

The Myth of Community?

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The paper provides an examination of how a myth of community as 'saint' and 'sinner' is constituted and used to legitimate and help realise the Con-Dem Coalition government's project of Welfare Reform for the 21st Century. The meaning, opportunity and threats posed by the policies and practices flowing from the Coalition government's Big Society will undoubtedly receive a great deal of attention and scrutiny from those working in 'community'. For the purposes of this paper, what is particularly notable is the positing of a 'Big Society' as the solution to the problem of a 'Broken Britain'. On the one hand, the saintly narrative of Big Society highlights the spirit, resilience and potential redeeming qualities of a civil society. In contrast, Broken Britain highlights the broken, depraved and threatening nature of a number of Britain's communities. These accounts of 'saints' and 'sinners', may appear very different, but what they share is the assumption that the supposed breakdown of society is to be found in a combination of the alleged enduring pathology of the poor, in part created and sustained, by well intentioned, but misplaced interventions of the state. Consequently, the solution is one that includes the disciplining of transgressors, initially, somewhat ironically, through a reconfigured state, but ideally through the market and community that constitutes the Coalition's Big Society.

In February 2008 the story of a community galvanized into action by the news that a local girl had gone missing began to emerge. Stories of local firms and stores contributing to the costs of printing; councillors commandeering photocopiers in a dozen community centres and taxis being put on standby in order to give volunteers free lifts to the latest leaflet drop were cited as examples of a community coming together. One particularly evocative story reported on a march through the streets near the missing girl's home and a poignant candlelit vigil.

Children carried a banner showing the youngster's face and a hotline to ring with information....The march ended with the crowd shouting in unison: "Shannon, we want you home." (Taylor, 2008: 4)

As is well documented, within weeks, as suspicion started to grow with regard to the role of Michael Donovan and Karen Matthews in the kidnap and false imprisonment of Karen's daughter Shannon, accounts of a community's spirit and resilience were quickly revised. The community was quickly recast - 'Saints' became 'sinners'. Stories of friends, family, neighbours and references to the community were pushed to

one side in order to make room for tales from the 'Estate'. In an examination of the coverage of the disappearance of Shannon Matthews and subsequent conviction of her mother Karen Matthews, it is this substitution of a 'community' galvanized into action, by a 'picture of dysfunction' on Britain's 'estates' that is particularly notable and represents a particular instance of the myth making that has implications for all those living and working in communities.

A wealth of literature is available regarding the meaning of the term community and subsequent debates regarding the nature and value of community work (for example Delanty, 2003; Ledwith, 2005; Mayo, 2000). The aim of this paper is to examine how the residents of said 'communities' have been represented in attempts to legitimate a range of policies and practices (Shaw and Martin, 2000). It is argued that a recurring myth of community as 'saints' and 'sinners' can be identified in continued attempts to legitimate what appears to be an increasing disciplinary welfare regime. With origins in attempts to distinguish between the alleged deserving and undeserving recipients of old and new poor laws (Fraser, 2003), or Charles Booth's mapping of the, 'Vicious, semi-criminal', and 'well to do' of London (Welshman, 2006), through to the documentation of Broken Britain and the aspirations for a Big Society (Cabinet Office, 2010), the residents of a range of communities have been cited as both the cause and proposed solution to a number of social problems.

Returning to the coverage of Shannon Matthew's disappearance, the fall of this particular community was signalled with descriptions of how, in response to the news of the young girl's safe discovery, the 'Estate' raised toasts with 'beer and cheap wine' and 'youths', strutted and swigged from bottles (Norfolk, 2008: 9). While acknowledging the efforts that had been made in the search for Shannon Matthews, it was now also noted that:

While most of the houses on Shannon's road carried a poster appealing for help to find the missing child in their front windows, attention was easily distracted by the rubbish-strewn gardens, the smashed windows, the discarded broken toys. (Norfolk, 2008: 9).

