CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

Supporting People Power: Personal reflections on 40 years in community learning and development

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For ten years Charlie was the CEO of the Scottish Community Education Council and then the first Head of Community Learning and Development with the Scottish Government. He is the author of 'Community Learning and Development: The Making of an Empowering Profession'.

If you Google Wikipedia for community learning and development or community education, only two examples are referenced: Scotland and the State of Wisconsin in the USA. Apparently neither terms are used these days in the policies and practice of countries worldwide. This is surprising - not only because it is wrong but also because in fact community learning and development is a worldwide phenomenon. The term may not be being used in other countries, but this work has been part of an incredible educational revolution that has been taking place certainly since the later 1960s. A revolution that is called people power.

I have recently retired after nearly 40 years in community learning and development. I'd like to reflect in this article upon how this work developed and also my own part in supporting some of it in Scotland, the UK and beyond.

I am a baby boomer. I left school in 1968 and studied Politics and Community Development as a student. After working in a community school in Yorkshire, I moved in 1975 to Scotland and to the Scottish Local Government Unit. SLGU was the brainchild of a handful of Labour councillors who had recently been elected to the new Regional and District Councils. All were academics – including Ron Young, Tony Worthington and Ken Collins. Ken went on to become an MEP and Tony an MP. SLGU was an independent think tank, intended to provide elected members and officers with some 'out of the silo' ideas, research and training. I arrived in Scotland a month after the publication of the *Alexander Report*: *The Challenge of Change*, which led to the creation of local authority community education services across Scotland and the launch of Strathclyde Regional Council's community development policy as a key part of its strategy to tackle multiple deprivation.

I worked on community education and development and at the same time lectured at Clydebank FE College. My particular interest was in how educators could reach out to disadvantaged communities. I had been impressed by the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and closer to home in Liverpool of Tom Lovett and Eric Midwinter as well as, earlier than that, John Maclean's popular adult education work on Clydeside. But it was in Scotland in the latter part of the 1970s that a number of factors and people

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were about to come together to create the UK's, indeed Europe's, largest testing ground for community education and development.

Ron was the creative spirit within SLGU, a powerful Strathclyde politician and a prolific writer, with influential articles in *Community Care* magazine and in local government periodicals. My first book, *The Community Worker as Politiciser of the Deprived,* came out in 1977 and I edited a magazine called *Scottish Radical Education,* as well as being the Scottish correspondent for *Community Care* for a couple of years. Information about Scottish community education and development was beginning to be disseminated around the world. This was a place worth watching.

The Scottish Community Education Centre (SCEC) in Edinburgh was the main practice support resource centre for staff working in this emerging field. In 1977 a national Training Committee set up by the Labour Government examined the future of professional community education training. It proposed a new qualification and in effect a new profession. One of the recommendations of the Alexander Report was to establish a national body for community education and, of the Training Committee, to establish a national validating body for all professional training. SCEC was given Non-Departmental Public Body (quango) status and government funding and now called the Scottish Community Education Council, chaired by Elizabeth Carnegy, chair of the Training Committee, with Ralph Wilson as its first Director. Things were moving!

I moved to Dundee in 1977 to become part of the teaching team that designed the first community education and development professional training programme in Scotland. Establishing a national validation body moved at a slower pace. A SCEC training committee was set up under Geoffrey Drought to move this forward. I was a member of this committee, which recommended the setting up of a body to validate professional training within SCEC, later called CeVe (Community Education Validation and Endorsement). Throughout this time , however, there was a strong counter current amongst many community workers who felt that their work was more appropriately an area of social work than education. Strathclyde Region employed as many community workers within its Social Work Department as in its Community Education Service. Tony Worthington was asked to examine this. I attended a couple of meetings of his committee. His report somewhat fudged the issue by saying that community development was an 'approach' which should permeate the practice of many professionals.

This opened up a rich vein of debate in Scotland which lasted for around 20 years. Strong proponents of the 'permeation' approach included Alan Barr, who moved to Scotland in the late seventies and subsequently went on to have a major influence as co-director of the Scottish Community Development Centre. I came to know Alan well and have huge respect for him, but whilst I agreed strongly that we needed to

influence the training and practice of all public service professions and indeed those in the private sector to support community education and development, we also required specifically trained community educators. These were not mutually exclusive objectives. This was a central theme of the book I brought out with Laurie Bidwell in 1982 entitled *Community Education and Community Development*.

At this time I was also appointed as an advisor to the Multiple Deprivation Officer/Member Group on Tayside Regional Council, where we adopted many of the area-based targeting approaches initially developed in Strathclyde. I resigned from that role to fight unsuccessfully for Regional and Westminster parliamentary seats for the Labour Party. These were difficult times with the Conservative Government trying to dismantle the post-war social democratic consensus and the Miners' Strike a totemic issue highlighting the struggle of traditional working-class communities and the demise of heavy industry in Scotland. I remember taking a group of students over to Fife coal mining communities to offer help with welfare rights and community organising advice. Frankly, on the latter we learned more from them!

In 1985 I went to work for the National Consumer Council, where I headed up its UK work on consumer education, a responsibility earlier held by Eric Midwinter and linked up again with Ken Collins who was now the Socialist Group's spokesperson on consumer and environmental issues at the European Parliament. My thinking about community education and development was changing at this time. I was increasingly attracted to the potential of linking it with the power of the mass media. I had dabbled in the production of open learning resources, producing a training film whilst in Dundee and also material for the Open University. I felt that in order to scale up this work and to reach more people, we needed to move beyond the local.

I had also become interested in how to harness the power of western consumers and communities to support poorer communities in the global south, and jointly to mobilise against companies and governments whose behaviour impacted negatively upon people and the environment. This was the time of the Bhopal disaster. I worked closely with the International Organisation of Consumer Unions and produced curricula and training material with SCEC and with the Community Education team at the Open University and set up a National Resource Unit at the Community Education Development Centre in Coventry. I also joined the editorial board of the international *Community Development Journal* and published a number of papers and articles. One of these was a report critical of the behaviour of some companies that sponsored educational materials, strongly encouraged during the Thatcher years as local authority education budgets were cut by the government. Much of this was blatant product advertising and biased misinformation.

This did however lead me to a closer understanding of more enlightened corporate social and environmental responsibility and how to influence and engage companies

and professions, such as journalists, lawyers and architects in supporting community education and development. Indeed, this was the period when the prefix 'community' was being adopted by a number of professionals keen to support disadvantaged communities – community architects being one example, with whom I had had a close involvement since I first met Tony Gibson, founder of *Planning for Real,* in the early seventies. I chaired a working party for St George's House at this time which picked up on this in relation to supporting the emerging community enterprise movement.

In 1988 I joined what was to become the Community Development Foundation (CDF) as one of its Programme Directors. A Gulbenkian Foundation study in the early eighties had argued that there should be a national centre for Community Development similar to the National Institute for Social Work, able to provide training and resource support to practitioners. I chaired the Scottish Consultation Group and we proposed that this function should be taken on in Scotland by SCEC rather than setting up a separate agency. From the mid-eighties, however, there seemed to be a strong reluctance at SCEC to include community development within its remit. Its focus was limited to youth issues and adult basic education - both important, but neglecting support for community capacity building. After the departure of Ralph Wilson it seemed to have become a rather cautious agency avoiding, in my view, what community education and development should be about, i.e. not merely supporting learning but also social action and in particular focussing upon helping disadvantaged individuals and communities. It was for this reason that the Scottish Community Development Centre was established by CDF and Glasgow University to fill that gap. I served for a while as a Board member.

