien to the real experience of people. In order to rehumanise practice, we need to speak the language of trust and solidarity and struggle and pain. But we also need to mean what we say. If we talk about participation, capacity building or any of the rest, we have to say what we mean and to be prepared to make it live up to its promise – or else explain why we reject it.

Building alliances

Alliances need to be cultivated around social and political purpose, as distinct from professional attachment or affiliation. There are signs that a small critical mass, if there is such a thing, is building up in this respect: the Learning for Democracy initiative in Scotland, the international Critically Chatting website for youth workers, the Social Work Manifesto group, the UK Coalition for Independent Community Groups and others. There is also some institutional muscle at last being applied to current political concerns (see The Edinburgh Papers, 2007). Practitioners and engaged academics can also become agents of alliance building between community groups themselves and between community groups and wider struggles in and outside the state.

Developing creative practice

We need to engage people's active side; to draw on natural reserves of humour and artistic expression. The poet, Emily Dickinson wrote that 'imagination lights the fuse of possibility' and it is just such a sense of possibility that needs to infuse practice.

Enacting critical praxis

Remaking the historic connection between politics and education is one way to do this. This means reasserting our agency as educational workers - not neutral facilitators - who are committed to working alongside people to analyse and articulate their contradictory experience of policy and to take action

in their own interests. Community development and adult education have something to offer each other. Community work enables adult education to be more sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of people in communities; adult education enables community work to be more systematic and effective as a purposeful educational practice.

Reclaiming dignity as public servants

Finally, there is a need to revive the moral basis of engaged adult education. What follows is a statement from a Social Work Manifesto circulated by colleagues in Stirling which could also apply to community development and adult education:

Many people entered social work (or community education) because it seemed to offer a way of earning a living that did not involve oppressing or exploiting people, but on the contrary could contribute, even in a small way, to social change. It was, in other words, an ethical career.

In the end, this means reclaiming a notion of professionalism which includes the capacity to express and contest professional and political purpose, not just to act as state functionaries. To echo Jane Franklin, we all have to 'think through what we mean by politics' and use our realm of relative autonomy to advance a progressive, more socially just practice.