

To What Extent Does The 'In And Against The State' Argument Remain Relevant?

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In and Against the State (1980), written by the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, is an exploration of the tensions experienced by the authors – all public sector workers – in their work. These tensions arose in particular from their commitment to promoting social justice and challenging capitalist systems and policies for the people that they worked with, whilst simultaneously being held accountable to state policy and processes. The term has since become representative of the often documented dichotomy in community development, whereby community workers are caught between the state and the community; between people and policies. In the current political climate, the popularity of community development in social policy and the use of community development values and language in the deployment of policy can be seen to cause a similar tension for community workers. This has seen the language of community development, such as 'community empowerment', 'participation,' and 'community' itself, used across the political spectrum, often in ways which work against community development principles (Ledwith, 2011). This process has important consequences for community work and shows the on-going relevance of the 'in and against the state' argument; that is, that the tensions experienced by community workers in mediating between the state and the community are still very much in evidence.

The reasons for the popularity of community development in social policy firstly require examination. The end of the Cold War was arguably most significant: the perceived failure of communism and success of capitalism led to a global 'period of political triumphalism' (Craig, 1998, p.5) for the Right, which allowed for the advancement of neoliberalism to the extent that its values now 'permeate everything about life on earth' (Ledwith, 2011, p.1). With this change in the political climate, neoliberal economic ideology was largely accepted and adopted across political

divides. In the UK, New Labour's response to this was to marry Thatcherite free market/neoliberal principles with their own social democratic traditions, creating a 'hybrid discourse' (Davidson, 2010 in Shaw, 2011, p.ii133) intended to prove their progressive credentials whilst showing their commitment to neoliberal economics (Wallace, 2009). This hybridisation can be seen to continue in current political discourses, such as in the promotion of 'compassionate Conservatism'.

The political atmosphere of the post-Cold War period, particularly the rise of neoliberalism, had other implications for British social policies and political ideology. The development of communitarian theory, which links neoliberalism with ideas surrounding community, is a notable example. From a communitarian perspective, community is seen as a homogeneous entity that shares commonly held moral values, a place where social cohesion is created through the mutual reciprocity of its members (Ledwith, 2011). Crucially, the self-responsibilised active citizen is the agent of this process of community building, with individual capacity to act and the freedom to choose emphasised.

Communitarianism was central to the New Labour project, in which the model of partnership between the state and the community in social policy was used widely for the first time (Ledwith, 2011). Such an approach has subsequently become popular in British politics, seen recently in the perception of community-based social welfare as a solution to the problems and failures of the welfare state (Hancock et al, 2012). In this discourse, social problems are framed in terms of the decline of community cohesion and lowered moral standards (e.g. the 'Broken Britain' discourse). Community becomes a key site for state interventions, with the championing of the use of participatory governance approaches that promote the devolution of power and resources from central government to civil society (both the Third/voluntary sector and, importantly for neoliberals, the private sector). This becomes a way of enacting social political priorities such as democratic renewal (specifically the democratic deficit) and welfare reform (Taylor, 2011).

This process has been described as a shift from 'government to governance... a reconciliation of the role and standing of the state and the forging of new sets of relationships with markets and civil society in sustaining social development' (Wallace, 2009, p.246), where these 'new sets of relationships' occur in the community. From a neoliberal perspective, this empowerment of communities is seen as liberation from state control, and in negotiating such reconciliation, community (and community development) becomes central to the facilitation of community empowerment, participation and renewal (Wallace 2009).

The language and policies surrounding the Big Society can be seen as a case in point. For example, in *Building the Big Society* (Cabinet Office, 2010), the Coalition clearly appropriates the language of community development, using 'empowerment', 'involvement', and 'social action' in their outline of Big Society policies. Ledwith (2011) suggests that, although the Big Society rhetoric implies a 'new form of participatory democracy' (p.1), in application it is undemocratic, and that this rhetoric is actually used to obscure neoliberal ideology. Community work's ethos of community empowerment can thus be seen to have been appropriated by the Coalition, through their advocacy of the transfer of service provision to the community. However, rather than being a product of a desire to extend participative democracy, it can instead be seen as part of the Coalition's on-going drive to reduce public spending (Ledwith, 2011).

In *Building the Big Society*, the Coalition states that 'only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all' (Cabinet Office, p.1). However, in the same document, the Coalition say that they 'will introduce new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services (p.1). These two statements suggest that, given the chance, the community will step in to provide services, often better and more equitably than the public sector. However, in the second statement, there is no discussion of why services might be threatened (budget cuts, for example, or government policies favouring competition and privatisation). The fact that, as public

funding is cut, public services and organisations in the Third Sector that support communities, like the community development field, will be in a weakened position and unable to affect such community engagement, is obscured (Ledwith, 2011).

These statements support Ledwith's claim regarding the undemocratic nature of the Big Society: with the withdrawal of state-run welfare services and the transfer downwards of resources and power, those least able to deal with this effectively, those at the most disadvantage, become responsible for their own poverty (Ledwith, 2011) and the state's responsibility for failure is removed (Taylor, 2011). In the Big Society discourse, community is conflated with community development; the importance of the role of civic society and the Third Sector in the achievement of the Big Society is emphasised, and so community development is framed as a viable alternative to public provision of services (Ledwith, 2011).