My main role at CDF, however, was that of European and Public Affairs Director and it was wearing this hat that I became closely involved with the Council of Europe and the publication of Europe's first *Resolution on Community Development* in 1989, attending the debate at the European Parliament with Ron Young. The definition adopted by the Council of Europe came from Scotland and was of community education. These were heady times with the fall of the Berlin Wall and opportunities for working with community educators across both western and eastern Europe. I worked closely with the Council of Europe, European Commission and the OECD to profile community education and development, publishing reports with them. I joined the board of the International Association for Community Development and was later instrumental in moving its HQ to Scotland as its Secretary General. I was a strong proponent of practitioners and others who support community education and development having national and international associations and had in the early eighties chaired the Scottish Association of Community Workers and was a founder member of the UK's Standing Conference for Community Development.

In 1993 I was appointed Chief Executive of SCEC. During my time there we radically reorganised the agency, adding a community development team to those for adult

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education and youth issues work, and focussed much more upon issues of disadvantage. We built upon SCEC's longstanding commitment to pan-European work led by Deputy Director Marc Liddle, by opening an office in Brussels, as the hub for what would become a Europe-wide network of *Eurodesk* information centres. We enhanced the work of CeVe and played a leading role in UK-wide partnerships, including establishing PAULO, the UK training standards body (NTO) for community learning and development (named after Paulo Freire). I served as its first chair.

We greatly increased our support for practitioners and trainers, publishing three academic refereed journals plus CONCEPT and a regular magazine supplement in the Daily Record (Scotland's largest selling popular newspaper) as well as web-based materials and other practical resources. We ran CPD training programmes and conferences, including co-ordinating the *European Year of Lifelong Learning* in Scotland and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Youth Forum, with participants meeting Nelson Mandela. Other work of significance included developing the Scottish Youth Parliament and programmes around drugs, health, the environment, crime, citizenship education and other issues and establishing national forums, one of which became the Scottish Community Development Alliance. We worked closely with SCET (Scottish Council for Educational Technology) where I was appointed chair of the Scottish National Grid for Community Learning Committee, continuing my interest in harnessing the new media for community education and development - one product of this being the on-line Community Channel.

1997 had seen the return of a Labour Government after 18 years. I remember with impish joy when I presented to the Board Labour's new democratic socialist Clause 4 as the basis for our new policy and practice agenda! Sadly for the next two years there was stasis with regard to almost any new public policy initiatives, as the Government in Scotland focussed upon establishing the new Scottish Parliament. In contrast, in England David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education, was forging ahead with work around citizenship education and community learning. I took the initiative with COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) in producing a report on the future for community education, focussing upon the promotion of social inclusion, lifelong learning and active citizenship.

This in turn influenced the 1998 Scottish Office's Osler Committee on community education, of which I was a member. In contrast to the highly consultative COSLA review, Osler pronounced but hardly consulted. Its most ambiguous pronouncement being that community education was an approach and not also a profession, something I said publicly was confusing. The committee would also not support my arguments for a legislative base for community education. Osler did however recommended yet another professional Training Review! The Scottish Office officials

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then decided in their wisdom that the field would henceforth be called community learning and that SCEC would be called Community Learning Scotland. On neither of these matters was there any consultation or discussion with the field.

These were, I have to say, mixed times. The new Scottish Labour/Liberal Coalition Government did introduce new Ministries – for Lifelong Learning, Young People and for Communities - for which we had long campaigned. But lobbied hard by SCVO (Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations), they also placed SCEC at the top of the bonfire of the quangos. In my view, this was populist public policy vandalism just at the time when, with the launch of PAULO, the integrated Scottish approach to community education and development was getting traction across the UK. We were required to break the agency up, transferring most of our work to four new or existing voluntary sector development agencies, with a tiny rump remaining to work on policy advice and to run CeVe within a short-lived Executive Agency called Communities Scotland. The national development agency for community education was abolished, coincidentally in the year Sir Kenneth Alexander died. Things looked bleak with inexperienced Minsters and centrifugal ministries dismantling the vision of a more holistic service. For my own part, I transferred into government as the first Head of Community Learning and Development, frankly to try to limit the damage.

It is at this point that I should make some reference to why the term community learning and development was finally adopted in Scotland. As I have implied, I was strongly against the dropping of the community education brand. It had taken 25 years post Alexander to build up our profile. It was a strong and respected brand and did what it said on the tin. It was within the third national Training Review, this time chaired by Fraser Patrick, that we had some discussion about the new term 'community learning'. I was a longstanding proponent of bringing together the community education and community development worlds and through PAULO had convinced the community development field to come under that NTO and not the one for social care. So as a result of horse trading with Fraser we agreed that we should use the term 'community learning and development', the term PAULO used, to forge together the broad coalition of community-based informal education professions – youth work, community work, adult education, development education - as a single employment sector for the UK.

Whilst Head of Community Learning and Development, I had some influence over profiling its contribution across the new Government's policies on social inclusion, lifelong learning, community regeneration, community planning, land reform and access, rural and health policies and over the recognition of community learning and development as one of the four pillars of the soon to be formed Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council, later abolished by the UK Conservative/Liberal Coalition Government in 2011. I was the main author of the Scottish Government's policy statements on the future of community learning and development and on its response

to the Training Review *Empowered to Practice*. This, amongst other things, called for CeVe to be given additional responsibilities and to become an independent Standards Council for Community Learning and Development. Perhaps predictably, it was several years and a further review of training, this time chaired by Ted Millburn, before that was eventually established. Disappointed at the lack of drive and support amongst the politicians, many of whom had come from our field and were now Ministers, I departed in 2003 to become CEO of the Carnegie UK Trust.

Carnegie UK had independent funds, far more than SCEC. But much of its assets were spent (on building libraries) and its grants scheme paled into insignificance compared with the new player on the block, the Lottery. It did however have huge recognition capital as the most iconic name in Scottish philanthropy. So in 2004 I advised trustees that we should become more akin to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in England. Scotland, I had long felt, needed a JRF, a progressive Scottish-based foundation 'speaking truth to power' that would fund independent Commissions of Inquiry, research and action-research, as well as supporting national and international communities of practice. In my five years with the Trust, as well as seeing the building of a new eco-designed HQ to replace the dental surgery atmosphere of its former off-putting offices, we supported a number of initiatives which I believed would strengthen community learning and development in Scotland, the UK and beyond.

We established two Commissions of Inquiry, the first into sustainable rural communities and the second into the future for civil society and democracy; we ran an extensive programme on youth empowerment, leading to the creation of *Participation Works*, the national resource centre supporting young people's participation; we funded over 50 community-based action research projects, over 100 local youth and community projects and the networking of communities of practice, including the International Association for Community Development and work around the possible impact of climate change upon vulnerable communities; we started to develop a significant publications programme; and created a partnership with the UK and Scottish governments and the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) to establish the first university-based research centres in the UK on philanthropy and charitable giving, a key objective being to unlock and target funding more effectively for progressive social change. Unsurprisingly, I also took the Trust international, forging its first European and American foundation partnerships.