Far from being considered a source of mutual help and support, the nature of life on the 'Estate' was now cited as being a major obstacle to the police investigation. Under the headline, 'Complex family tree held up police', (Gardham and Stokes, 2008: 5), it was suggested that efforts to unravel and make sense of the 'myriad of family members' and relationships that made up the extended network of Shannon Matthews's family was one of the main reasons why Police had taken as long as they had to find her. Another article highlighted how:

For West Yorkshire Police, who from the start of their inquiry needed to tug public heartstrings to encourage potential witnesses to come forward, Shannon's family was a hard sell from the start. There were no cute home videos, no happy family photographs, no middle-class parents who could speak articulately of their grief. Instead, as officers sought to build a detailed understanding of the extended families of Ms Matthews and Mr Meehan, a grim picture of dysfunction emerged. As a portrait of 21st-century life on one of Britain's most deprived council estates, it made even hardened detectives despair. (Norfolk, 2008: 13)

Once the arrests of Michael Donovan and Karen Matthews were confirmed, the accounts of life on the 'estate' became unequivocal. Headlines such as 'They keep

having babies - and we have to pick up the bills' (Moir, 2008) and the 'Estate is like Beirut - only worse' (Taylor, 2008), described 'Dewsbury Moor' as 'a real-life version of the smash hit Channel 4 show *Shameless*'. Details of life on the 'estate' now included the sight of people regularly being seen 'walking to the shops in their pyjamas up to MID-DAY...even in the rain', bailiffs visiting as 'regular as the postmen' and 'lags openly showing off their electronic tags'. Not only were the efforts of the 'community' in the search for Shannon Matthews being erased, but a crime that many found difficult to comprehend, was now being illuminated through, a contemporary inflection, of the familiar historical discourse of the 'underclass' (Welshman, 2004).

Karen Matthews isn't and doesn't represent the white working class. She's part of the chav class, the great unwashed. The clue is in the title "working". She and her ilk have no intention of ever working, they just want to leech off the sweat of the rest of us. It's time the Karens of this world were forced back into work. The liberal elite has created this underclass by excusing their slothfulness and by creating a benefit system that rewards them and discourages them from looking for work. These freeloaders are not too thick to realise they can get more by scrounging on the dole rather than working. They've sussed that even with a minimum wage they can lie in their pits until the afternoon and still pick up a nice wedge, especially if they keep pushing out their soon-to-be-feral offspring. It was almost laughable that it has now been revealed Shannon's mum may be up the duff again, but tragic to learn that she dumped one of her kids because an ex-boyfriend wouldn't buy her a packet of fags....we have allowed the Guardianistas to create a new Britain where we are no longer allowed to be judgmental and where we must accept all forms of "families and lifestyles". Well I'm sorry, I don't accept Karen Matthews' lifestyle and I certainly don't want to support her blokes-and-booze way of life. Let's get tough on these parasites. We need to have benefits time-limited and force people back into work. Let's allow the private sector to take over and give financial incentives to get the feral, the feckless and the freeloaders back into work (Gaunt, 2008: 7)

This article represented one of a slew of stories appearing at the beginning of December 2008, that although ostensibly reporting on the conviction of Karen Matthews, took the opportunity to highlight the 'lessons' to be learned from her case. Headlines included, 'How one case exposed the grim reality of life for thousands in the poorest communities' (Norfolk, A. 2008: 4); 'Children were just a way of getting money from state' (Stokes, 2008: 11); 'More Shannons in Benefits R Us hell' (Gaunt, 2008: 27); 'Force low-life to work for a living' (Malone, 2008), 'Now teach the sinks to swim' (Nelson, 2008); 'New tough line on welfare mothers' (Oliver, 2008: 1); 'Well, we did pay Matthews to keep having children' (Sergeant, 2008: 16); 'Mr Brown: stop being kind to be cruel' (The Sunday Times, 2008: 16); 'Just a shameless breeding machine' (Maxwell, 2008: 11); 'I do feel pity Karen ... but only for taxpayers' (Moore, 2008: 8); 'Shameless layabouts' (Randall, 2008: 26), and; 'We will all pay the price for broken Britain' (Duncan-Smith, 2008: 29).¹

¹ This article in particular offers a clear indication of the thrust of a Conservative community based social policy, as Iain Duncan Smith, MP and former Conservative leader, is chairman of the Centre for Social Justice, www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk

Taken as a whole, these stories represent a variation of a theme. Bearing the echoes of the policy language and prescriptions of Murray (1994, 2006) and Mead, (1986, 1992 & 1997), and combined with the imagery of the grotesque and 'comic' figure of the 'chav' (Hayward and Yar, 2006, Tyler, 2008), a potent narrative is communicated where society is subject to a moral malaise, in part created by well meaning but ultimately misplaced and destructive interventions from the 'state'. Karen Matthews became the face of a Broken Britain (Connor, 2010) and was considered to offer a glimpse into a culture of dependency and 'worklessness'; where the virtues of self help and self-reliance have been eroded by a 'generous' benefit system. Put simply, deprivation is synonymous with depravation. This sentiment found its apogee in an article for the Mail on Sunday, under the heading, 'There are 5 million people on benefits in Britain'. David Cameron posed and then proffered an answer to the question, 'How do we stop them turning into Karen Matthews'? (2008: 1).