The attractiveness of community as a site for such policies has impacts for community development work. For many, most worrying has been the process of incorporation of community development by the state. This arguably began with the election of New Labour: their rhetoric of community, partnership and empowerment was attractive to the Third Sector, who, already naturally allied with the Left and feeling relieved after years of Conservative government, entered into a relationship with the state that was 'less critical' and more 'cordial' than during the Conservative years (Bunyan, 2012, p3). It has been argued that this has led to a weakening and depoliticisation of the community development profession and to the silencing of opposition to government policies. As a result, an intensification of partnership and co-operation between the state and the community sector occurred, and consequently, there was an increase in the political recognition given to community development.

So, as emphasis was being given to community as the site of enactment of social policies, community development became more allied with the state; dual developments with important consequences for community work. Ledwith (2011, p.28), in discussing the involvement of community development in service provision, argues that in being co-opted into supplying welfare, community work runs the risk of

becoming outcome-focussed and losing sight of its social justice values. This again raises the problem of community work being depoliticised and the creation of a culture of 'doing' rather than 'thinking' . Without an ideological base, community work is thus open to political manipulation through its partnership with the state, which, it has been argued, could potentially further legitimise and enable state withdrawal from service provision and welfare cuts (Shaw, 2011).

The professionalisation of community work has also been singled out as part of this process, most notably the increasing managerialism of practice (Shaw, 2011). Shaw argues that this could lead to standardisation and regulation of community engagement practices and to community development undergoing 'incorporation into managerial procedures [that]... create a serious crisis of critique' (2011, p.ii132) for the profession, a view that supports Ledwith's argument. Martin (2006), in questioning the professionalisation of adult education, also highlights that while professionalisation may have improved practice in many ways (e.g. raising the status of the profession), it could also potentially lead to a focus on adaptive or reactive approaches to problems rather than transformative solutions.

By engaging with policies uncritically, community workers could therefore be unknowingly drawn into working in ways that entrench inequalities and social injustices rather than challenging them. Focusing on targets could reinforce mainstream, less risky activities, and promote government policies and standards over community driven action (Taylor, 2011). Furthermore, by critically disengaging, community development could lose the role that it plays in civil society, particularly the potential it has to reflect, represent and support the interests of disadvantaged groups 'against' the state (Miller and Ahmad, 2011).

Nevertheless, despite these developments, it has been argued that there are still opportunities open for such community work. The current trend for partnership working and the use of community development values in welfare provision opens up prospects for the sector, and for the community. Scott (2012) argues that, for example, community planning initiatives are positive chances for community workers to

persuade local authorities of the value of consultation beyond their statutory obligations, thereby transforming how policy-makers view community engagement. This could bring people together, creating new alliances and understandings, 'a combination of both insider and outsider strategies' (Taylor, 2011, p.297) that could be beneficial for community development and the community, with community workers and activists gaining strength from being part of political processes rather than standing outside them. The 'insiders' could also benefit (as Scott argues) from the input of the 'outsiders'. Practitioners could also have a role to play to ensure that opportunities for engagement are open to all community members and that participants in community engagement processes have the support required to take part effectively (Scott, 2012). Community workers could thus influence reform and work from the inside to defend public services, with community-based state interventions being influenced along the lines of community development's own working practices and ideology.

Additionally, depending on community priorities, community workers could also support reform of state processes (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011): the incorporation of community development by the state could be seen positively as part of a process of bottom-up pressure on the state, not just as a negative result of neoliberalism. An example of successful bottom-up pressure can be seen in the new radical social movements, like the disability rights movement and the feminist movement, whose challenges to the status quo in demanding redistribution of resources and social recognition has led to more sensitive and responsive policy-making, particularly on issues surrounding plurality and diversity (Miller and Ahmad, 2011). Miller and Ahmad argue that community development has become central to social policy because it has been seen to promote social inclusion through its working practices and ideology, and so could have a role to play in continuing such pressure on state processes. Gilchrist and Taylor (2011) agree with this perspective, but caution that, despite political acknowledgement of the value of community work, the state has nevertheless yet to realise that community development's ideological position is inherently allied towards supporting communities rather than meeting policy

objectives, which could lead to further tension between community development and the state.

Still, progressive social change could be promoted and expanded by practitioners using policies of community partnership and empowerment for socially just ends. Ledwith (2011) believes that the on-going use of community empowerment discourses offers 'an opportunity for community development to redefine its radical agenda and to engage with injustice' (p. 2). Community development could thus reclaim terms like 'empowerment', 'social justice' and 'equality' from the neo-liberal agenda, but only as long as awareness is cultivated of the potential for these terms to be used in ways that divert community work and obscure underlying causes of inequalities and poverty (Ledwith, 2007). This could open up new areas of engagement between alternative discourses, such as those promoted by social activists, and the state (Taylor, 2011), thereby enhancing the autonomy of people and communities (Wallace, 2009).

Hogget et al. (2008) describe community development as taking place at 'the point where representative and participatory democracy meet: a public sphere where public purposes and values are continually contested' (p.15). In contemporary Britain, community work finds itself in this position, at the nexus between the state and the community. It has been subject to a process of incorporation by policy-makers over recent decades, and seen the adoption of its language and values in policy discourses, a development that seemingly connects with community development's 'embodied argument' of promoting social justice (Martin, 2012) but which, at times, has been shown to work against it. This could potentially lead to an exploitation of the values of community work and of a diversion and silencing of the profession. Opportunities for social justice and positive change could arise here, but practitioners need to work in ways in which the needs of the community are not subsumed to the needs of policy objectives. The tensions between the state and community development, as represented by the term 'in and against the state', can therefore be seen to be very much alive. The challenge for community development lies in remaining aware of the

processes of co-option and to engage critically with them, working *against* state colonisation of the profession but *within* the state to achieve real social justice aims.

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