Indeed, I left Carnegie in 2008 to become the CEO of an international foundation based in America but, sadly, for family reasons was unable to take up the job. So I returned to adult education, becoming Director of an international college inspired by EF Schumacher, the author of *Small is Beautiful.* Schumacher College is a remarkable place. It is a residential centre somewhat like Newbattle Abbey, running post-graduate and short course programmes around community, social, economic, farming, ecology

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and environmental themes, with a strong sustainable and participative development underpinning. Its community learning and development approach is rooted in Schumacher's notion of 'whole person learning', i.e. where education touches your head, hands and heart.

With several hundred social and environmental activists, corporate social and environmental responsibility staff from the business sector and community educators in any one year coming from across the world, it is an immensely rich learning environment, as well as a place for recharging the batteries. In my period there we expanded the college, introduced more practical certificates and degrees and extended access for lower income students through cheaper courses and open learning. I retired in 2012.

It's been an interesting career, with never a bored but many frustrating moments. I've met some wonderful colleagues and many, many inspiring individuals and communities. Ken Alexander, whom I first met in 1975 and who kindly wrote the Foreword to my book *The Making of an Empowering Profession*, was clearly a visionary and deeply committed to widening access as well as enhancing the quality of learning and development support for disadvantaged communities. Individual politicians have been positive drivers of progressive change, whilst others who should have known better have knocked things into the long grass of endless reviews.

For nearly three decades with the support of organisations like SCEC, PAULO, the Lifelong Learning UK Sector Skills Council and now the Standards Council, community learning and development practitioners in Scotland have developed a sense of coherence and confidence as a recognised and respected sector of employment. According to the LLUK's last labour market report in 2010, some 60,000 work in this field across Scotland in one role or another, full- or part-time. But three of those support bodies now no longer exist and the Standards Council looks to me to be seriously under-funded for the tasks required. New development agencies have, of course, emerged, supporting different aspects of community learning and development - SCDC, Young Scot, Youth Link, and Scotland's Learning Partnership, for example - and they are doing some really excellent work. Paradoxically, the scenery of support since devolution now looks much more like England.

There has been a considerable growth of staff across Scotland supporting community learning and development over this period, although government cuts of late are biting deep. They have a myriad of job titles and far more are now employed in the voluntary sector. But too many remain untrained and unsupported in terms of their continuing professional development. It is here that I welcome the Standards Council's push for higher quality standards and this is why I have long supported open learning, work-based as well as FE and university-based professional training to scale-up access to training opportunities. On this latter point, however, I would say

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that the graduate community learning and development professional training degrees run by the universities in Scotland have become over-theoretical. We need intelligent, critically reflective practitioners with an understanding of the structural causes and effects of inequality, but also the ethical passion and a strong skills toolkit to do something about tackling it. Practical skills training is vital. The Standards Council should not validate such courses unless they can demonstrate this.

The community land movement is just one example of where people have made real gains in Scotland, redistributing power and resources. Local communities, particularly those that are disadvantaged and facing day-to-day social, economic and environmental problems, let alone the need to be resilient to deal with future shocks such as climate change or long-term recession, need the best expertise and the most skilled community educators we can provide, and with specialist areas of technical expertise or, at the very least, the nous of how to get it. And it is here that the Standards Council needs also to influence the training and practice of other professionals from architects and health workers to farmers and artists, to sustain high quality community learning and development.

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CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY
Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

Searching for the state and the market in American community development: reflections on editing Community Development in the Steel City

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This article was first published in Community Development Journal Vol 48 No 1 January 2013 pp. 158–162

As an African American (a Texan to be precise) living in Scotland for over ten years, I find that my overarching experience as an expatriate is one of deep ambivalence. The old cliche´ of expats being caught between two worlds turns out to be surprisingly true and disruptive to my sense of self. Certainly, my adopted country feels like 'home' most of the time, but there will always be a barrier to my inclusion – a kind of cultural grammar that I will probably always lack. When I periodically return to the United States, I find that my newly and stealthily acquired Scottish sensibilities exclude me from many of the taken-for-granted assumptions on which the American Dream is founded. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903, p. 3), the African American social critic and civil rights campaigner writing in the early twentieth century, argued that black Americans [are]:

> Gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

To be sure, Du Bois was arguing that a central part of the black American condition was the dilemma of having to understand and make sense of ourselves, our identities and our experiences simultaneously through a hegemonic white supremacist ideology and an ideology of racial equality, justice and uplift. I find Du Bois's concept of double-sightedness compelling for my expat adventures in Scotland. This 'double-consciousness' of perceiving things as simultaneously American and Scottish is essential but oftentimes burdensome. Organizing and editing Community Development in the Steel City: Democracy, Justice and Power in Pittsburgh was, I thought, a perfect opportunity to try to understand the assumptions, traditions and

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imperatives of one example of American community development using my insider/outsider American/Scottish double-consciousness.

The idea for this edited collection was born out of a United States/ European Union symposium on social inclusion and community development organized by the University of Pittsburgh in May 2011. This three-day conference brought together academics and practitioners to debate the role, purpose and effectiveness of community development in combating marginalization and exclusion in different national contexts. During my time in Pittsburgh, I also had the opportunity to visit a number of community projects and discuss with workers and activists their understandings and approaches to community development. Wanting to capture the enthusiasm of both the conference and the grassroots-based work in the city, I approached Tracy Soska (University of Pittsburgh), Terri Baltimore (Hill House Association) and Adrienne Walnoha (Community Human Services) to help me formulate and plan a publication about community development in Pittsburgh. The nine articles in this edited collection are written by practitioners and academics primarily working at the grassroots in the city. The articles reflect both the spirit and the work that typify much contemporary community development thinking and practice in the United States. Articles run the gamut from a history of urban regeneration in Pittsburgh to partnership-working for action research, developments of community university partnerships, innovations in comprehensive community initiatives, community organizing for economic justice, working with at-risk young people, arts-led regeneration, supporting community leadership and participation and new approaches to sustainable development. I am delighted with Community Development in the Steel City primarily because it provides an opportunity and a space for authors to reflect and share with an international audience the triumphs and setbacks of contemporary community development work in a particularly challenging post-industrial setting. Through this snapshot of practice that the publication affords, we can better understand the important influences a primarily place-based, micro-level practice can have on the life chances and opportunities of marginalized groups.

