



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### Whatever happened to radical youth work?

**Tony Jeffs**

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Whatever happened to radical youth work? This is a stirring question. There has always been a radical tradition within youth work, of workers committed to not merely working with young people, but working *with* young people in order to try and create a better society. Something that is about radical, root and branch reform. And that is one reason a lot of radicals have been attracted to youth work.

I'll just illustrate it by talking about a woman called Hannah More, who is probably the first modern youth worker. Operating in the 1780s, she set up girls clubs in particular, in a very poor and under-privileged area on the outskirts of Bristol. She was a very rich and famous woman, but one great campaign dominated her life - anti-slavery: the cessation of slavery. A brave area of work to be in, especially in Bristol which, along with Liverpool, was the area where those who profited most from slavery lived and worked. She was at one time one of only 6 members of the Anti slavery League in Bristol. This she largely funded from her money earned as a playwright and writer. There was a clear relationship between her desire to eliminate slavery, to remove that blight, and her determination to develop work with young women, in particular, through group work and outreach work. This is what we would now call detached work. She went from village to village, running groups in church halls and when they accused her of being a Methodist and threw her out of Church halls, she ran her groups on village greens and in church yards as a protest. It was an amazing development. That radical tradition within youth work has been around for 200 years. It has always attracted radicals – people committed to social change.

But then I asked another simple question for I had a sense that this radical tradition has been pushed aside, denigrated and its influence severely reduced over the last 20 or 30



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years. I concluded it was not accidental, but the result of a quite deliberate set of policies, not just directed at youth workers and community education workers, but at welfare workers in all sectors. First, it was the end-product of strong anti-trade union laws designed to weaken our self-confidence and to convince us that working together - collective action - would not be successful; that if you tried it you would be defeated; that the only way forward, the way to success and survival, is by compliance and good behaviour. The breaking of trade unions here, but also elsewhere, abroad, has been a clear aim of governments.

The second fact was the control, the reigning in of local democracy, so that the councils and the local elected bodies that we work with and in a sense, work against, had their powers stripped from them. The ability to set budgets, the ability to determine policy, to manage schools, to manage social services, in any real sense - these were taken from them. That made our lives very much more difficult, because it meant that for the young people we were working with and the communities we were working with, we had little opportunity to promise them that collective action and working together would achieve real results. Because those local politicians in the Town Hall really had less and less room for manoeuvre - so we had to become more reluctant to lead, or to be involved, or to engage, or stimulate or encourage movements of protest and movements for change in localities. Because we knew that their chances of achieving any major success, and that the power of local authorities to do imaginative and creative things were being taken from them. Not totally, but they were reigned in, by all sorts of controls from Edinburgh and Whitehall.

With regard to our way of working, inspection and evaluation became more and more intrusive, more and more controlling over what we did. We were firmly taught that funding was short term, dependent on good house points and models of behaviour, smartness and respect for authority. To get on, even if you just wanted to survive, good behaviour was essential.

We were taught that the 'project down the road' wasn't run by colleagues but by rivals, by competitors, people bidding for the same pot as we were. I always think of the 14 different short-term projects operating in the last 20 years in an area where I work. Every one of the



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people there, the community workers, have to bid for funding. Invariably, most fail. So, you are working with people, but you mustn't build up expectations. That is really significant for, historically, our work has been about creating expectations, creating hopes, inspiring people for the future. But these workers have to say: 'We will bid for this. There's probably got to be a community involvement in the bid, but you are probably going to fail.' That's a dispiriting and difficult way to work. It reigns us in all the time and teaches us, or tries to teach us, constantly that our first duty is not to young people, not to the community, not even to the elected representatives in the area. But, our first duty is to the funder; and if we don't recognise the primacy of the funder, there are all sorts of punishments reaped upon us. But more importantly, for those we work with, projects close, resources disappear and often so do we. It is no accident we have moved to that model.

Finally, I believe that there is an ideological offensive, an offensive around ideas; the notion that we are preparing young people to be producers and increasingly to be good consumers. And one of the ways that happens is that you can't do anything now without sponsorship. You have to go to big companies, big organisations, local companies. And the young people have to learn to beg. That's fascinating! I was thinking back to the great row between Smith and Baden Powell - one founded the Boys' Brigade, the other the Scouts. They fell out - they were great friends - but they fell out for a period because the Boys' Brigade went round with cans and collected money on street corners. Baden Powell insisted that Boy Scouts and Girl Guides would never beg. He was uncompromising about that; young people must never be reduced to begging for resources. So the only thing they could do was 'bob a job'. They may earn money, but a Scout never begs. There was also a thing about the boys' clubs. The boys' club often stood on street corners, raising money. Powell would never have that, and some others like Basil Henriques never allowed their members to beg. If they couldn't pay for it themselves, they wouldn't do it – that was the rule.

What we are now obliged to do, actually we are forced to do, is beg - matched funding, and all that sort of thing. We are taught that young people must have it impressed upon them that the power of capital is much more important than the power of their ability to achieve things themselves; that they and us are small cogs in big wheels, rather than actors, and agents of social change.



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You see it when you walk into a school now! It's full of pictures - not of philosophers and artists, great men and women - but it's full of pictures of, I have to say, grubby local employers and PR people from snotty little firms, handing out cheques to the head teacher, who is smiling like a supplicant. When you walk into the foyer there is always a certificate from BT, or someone saying how generous BT is. It tells the kids, speaks to them, very powerfully, about who runs these things and where they belong. Clubs are the same, and that's no accident that has grown up in the last 20 years.