Cameron was criticised for such a blatant 'demonization of people on benefits' (Watt, 2009). Notably, these criticisms were quick to reflect back on the early efforts of the residents of Dewsbury Moor in the search for Shannon, point to the skewed representation of Britain's 'Estates' and highlight the majority of hardworking and decent 'pillars' of the community (Davies, 2009). However, in what may appear to be an admirable sentiment, the desire to show the decency of the majority and the virtues of community has become common parlance in the presentation of increasingly disciplinary and surveillance based social policies (Connor, 2007). 'Decent, hard working families and communities' are posited as the ideal, to which the 'excluded' should aspire. Adopting the mantle of a progressive policy, a 21st Century form of Welfare (Department of Work and Pensions, 2010) is set to ensure that those unwilling or incapable of closing the alleged gap are compelled, for their own welfare, to adopt the behaviour of the respectable classes.

It is here where the role of myth (Barthes, 1957) and the myth of community as 'saints' and 'sinners' (Connor, 2010a) in particular needs to be understood. Admittedly the two accounts of community can appear poles apart and for those working in communities, attempts to highlight the 'spirit', 'resilience' of its members may be more palatable and desirable than moral indignation. However, they are equally culpable of propagating a myth of community, for they are two sides of the same coin. They both point to an 'essence' of community, one decent, the other flawed, and they both point to the community as an 'other' place, a place whose origins and reproduction is hidden from view. In both instances, this myth of community is used to highlight the scale of the task faced by those governing society, but in doing so, fails to engage with the possibility that it is the very fabrication of society where the locus of responsibility lies.

The selective and particular collation and presentation of material as witnessed in these media stories may be a requisite for myth making, but it fails to offer an effective guide to action in the world and as such should not provide a starting point for analysis or practice. However, this should not detract from the potential myths have for rationalizing particular policy strategies and outcomes. The power of a myth is that it always contains a 'truth'. Karen Matthews and Michael Donovan, were convicted of false imprisonment, kidnap and perverting the course of justice and the residents of Dewsbury Moor did spend their time and money helping to look for Shannon. But the function, and arguably the power of myth making, is not found in its 'lies', but the ability to extend a particular 'truth'. Subsequently, challenging myths

becomes difficult as they are taken as common sense and there will always be some evidence to substantiate the case being made.

What is notable is that at a time when a newly elected Coalition government represents the latest incarnation of a broadly neo-liberal project to transform the social, political and economic landscape (Connor, 2010b) those with most to gain from such an arrangement are engaged in the propagation of myth making of the highest order. By foregrounding certain narratives, whilst casting others into the shadows, the nature, particular causes and proposed solutions to social problems become presented as 'the' way to make sense of society (Edelman, 1995: 110). By providing fixed categories and narratives, the circulation of myths help create and shape alliances, fears, and antagonisms, in a way that makes such categorizations appear to be a natural and self evident description and response to social phenomena. In this instance, by providing a simple and familiar explanation, where social problems are considered to be the result of 'good' and 'bad' people, simple and familiar solutions are made available. As such, a myth of community as 'saints' and 'sinners' provides a profoundly pessimistic and conservative viewpoint. It follows that at best, potential threats are contained and good people 'rewarded' through ever more disciplinary regimes, at worst, one is faced with the prospect of becoming accustomed to what is cast as the enduring reality of human nature and society as a whole.

To argue that our beliefs about the causes and consequences of social problems and particular policy preferences are influenced by and through myths is not to suggest that we are cultural dupes. Rather, the more self evident point that what we claim to 'know' about the social world is increasingly mediated and dependent on frames that we inherit rather than make for ourselves (Edelman, 1995). It is in this framing of the world that myths come to play their part. As people and institutions have different levels of access to the power and resources required to establish and circulate such frames, the ability to make claims as to the nature of social problems, remains closely related to socio-political systems and inextricably linked to the (re)production of socio-political power (van Dijk, 1993; Volosinov, 1973). This raises the stakes for those living and working in communities when it comes to contending with such myth making. For the myth of community as 'saints' and 'sinners' and the problematic it represents, increasingly appears to inform social welfare policy and practice and notably there are ever more increased expectations on community work to provide the vehicle through which the development and discipline of the population is achieved and legitimated.

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