However, over the course of the year editing these essays, my expat double-consciousness continuingly provoked in me dissatisfaction with some of the assumptions, silences and taken-for-granted concepts underpinning the entire publication. Living in Europe, and in Scotland in particular, has required a crash course in my understanding of the opportunities and the dilemmas the local and national state offer in individual and community life. The state can be a cumbersome, bureaucratic and self-serving institution that undermines individual liberty and innovation. But it can also be a key guarantor and protector of equality and rights which makes individual liberty possible and meaningful. For community development, the state is both these things simultaneously. The state can undermine or suppress deliberative dialogue about the common good through 'invited spaces' that direct and control both the process and the outcomes of citizen debate. The state,

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however, can also support the democratic participation of the most marginalized through a system of social protection and welfare. Regardless of how the state in advanced capitalist countries is seen or experienced, it is important to bear in mind that it is not a monolith of either control or protection. However, in editing the contributions to Community Development in the Steel City, I found that the state was almost completely absent in many authors' analyses. Perhaps this is unsurprising given most Americans' hostility to 'the government' and its role in individual and public life. However, especially in a time of austerity, I was surprised not to see a clearer discussion about the field of power of the local, regional and national state and a closer examination of the free spaces and/or constraints that community development experiences in relation to the state. The state's absence in many of the narratives is telling because I think it signals the American state's simultaneous weakness and strength in relation to community development. The US state is 'weak' in the sense that spending on and defence of the social rights and protections of American citizens is far inferior to that in Europe. The state may be arguably 'strong' on protecting individual liberty but the recently enacted Affordable Care Act (the popularly dubbed 'Obamacare') notwithstanding, the state does relatively little to protect individual and group equality and justice – which is, I would argue, community development's primary concern.

Not engaging more directly and clearly with analyses and actions in relation to the state does not, of course, mean that the state 'withers away' from the politics of community development – the state is simply captured and directed by other more canny interest groups. The Tea Party, an influential force during the 2010 mid-term elections, may have seen much of its power wane on the national stage, but activists have not disappeared and gone home. They have refocused their efforts on local politics (Emejulu, 2011). Tea Partiers are bringing their libertarian small government agenda to school boards, city councils and state legislatures (Martin, 2012). The headline of the 2012 elections might be Barack Obama's expertly organised ground game of building a majority coalition among young people, women and minority groups, but the more pressing issue for community development are the results of 'down-ticket' local races. By ceding ground on the local state, community development practitioners may well be gifting the levers of government to those most hostile to its aims and purposes. As the actions of the influential American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC, http://www.alec.org), a free market, small government interest group demonstrate, local and state government can be easily captured by corporations and other partisan interests to advance their particular goals which are oftentimes anathema to the values of equality and justice. ALEC builds partnerships between policymakers and various special interests groups to jointly draft 'model legislation' for allied politicians to introduce and attempt to enact in state legislatures. The work of ALEC recently came under intense media scrutiny due to its model legislation of the so-called Stand Your Ground Law that George Zimmerman is using in his defence of the alleged murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida in February 2012

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(Lichtblau, 2012). Given this stark political reality, I think American community development (in Pittsburgh and further afield) has a duty and an obligation to advance a theory of the state and state power and develop clear strategies as to how grassroots-based work can be translated into coherent political demands which are in turn realized in effective public policy formation and implementation.

The other notable silence in the text is in relation to free-market capitalism. Although Pittsburgh was ravaged by the movement of capital out of the city and overseas (as seen in the collapse of its steel industry), it is not clear to me that that very hard lesson of the free market has been integrated into the thinking and practice of community development in many of the contributions to the edited collection. With a few exceptions, there seems to be an assumption of consensus and of aligned interests between state, private sector and community actors which, at least to me, seems to be a very unhelpful starting point for advancing equality and justice for marginalized community groups. While conflict should perhaps not be the default position for community development, Saul Alinsky (1946, 1971), for all his problematic analyses and practices, was on to something about identifying and understanding a given community's self-interests and how those interests may well be at odds with other more powerful political actors. The story of Pittsburgh is in many ways the story of the reorganization of capital and the struggle to build a new economy in this post-industrial landscape. By all accounts, Pittsburgh is succeeding in its on-going restructuring and recovery from steel and towards a health service and knowledge-led economy. This transformation of the local economy is encouraging but it is creating new winners and losers in the market economy, which has a direct impact on community life. Understanding how the free market can create constituencies for resistance and/or compliance (note the different popular reactions to austerity policies across Europe) must be a central plank for community development.

As several essays in Community Development in the Steel City evidence, community development work in Pittsburgh is doing innovative and essential work of rebuilding neighbourhoods and supporting the participation of local people. The determinedly micro-level focus of much of the work in the publication is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Demonstrating what can be accomplished without a clear role for or demands placed on the state is important. Understanding the opportunities that do exist when the state is 'silent' or 'passive' is crucial for analysing the scope of what is possible through the grit and determination of local action. However, as long as local community development action is disconnected from broader politics and policymaking, its impact may be, in the long run, undermined.

Community Development in the Steel City: Democracy, Justice and Power in Pittsburgh can be downloaded free from the CDJ Plus website:
http://www.oxfordjournals.org/cdjc/?page_id=3

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CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY
Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

Learning environmental activism through social networking sites?

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Introduction

Environmental movements, like a number of other movements, are increasingly using social networking sites (SNS) to recruit new members, to fundraise, to promote their causes and to facilitate their campaigning activity. SNS therefore enable social movement organisations to engage with a wider body of supporters, and may lead supporters to expect greater involvement in setting policy in this new public sphere or to reuse materials in unexpected ways. Are social networking sites changing the nature of the relationship between social movement organisations and their supporters and are we seeing the emergence of a new public sphere of activism? Are new forms of activist identity beginning to appear as SNS users 'learn in and from' movement activity (see Hall et al 2011)? To explore these questions a study was undertaken of the community of supporters linked through Friends of the Earth Scotland's Facebook group. This study provides an opportunity to examine the potential impact of social media on the relationship between organisations and supporters to ascertain if significant changes are occurring.

A note on SNS

SNS allow users to construct and communicate representations of their identities online and Facebook, the leading global SNS, has grown phenomenally since its launch in 2007, with 31,114,800 accounts registered in the UK by May 2012 (CheckFacebook.com, 2012). They may be contributing, as Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, to the Internet providing a means for an online 'civic commons': an organised open forum for deliberative democracy, or at least an online manifestation of Habermas' (1989) public sphere in which issues can be discussed freely. Unlike the largely un-idirectional information flow of conventional websites, social networking sites operate through user-generated content which offers the possibility to create a discursive online public sphere.

Loader (2008) notes that interactive media provide channels for social movements to take digital content from supporters and from other sources, which can then be juxtaposed, re-contextualised and distributed. This means that the communications between a movement organisation and its supporters is two-directional, so that while the organisation can publish material offered by supporters, their supporters can do likewise. SNS are more than channels of communication for organisations to mobilise supporters because they may be fundamentally altering the interaction between the two: the collective identity of the movement might be enhanced but equally the movement may be enrolled into a plurality of self-projects, which Facebook movement users develop.

A case study of Friends of the Earth Scotland's Facebook group

Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) was established in 1978 and claims to be Scotland's leading environmental campaigning organisation, with over 5000 members. They have a network of supporters and active local groups across Scotland. With their inclusive approach to supporters and members, FoES is a potentially fertile 'testing' ground to assess the impact of Facebook on the relationship between the organisation and users. To gain insights into how the organisation enables members and supporters to participate in environmental activity, and how users perceive their experiences of such activities, a small-scale study was conducted to provide a snapshot into the changing nature of 'activism' and what it potentially means to be an 'activist' in SNS-mediated environmental activities.