One of the things I'll deal with quite quickly is that youth work has been driven, like society, to focus much more on the individual. There has been a tendency to abandon what was at the very core of youth work, which was the notion of the club or association: collective working and joining together. This notion was that there was something bigger than the individual - and that was a society which we created. We are driven, much more to working around things like advice and information, counselling, therapy and individualised detached work and case work, which I think is significant. The notion of the young person, not as a member, not as somebody who is part of a great enterprise, but as a case whom we have records on, whom we work on, and if necessary, whom we hand over to others, is growing.

I don't want to go over this too much but there have always been two strands in youth work; a radical strand and one that has never been happy with change. Within contemporary youth work, those who see it as a means to building a better future, other than for oneself, have found themselves up against very powerful national and local forces. There has also always been a tradition of managing and controlling. That social control element of youth work has been given great encouragement over the last few years. And that has resulted in a shifting of resources away from young women, towards young men - because 90% of crime is committed by young men - and they are a social problem. Likewise, truancy is perceived as a social problem for young men and public truancy - the control of young people in public space - that's the control of young men. Research shows as many young women meet friends on the street as young men but the problem of young people and public space is a male problem, so again, it is that which directs resources.



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And there are a lot of youth workers who haven't been unhappy with that, who are quite delighted with that withdrawing of resources from young women and putting women back in their place, controlling the 'uppity woman worker', who feel this feminism has gone just a bit too far. There wasn't a struggle against that. There hasn't been collective struggle to protect work with young women.

The reigning in of radical youth work has protected the lazy and incompetent youth worker. You see, I don't think it is evaluation and inspection that sustains standards in the final analysis; it's the questioning, debate and dialogue of worker-to-worker. In the collective sense, it occurs when we sit down and analyse our own and other's practice. That always raises standards and pulls forward and makes the lazy and incompetent feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, driven to leave or to do something else. But the myth is that what controls bad youth work is managers and inspection and evaluation. What formulation does is allow the unthinking worker - those who don't analyse and reflect on their practice - to survive because they simply go through the motions. They go through the processes that are set out for them by others - much as the national curriculum has not raised, not improved by very much, the standards of the poor teacher. In fact it has enabled them to survive by delivering a formulised package. You can see it in FE where skill and artistry have gone, where people just simply pick up the pack and go in, deliver the unit and may never reappear again. A completely interchangeable package. You don't need to be a teacher, you just need to be a technician. So a lot of workers have welcomed a system that protects them from debate and analysis and the conflicts that emerged within the old system.

I do think a radical youth work tradition remains, and is reinvigorating itself. For we are becoming very dissatisfied with what has happened over the last few years. More workers - not all, because there will be many that will never be happy with this - want to focus on education, on the centrality of our role as educators, as philosophers, as people who are engaged in dialogue. The things that are really important to people like happiness, security, a sense of self-worth, love, caring are not things that you can buy in the supermarket. They are things that are constructed by people in communities, in dialogue and in relationships with each other. You can't buy those ready-packaged off the shelf. But they are what youth work is about. Those fundamental things are what we talk about. We don't talk about



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NVQs; we don't promise an NVQ, but we do promise the opportunity for young people to reflect and think and discuss and look at really deep and meaningful things in their lives. I think that's what good youth work has always been about. I think many workers know that and want the space and opportunity to do it, but they know they are going to have to struggle to get space and opportunity to do so.

There is this notion of the democratic deficit, people beginning to realise that democracy, in tiny ways has been snatched from us. I'm not saying we have become an undemocratic society, but democracy has been eroded in very important ways. People sense this and they know that all these silly little projects about encouraging young people to vote are not worth the paper they are written on. They know, as workers in the nineteenth century did (the old girls' club workers for example), that democracy is something that is lived, not taught. And youth work has always been about offering young people opportunities for lived democracy; those tiny, small little pockets in which real democracy grows. I think many workers sense this. A lot of us wish to create these opportunities for young people.

I believe we are in a period where real social change is taking place and I think the pace of change may escalate. I would very strongly recommend that if you have got the time you should read an essay by a man called Richard Titmuss, Anne Oakley's father, a wonderful man, called *War and Social Policy*, written shortly after the second world war. In it, he reflected on the relationship between periods of warfare and the way in which working people, during and after these periods, secure real gains in terms of things like housing, education and health. For all the evils and horrors of war, and as we may be entering a period of sustained war, you can already see it, a government that has refused to raise taxes to eliminate child poverty, may come to us to raise taxes to fight a war. That is a powerful political point that has to be made. You want to tax us for war, then you can tax us as well to eliminate child poverty, and we can raise the list. That's what Titmuss says: wars open up political opportunities for ordinary people that are denied us in other periods of our history. We have to be aware of that.

David Donnison warned 20 years ago, in a very prescient article, that the end of large-scale warfare is going to create real problems for welfare workers, because governments no



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longer need to buy off the working class because they don't need to produce cannon fodder. And he said that now we have come to that point in history, the end of mass warfare, we may have come to the end of mass welfare. Sure enough as we saw the cold war end we saw the rolling back of the welfare state!

### **Tony Jeffs**

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