Research methods

The study involved a qualitative investigation of 15 individuals who had joined FoES's Facebook group. The interviewees' biographical narratives were recorded, covering family environment, education and employment history, the development of their interest in environmental issues, the kinds of environmental campaigns they had participated in, their usage pattern of computers and their engagement with environmental NGOs online and offline. In order to supplement the qualitative data, FoES's Facebook site was also examined. It was first created in June 2009 and the postings from the beginning up to March 2012 were retrieved and used for retrospective analysis. This enabled us to assess how Facebook was being used by the organisation to achieve its goals and how its Facebook presence linked with its website. This virtual ethnography entailed recording and examining the content of the material generated on Facebook, an analysis of its interactive features and an assessment of the frequency, type and nature of the dialogue and actions that were generated - with permission from Friends of the Earth Scotland. The Facebook users were also informed of our presence and the reason for our study, which we posted on the site when the study began. We draw on part of this data to examine user perceptions of their relationship to environmental activism through Facebook.

Dissemination and combining platforms

It is no surprise that interactive technologies supported and accelerated traditional campaigning practices. Facebook is a means for FoES supporters to extend and accelerate the circulation of information, to mobilise resources, raise awareness, facilitate discussion, organise events and gain public attention. Facebook also helps users develop 'horizontal networks' (Castells, 1999) which can facilitate the internationalising of campaigns so that other campaigners/activists can share experiences, ideas and information. The multi-media capacity of digital technologies also helps by creating user-friendly and flexible forms of communication as, for example, an SNS-mediated video clip on Climate Change/carbon trade demonstrates:

> That was really the first time I was aware of what happens in Brazil and I was quite amazed and that's the benefit of the technology; it is a great thing for educating you and giving you access to these things that I would probably never really have known about unless I had been able to get access to these things on the website, so that's why I find the computer is a great for communication and getting to people and getting stories to people that normally would maybe never hear about them. ...

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> (Occupation unknown, 60s, male living in a remote place in Scotland)

The ability to reformat material using different technological platforms makes for versatile use in public education, as explained by one respondent who organised a showing of the same film in a restaurant where the group met. Moreover, SNS users were not restricting their use to a single platform, so digital information was spread across technical platforms through horizontal networks to a dispersed audience. This viral spiralling outwards through horizontal networks interconnected through different platforms begins to maximize the communicative capacity of the technology (Gillan *et al* 2008)

SNS that create networks of users are potentially new forms of collective distribution and ways of organising and educating in online and offline settings. The combining of imagery, audio and textual resources may not be particularly new to movements but the ability to disseminate these quickly is amplified by SNS. This cross-platform usage allows users to be selective about which SNS is best to use for a particular purpose. For example, some people link their Facebook to Twitter or other social media and appropriate them for specific purposes/interests. The 140 character limit on Twitter reduces the amount of information that can be posted, but the ability to link it with other SNS like Facebook or, if more depth is required by email, can provide a range of complementary platforms which can be selected by users for depth of information, discussion and interest.

Persuasive activism

Loader (2008) noted that online communication is perceived as being a weaker commitment than face-to-face interaction. When interviewees were asked to describe their identification of themselves in relation to their Facebook activity only one described themselves as an environmental 'activist'. They preferred using terms like 'evangelist', 'communicator' and 'campaigner'. This implies that they recognise a continuum of activism, but more significantly that online activity is seen as being something short of full activism, which was usually seen in terms of an embodied engagement in struggles:

> My idea of an activist is someone who gets very involved at the coal face, who sits in the way of a bulldozer or who digs himself… or climbs a tree and stays up there, but I think that's a romanticised idea that I have of what I would almost have become. (40s, School teacher, male)

> I mean activist to me sounds like somebody's out there, actually lying in the road somewhere stopping it being built or something! … Which I probably might have done when I were younger and had the freedom to do so but perhaps it isn't the word I would use of myself. (Open University tutor, 50s, male)

The subtext of these comments implies a stereotypical image of 'activism' which is associated with 'high stakes' participation (McAdam *et al*, 2001): an embodied militancy, such as 'sits in the way of a bulldozer' or 'climbs a tree'. In the digital age this idealised construction of activism may be limited as well as limiting. SNS can potentially allow for principles and commitments to be maintained whilst at the same

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time side-stepping the hazards that a more embodied 'high stakes' activism may entail. An embodied presence can restrict people's activist identity whilst a disembodied one opens up activist identities to a wider range of people and forms of participation.

Online action can be more conducive to a low-key approach that lends itself to a persuasive strategy of engagement rather than a confrontational one. The emphasis on the relationship between concerned, committed and persuasive rather than being hectoring or directly confrontational is emphasised by the respondent below:

> I am an activist without seeming to be one. It's a more subtle approach. I don't want to turn people off… the word environmentalist is almost a bad word with some people; they talk about 'all those damned environmentalists', as though they are some sort of an enemy. That's unfortunate, that's because of the militant approach some environmentalists have been using and we won't get people on our side by antagonising them, so if we are a little more low-key about it and more approachable and less lecturing, then people will listen to us and we'll be able to influence them a lot more. (Self-employed/ blogger, former high school teacher/social worker, male in his 50s)

We might think of this form of participation as 'sub-activism' (see Bakardjieva 2009: 92) which is 'a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured.' It refers to a range of primarily personal forms of political engagement that can include a mixture of online and offline activity.

Preaching to the converted?

Ellison and Boyd (2007, 211) claim that '[o]n many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network'. This also applied to a number of our interviewees. For example, in relation to his membership with the Facebook group, one participant says:

> I was already a member of Friends of the Earth Scotland, so it was just an extension of that and a simple way to … as opposed to me maybe emailing friends and such like, regarding campaigns and such like, I could do it very easily on Facebook to share it with everyone. (40s, male)

The extensive and instantaneous reach to an online audience is an advantage of SNS campaigns. However, as the following respondent acknowledges, these media may also encourage a degree of insularity as well as seeming to promote digital divisions between activists:

> We are often preaching to the converted, not always easy to reach 'environmentally persuadable people' … Also, people who are very engaged activists may not use Facebook… and as a result those people can be marginalised from campaigns. (Self-employed/ blogger, former

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> high school teacher/social worker, male in his 50s)

Although SNS-mediated, sub-activism, may not reach a wider public as extensively as mass media such as newspaper or television, those using SNS can acquire a sense of belonging to an imagined environmental community:

> ICT has certainly broadened my knowledge of environmental issues and has given me a sense of belonging to a community of activists at least in an abstract way. (Postgraduate student, 20s, male)

SNS activity becomes incorporated into users' construction of their identity, presenting a stage in a developing narrative of engagement with diverse issues. For example, an interviewee commented:

> I've tried to take part in a lot of these things because I think, you won't make changes unless you actually take part in these things so I try my best but I participate in them just to see if it does help. … before that [using computers/the Internet] I would purchase things, environmentally friendly foods and stuff like that, tried to take action in a way by donating to charities, that type. But now we're getting access to a computer, it has made a lot of things so much easier and there is the opportunity to have your voice heard by having these sites at your fingertips through the computer. (Occupation unknown, 60s, male living in rural Scotland)

Facebook is allowing users to become increasingly sophisticated in constructing an identity and acting out an online role. Association with FoES allows these users to be environmentally concerned but not militant, politically engaged but not ideologically driven, participating and active, but without bodily risk.

Is it activism?

The lowering of the barriers to active engagement can disrupt rather than facilitate activism.

> I have created the group…. (we) have like five thousand and four hundred members... I have to admit, not everyone has the same commitment on the cause, I mean some people just do it because it's cool… Because it's nice, because it's like … exhibitionism, you know! … Suddenly you realise that the quantity is not the important thing. I mean more number of members doesn't mean necessarily a higher level of commitment or stuff like this, so sometimes … Less useful is that SNS can distract from the serious nature of some environmental causes and that people may feel 'they have done their bit' by joining a Facebook group. (Employee of Environmental SMO, Ghent, Belgium, 20s, male)

If, as argued by Gladwell (2010), online activism is low commitment activism, the growth of 'social media activism' may be misleading as it may merely express how individuals are constructing their own identities rather than expressing strong commitments to social movement goals. This use seems, in part at least, to reflect Gillan *et al*'s (2008) distinction between the manifest and latent function of the

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technology. Although the manifest function of Facebook is to join friends and to promote 'causes' it is its latent capacity to facilitate social action that is a critical factor for social movements. However, this amplification of the latent function can be subverted or disrupted as the following comment reveals:

> It is not designed for activism stuff … sometimes you receive a lot of information which can easily make you feel confused … you know about you have business at the same time you have the pictures of either a whole … environmental issues plus recipes plus games. I don't know, you know it's a lot of information for only one screen. So sometimes you run the risk that maybe the people get confused. (Employee of Environmental NGO, Ghent, Belgium, 20s, male)

The study of the FoES Facebook community has shown that SNS are able to provide multiple and flexible communication environments. They also enable individuals to appear to be engaged with a range of issues, but without necessarily creating the substance of traditional activist engagement. This creates the possibility that participants are enrolling environmental organisations into a plurality of personal identity constructions rather than being galvanised themselves into the projects of the organisation. The social network being formed may be open and expansive, but also be 'ideologically thin' (Bennett, 2004), based on using association to communicate identity, like listing one's favourite band, rather than engagement with the underlying issues that activists normally address.

Conclusion

Facebook provides the facility to articulate a personal identity built from disparate elements and present it to the world. The preferred low-key engagement is facilitated by SNS, which enables users to take part in environmental movements to raise public awareness and potentially shape public opinion as active agents through supporting environmental organisations like FoES.

In the context of developing a culture of democracy that involves critical and self-conscious people, involved in individual and collective actions in civil society, the role of SNS seems to be particularly important. A focus on persuasion and learning is compatible with this type of activist engagement and therefore should be of interest to community educators. We should resist assuming that the low-key engagement emerging through SNS is necessarily superficial, as the intertwining of the campaigns with the supporters' own identity may imply a high level of commitment to the issues. However, if the 'self' that is being shaped diminishes opportunities for focused and concerted collective action, which involves risk, in 'real' as well as virtual terms, the culture that is being created may fail to significantly challenge vested social interests and structural inequalities of power.

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CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY
Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

An educational approach to gender justice

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The Government in Scotland has adopted a gendered understanding of its approaches to tackling violence against women (VAW) VAW is defined by the Scottish Government as follows:

> Gender based violence is a function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power and privilege. It takes the form of actions that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering to women and children, or affront to their human dignity, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It is men who predominantly carry out such violence, and women who are predominantly the victims of such violence. By referring to violence as 'gender based' this definition highlights the need to understand violence within the context of women's and girls' subordinate status in society. Such violence cannot be understood, therefore, in isolation from the norms, social structure and gender roles within the community, which greatly influence women's vulnerability to violence
> (Scottish Government 2010)

This definition is significant and has won considerable support from women's organisations across the world. The gendered approach is the result of campaigning and lobbying by women's organisations, and the deployment of evidence gathered from a wide range of grassroots organisations, including Women's Aid groups across Scotland. The Scottish approach contrasts with that in England and Wales, which offers a more 'gender neutral' definition, reflecting an institutional politics divorced from the political realities of survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, women's groups tackling violence in the community and professionals working in communities with women and girls. Policy in England and Wales has been influenced by the gender-blind arguments of gender symmetry in issues such as domestic abuse and sexual violence, which in turn has been fuelled by anti-feminist and, in some cases male-supremacist, groups such as the UK Men's Movement. These reactionary movements are present in Scotland but the feminist movement have successfully protected the gendered analysis from their attacks.

The Scottish Strategy to tackle Violence against Women has had a strong educational component. The Scottish Government's National Training Strategy to Address Violence Against Women identified training and education needs across the multiple sectors in Scotland where professionals and the public encounter violence against women. Lesley Orr was responsible for developing the national training strategy, based at Scottish Women's Aid, and identified the need for accredited education at a higher level to provide a strong theoretical grounding for the many workers engaged with addressing gendered violence in different parts of Scottish society.

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At the same time, Eurig Scandrett at Queen Margaret University (QMU) had been developing the university's educational curriculum in social justice, building on work in collaboration with community-based and non governmental organisations. The origin of Queen Margaret University is in the women's movement of the 19th century and the campaign for access to education for working class women. Two activists, Christian Guthrie Wright and Louisa Stevenson, established the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Science in 1875 to provide education for young women seeking work in domestic service, the dominant form of employment in the Scottish Capital, as well as providing nutritional improvement. Education for nurses quickly followed and through a series of iterations, the school became Queen Margaret University in 2007.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the University developed a strong reputation for providing relevant education in partnership with community-based and campaigning organisations. An opportunity was therefore identified for providing a course on violence against women in the context of gender justice, aimed at two distinct groups of people: activists and professionals involved in community support projects and campaigns around violence against women; and social science students developing an interest in gender. Through a partnership between Scottish Women's Aid and QMU, a course – Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence - was developed by Lesley, Eurig and Nel Whiting, Scottish Women's Aid's training officer.

The course embedded dialogical education throughout. It is taught by educators from academia and social movement organisations (indeed all three tutors are both social movement activists and academic scholars). The students are drawn from full-time education and the field of practice in tackling violence against women. The curriculum draws on these experiences as well as the theoretical developments in understanding gendered violence. Feminist theory has emphasised the social location of the theorist, the claim that all theory occurs from a 'standpoint': a socially-located position from which the world is viewed. Understanding gender justice, masculinities and violence must recognise that all theory is gendered and emerges from praxis. This is not to say that men cannot develop theory about women and vice versa, but rather that theoretical understanding must be grounded in a social reality in which theorists are either engaged in challenging, or else are complicit in, patriarchal structures of power. There is no gender-neutral position from which intellectuals can theorise, practitioners can act or educators can teach.

Theoretical frameworks that the course draws on include Gramsci's conception of hegemony and Foucault's idea of discourse. Neither Gramsci nor Foucault were feminists, and indeed aspects of their writings exhibit the particular forms of misogyny of their social locations of gender, history, class, sexuality. Their theoretical insights however have been useful to feminists working to transform society towards gender justice, including the constant renegotiation of masculinity away from its hegemonic manifestations towards forms which can embrace equality; and constructing alternative discourses of gender that have the potential to deconstruct gendered power relations.

Indeed, the provision and practice of a course in gender justice, masculinities and violence within a mainstream university, which is both a validated elective module

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within a degree in psychology and sociology, and an opportunity for theoretical nourishing of practitioners and activists working in the field of challenging gender-based violence, is itself a counter-hegemonic contribution to gender justice. It is delivered by, and open to both men and women, and its curriculum draws on the struggles of the women's movement, and pro-feminist men. Its presence demands that the practice of activists is taken seriously within the institution of Higher Education, and the rigours of academic theory becomes a resource for those working in the field.

The political value of education of this kind is illustrated by the importance which feminists have always recognised, of the integration of theory and struggle. In 1966, in her ground breaking paper *The Longest Revolution*, Juliet Mitchell wrote:

> Feminist consciousness is the material with which our politics must work, if it is to develop. The Women's Liberation Movement is at the stage of organizing our 'instinct' of our oppression as women, into a consciousness of its meaning. This will become a rational consciousness as we come to understand the objective conditions which determine this oppression. At the moment, the essential 'instinct' coexists with the possibilities for transforming it into rational consciousness. The 'instinct' expresses itself as all our protests against every manifestation of our oppression – it is here that the jokey, spontaneous bra-burning, the smoke-bombing of Miss World competitions, descriptions of the misery of housework and of the degradation of women's jobs have their place, as machine-breaking and descriptions of the 'real life' of the workers in the nineteenth century had a place in the formation of working-class consciousness. It is as though we suddenly, out of the blue-mists of mystification, see what is being done to us.

The oppression continues although the objective conditions change and so the need for development of rational consciousness remains an important task for activists in women's organisations, communities and feminism movements. Many of the younger students start with a perception that gender equality has been achieved, and that the struggles of their parents' generation are no longer needed. Others recognise the need for continuing struggle yet reject the analysis – or at times just the label – of their feminist antecedents. Several battles have been won since 1966, at least on paper. In the UK, the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970, although current average female pay remains around 83% of male, a result of the sticky floor as much as the glass ceiling, poor access to affordable childcare and the unequal division of domestic labour. The Abortion Act of 1967 provided for women limited access to abortion which is under constant threat from an anti-abortion backlash. Domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment are all now recognised and increasingly taken seriously by law-enforcement agents and employers. On the other hand, commercial sexual exploitation of women is multiplying, from the plethora of commodities aimed at the sexualisation of young girls; the mainstreaming of lap-dancing, pole-dancing and strip clubs; increased trafficking of women; the exponential growth of pornography through increasing variety of online and offline media (The value of the pornography industry increased from $7 million in 1972 to $12 billion in 2000 (Whisnant & Stark 2004)).

More recently, Motta et al (2011) have pointed out that

> Neoliberal policies have driven ever larger proportions of the population into flexibilised and informalised working conditions, and caused a crisis in masculinised organised labour, the collapse of welfare provision for poor families, and the privatisation of public and/or collective goods such as land, housing and education. As a consequence, poverty has been feminised and violence, both structural and individual, has intensified. In the main, women carry the burden of ensuring the survival of their families, combining escalating domestic responsibilities with integration into a labour market that is increasingly precarious and unregulated. Furthermore, their integration is accompanied by accelerated sexualisation of public space, and the concurrent objectification and commodification of women's minds and bodies. Such conditions serve only to deepen women's experiences of poverty, inequality, exclusion, alienation and violence.
>
> At the same time, feminism seems to be in crisis… In this light, we suggest that there is an urgent need to revisit and reinvent feminist theorising and practice in ways that combine critical understanding of the past with our current struggles, and that create theories both inside and outside the academy to support movement praxis.

Education, which engenders dialogue between practice and theory, academic rigour and political struggle, critical analysis and strategies for change, has its place in such generation of theory and facilitation of praxis.

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Social State: Exploding the scrounger myth

Marjorie Mayo

Marjorie Mayo is Emeritus Professor of Community Development at Goldsmiths and now sits on the National Advisory Panel of Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS).

Blaming the victim is a tactic with a long and dishonourable history. The caricature of the 'undeserving poor ' was precisely what the Beveridge Report set out to challenge, basing the Welfare State, in contrast, on the concept of universal rights and responsibilities for all. But the stigmatisation of welfare recipients as scroungers has continued as a recurrent theme in public policy debates, and especially so from the Thatcher years onwards. In the current situation, the financial crisis has been ideologically reworked, from an economic problem to a political problem, it has been argued: "how to allocate blame and responsibility for the crisis" (Clarke & Newman, 2012).

Victorian fears and fantasies about the disorderly, dangerous and depraved lower orders have uncomfortable similarities with contemporary obsessions with the urban 'underclass' in its many guises (hoodies, chavs, single mothers, the feckless and the workshy) , negative stereotypes that conservative critics such as Charles Murray explain as the result of dependency-inducing statism and welfarism (Clarke & Newman, 2012: 310).

The answer, according to conservative critics: slash welfare spending and blame those who need it most.

The scrounger myth has all too obvious benefits for a government hell-bent on cutting welfare spending. But what about the facts? Who exactly are these 'scroungers'?

Are there really generations of workless, work-shy families?

Analyses of the Labour Force Survey demonstrate that in households with two or more generations of working age, there were less than 1% where neither generation had ever worked. And in a third of these families the member of the younger generation had been out of work for less than a year. That doesn't mean that there couldn't also be families where previous generations had also experienced worklessness – as in areas where employment has been declining over many years. But overall, the notion that there are generations of families suffering from cultures of dependency simply doesn't stack up. Intergenerational worklessness is much more likely to be explained by a lack of jobs than a lack of a work ethic.

What about the myth that the main spending on benefits goes to unemployed people of working age who can't be bothered to get out of bed in the morning?

The largest element of spending actually goes on pensioners. And round a fifth of housing benefit goes to people in work - although this is, of course, a key target for cuts and further cuts. This is somewhat ironic given that housing benefits go to landlords - in a position to push up rents in areas such as London and the South East of England where affordable housing is in such short supply.

Other benefits to those in work include child benefit and child tax credits – benefits that are actually subsidising employers paying low wages for those in low wage jobs.

All in all then, welfare benefit cuts are having a great impact and will continue to have even greater impact on those in work, especially the poorest households.

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Meanwhile research evidence demonstrates the strength of the work ethic. Most people who find themselves without work make strenuous efforts to find a job, or to find some other way of improving their job prospects, such as through training or volunteering. But low wages and high costs such as the rising costs of transport and the high costs of childcare can make this increasingly problematic. Too many of the jobs that are available are short-term, in any case. These casualised jobs leave workers vulnerable to recurrent bouts of unemployment, moving on and off benefits – adding to the problems inherent in Ian Duncan Smith's forthcoming re-organisation of the benefits system.

What about benefit fraud?

Here too, the facts demonstrate that this is actually a very minor problem. When David Cameron pledged a crackdown on benefit fraud in 2010 he claimed that this was costing the taxpayer £5.2 billion. But what he failed to mention was that £4.2 billion of this sum was due to errors on the part of officials rather than fraud committed by welfare recipients. And compared with the revenues lost through tax avoidance, the figures are minute, in any case.

What about most people on disability benefit? Couldn't most of them be working?

This is one of the cruellest myths of all. The stigmatisation of people with disabilities has had appalling effects on their lives. Discrimination and incidents of abuse have been increasing as public attitudes have been hardening. The tests that ATOS has been applying have been resulting in massive stress as people with disabilities are being judged as fit for work – regardless of whether suitable work might be available. Last year over 1,000 people who had been considered fit for work actually died. The proportion of ATOS decisions that have been overturned on appeal has been significant, indicating the absurdity as well as the cruelty of the whole process. And where claimants have been represented, far more of such appeals have been successful, in fact.

Undermining democracy

But this all points to yet one more irony – access to benefits advice has been under threat, and legal aid coverage is being cut right back at the very time when the need for this has been increasing dramatically (even the Coalition Government's report on 'Not-for-Profit Advice Services in England' recognises this yawning gap). Access to justice for all was a founding principle of the Welfare State – essential for the functioning of the democratic process. The Coalition government's attacks on the Welfare State represent attacks on the very notion of democracy itself.

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This article first appeared on the website of CLASS, the Centre for Labour and Social Studies 27.11.2012

CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY
Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

Poems

Brendan Moohan
West Lothian Council

Hailing originally from the 'honest toun' of Musselburgh, the young Brendan was a punk who started his working life as a Miner in Monktonhall Colliery in 1982. He took an active part in the miner's strike of 1984/85, which had a significant effect on the future direction of his life. Amongst other things his experiences developed a strong interest in the Labour and Trade Union movement, poetry, literature and education. He returned to full time education to study for a degree in Community Education 1997 and has worked in the field since his graduation. He currently works for West Lothian Council as a Senior Community Education Worker with a responsibility for youth work.

The background to the poems

The three poems attached were written as a reflection of events which have shaped my life. The first poem *High Street* is written to rap rhythm and is a performance piece. It was composed whilst walking up the High Street from Moray House and it was an observation of the various aspects of life and history in the street. It is also a protest against the term Royal Mile which gives ownership of the place to the ruling class and aristocracy. The High Street is home to the homeless and the poor as much as it is to the wealthy. And the last lines reflect the suffering 'greet' and rain at feet (wet feet!) angrily reclaim the territory.

The second poem speaks for itself and was written about my experience of union rallies during the miner's strike. The banners were works of art and dedication which reflected the gratitude of the miners for the achievements of the NUM in safety at work, wages and conditions as well as the social and community aspects of union involvement. Most importantly was the standard 'education' which adorned all banners. Miners saw education as a way for their children to escape from the pits and have a better life. They also, via the union, saw it as a means to challenge their bosses and fight collectively and more effectively when protecting or improving their lot. It was no accident that many of the most articulate men in the pits were the Union men.

Finally the poem about Orgreave was composed after much deliberation, it was a difficult memory to capture the essence of. The poem is deliberately pacy and chaotic to depict a scene which can only accurately be described as a police riot. The part at the end reflects the moment of truth for me that the BBC was not the neutral observer of events, which it was presented as globally, but a manipulated arm of the state to be used to protect the interests of the Tory government of the time. It also reflects the fact that I am one of the few people in this country who has actually heard the riot act read out.

I hope these provoke thought.

Brendan

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High Street

Rattlin' rain and a piper plays
And drunks doss on the streets
And the wind and the howl
And the bagpipe drone
And the cobbles beneath my feet
And the Hackney cabs
And an open top bus
And the smell of chips in the air
And the scowl of a man with an angry face
Says look back if you dare
And the cashpoint queue
And the souvenir shops
And the Celtic craft creations
And the court and the council
And the Saltire sits
Aspiring to a nation
And pizza places
And the coffee cups clank
And the tourist traps and talks
And the Tolbooth, the Tron
And Midlothian's heart
And the house of John Knox
And the beggars and the tellers
And the Big Issue sellers
In the shadow of the esplanade
And the toffs and the toughs
And the top hat and tails
And the hostels of the Canongate
And those with riches
And those with style
Will call it the Royal Mile
But we who greet with the rain at our feet
Will call it the high street
Will call it the high street
Will call it, the high street.

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Banners

Grandly they flash
Like sails in the squall
Held strong by proud men
Each one rich in colour
And history
With portraits of leaders
And pit wheels
And golden threaded edges
From places like Polkemmet, Kinneil
Monktonhall and Longannet
They are the essence of pride
And their words
Unity, Solidarity, Strength, Dignity
The soul of man in the modern age
But one word is on every banner
And it stands above all:
Education.

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Orgreave

Marching in the warm sun
From the bus in Sheffield to Orgreave
In this battlefield we arrive
Like Cossacks meeting tanks
There is something in the air
This is not good
Then hell is unleashed
In horses and dogs
And batons and shields
And visors and stones
In the tramp of feet
In the screams of kids
In the shouts and taunts
And I smell fear
I feel terror
And it is not my feet
That take me
But another, unearthly force
And all day the charge
Forcing further back
No cameras can record
We are here to be smashed
And the riot act is read
'Any more than three persons …'
And we build a barricade
And fight from behind the fire
A stalemate of cops and young men
It is not about fuel anymore
It is personal
Slowly in ones and twos
We leave
To the sound of sirens
Along the motorway
Slowly we return to
The BBC news
Twisted to attest
To our aggression.

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CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2013

Review

By kevin Donnelly
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For Youth Workers And Youth Work
by Doug Nicholls (Policy Press, £14.99)

In the current political climate, there is malign overemphasis on compliant youth workers being instrumental in producing compliant youth. So it's good to see a book come along which reaffirms what youth work is really all about and the reasons why many go into this line of work in the first place; that it offers a powerful tool for transforming the world. And as this timely book also reminds us, this is also one of the reasons why youth work has come under such a sustained attack recently from those in power.

They are not blind to youth work's enormous potential to challenge state monopoly capitalism and the dominant neoliberal agenda. Of course, young people are at the sharp end of that agenda. In one important section Youth In A Suspect Society, which builds on the work of educational and cultural theorist Henry Giroux, Doug Nicholls outlines how young people are experiencing increasing levels of super-exploitation and disenfranchisement unknown to previous generations. This provides a compelling theoretical analysis of the extreme effects of neoliberalism, consumerism and the new authoritarianism on the state of youth and how this leads to the disposability and demonisation of non-functional groups such as young people who are no longer viewed as being at risk. They themselves are the risk! In challenging this, the author points to the need for a cultural shift in youth work with class consciousness, trade unionism and socialism just some of the key elements in shaping this change. He argues that this shift is crucial if young people are going to be helped to realise their potential and become part of the struggle against inequality and social injustice.

One very minor quibble is that there might have been more analysis of how youth work could clearly and directly inform and influence trade unionism in a progressive way, around organising young people and in communities for example. That aside, this is a powerful, wide ranging and thought provoking book which needs to be read by a wider audience than just those involved in youth policy making, academia or those who work directly with young people.

Marxist methodology is deeply informed by the radical interaction between theory and practice - by praxis in its most revolutionary sense - and how this can effect political change through cultural action. This book is therefore useful and important in both making sense of that often difficult and demanding process and much more besides.

This review was first published in the Morning Star on the 18 September 2012
http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/index.php/news/content/view/full/124043

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