

Draw from the Past, Cut into the Present, Create the Future

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Introduction

Community development has always served ideological functions. In the current era of neoliberal austerity, empowerment narratives are in vogue across the British political spectrum. The strapline is that communities can use their assets, strengths and positive attributes to foster resilience. However, such rhetoric obfuscates the fact that marginalised communities have been objectified in a way which allows for further state withdrawal. This article will suggest that practitioners would do well to draw from past radical projects to assist in coherently re-framing the Scottish Government's empowerment agenda and to assist communities in claiming spaces to forge a vision for social justice.

Community development, whilst essentially ambiguous, is broadly defined as an approach to working with people. Initially, the needs and aspirations of marginalised groups are highlighted and articulated so that they can organise politically in response to these needs and demands. Essentially, it is about social justice being achieved by inverting the typical top-down political process so that disadvantaged people are at the helm (Craig, 1998). Community development is historically located and amorphous, and terms like participation or empowerment

can be used as smokescreens, meaning ‘lines of coherence and distinctiveness become blurred’ (Shaw, 2017, p.26). Moreover, over the past three decades, the ability for community development to facilitate a social justice agenda has been severely compromised. Service provision has been hollowed out wholesale as a direct result of neoliberalism (Ledwith, 2016).

While time and space constraints do not permit a thorough investigation of the history of community development, a brief exploration of significant antecedents is required to contextualise the present. After all, ‘cause, act and end constitute a continuum’ (Sartre, 1943, p.185). An official recognition of community development did not materialise until 1953, although philanthropic and paternalistic strands emerged during late Victorianism (Craig *et al.*, 2011). Liberal evangelicals, however, viewed compassionate giving, in the form of material aid to those living in squalor, as an inhibitor of self-reliance (Koven, 2004). Therefore, character building to foster a work ethic was argued as the most effective means of countering poverty (Tett, 2010). Whilst colonialism furthered the self-help narrative, in the post WW2 UK context, material advances from the state were seen to be necessary for deprived communities to become more resilient to the effects of capitalism (Craig, 1989). Notably, state giving in this form served ideological functions, namely, promoting competitiveness and placating an increasingly discontented working class (Shaw, 2004).

The rent strikes of the 1930s exemplify this public unrest. Responding to the great recession, the Unemployed Workers Movement, for example, mobilised to counter the socio-structural conditions of the time. This movement was arguably the precursor for ‘the community action movement of the 1970s in Britain and ... [one of] the first attempts to link struggles within the community and those at the workplace’ (Craig, 1989, p.4). By the 1970s, the Welfare State was firmly established as a core mechanism of government for ensuring those detrimentally affected by capitalism would have a material safety net. However, official discourse continued to hold firm to pathologizing communities, arguing that the over-riding factor that sustained

poverty was the apathy of the poor themselves (Banks and Carpenter, 2017, p. 233). To counter persistent pockets of deprivation, in 1970 Wilson's Labour government introduced the Community Development Project (CDP).

In order to maximise organisational efficiency and self-help solutions, the CDP enabled Community Workers to act alongside marginalised communities, local organisations and academics (ibid.). This enthused CDP workers with optimism as they had space to forge radical alliances with local groups and activists. By 1974, austerity policies and mass de-industrialisation were compounding unemployment and many CDP workers framed their reports through a socio-structural lens, arguing that such macro shifts were exacerbating poverty. Self-help and better aligned services were therefore insufficient to plug the gap (ibid., p. 232). Community workers offered class perspectives which were unpalatable for Conservative administrations. In the end, the CDP was terminated during an 'atmosphere of acrimony, just before the openly neoliberal Thatcher government came to power' (ibid.).

Thatcherism marked a critical juncture. The post-war consensus of socially democratic values, and a robust welfare state were ditched in favour of a market-based ideology which still dominates today (Ledwith, 2016). A small welfare state forms the nucleus of neoliberalism by curbing state expenditure and supposedly maximising individual liberty through lightly regulated markets, which offer myriad consumer goods (Harvey 2005). Neoliberal proponents argue that poverty is created through poor choices and is furthered through state indebtedness because worklessness is encouraged. Therefore, securing paid employment is the most effective means to work your own way out of it (Wiggan, 2012). Neoliberal advocates propose self-advancement can be realised through hard work: irrespective of an individual's background, provided they remain resilient and work hard, they will be rewarded with material gains (Bloodworth, 2016).

However, the realities of neoliberalism are self-evident. Globally, Britain is the seventh richest but the fourth most unequal country in Europe, with the second worst social mobility record (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). In addition, the ‘it pays to work’ mantra is dubious, considering that 60% of those experiencing poverty within the UK are from working households. This is the highest figure since records began, and is directly attributable to draconian social-security changes (Hick and Lanau, 2017, p. 3). Another notable oxymoron of neoliberalism is the ‘subversion of all traditional values by the profit imperative and the simultaneous inscription of traditional values in an attempt to guard against revolt’ (Choat, 2010, p.52). This harks back to a supposed halcyon age, in which society pulled together, and has re-emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing austerity measures.

Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ agenda centred around a civic engagement narrative. It emphasised the vital necessity of communities pulling together. Through volunteering, they would gain ample empowerment to counter the effects of state-imposed austerity cuts (Jupp, 2012). This discourse fitted squarely with the neoliberal tenet of a big state infringing personal aspiration. Therefore, state withdrawal would enable individuals, families, and groups to fill the void with ‘their local knowledge, assets, and energy to rebuild local services on their own terms’ (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014, p. 431). Conversely, Bunyan (2013) views the Big Society discourse as feigned, arguing that it bolstered neoliberal hegemony and depoliticised community work practice, further marginalising *materially disadvantaged* localities.

The Scottish Government’s rhetoric tends to denounce austerity policies enacted under Westminster administrations. However, it has still wholeheartedly embraced an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) strategy (Freidli, 2013). ABCD equates to a shift in the realm of community development, where community practice has shifted its focus from deficit, needs and problems to community attributes, strengths and power (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014, p. 431). Focussing on community capacity in this way is viewed by some as a deliberate semantic shift that actually

capitulates to neoliberalism because public issues become conflated as private troubles, meaning powerful actors are made unaccountable (Harrison, 2013). Pring (2017) argues that precarity has become normalised under austerity, making it less likely for citizens to make demands on the state. Moreover, trillions of pounds of tax payers' money have been used to shore up the UK's financial system, whilst 80% of the UK's deficit is being paid by the poorest members of society. It is argued that if excessively wealthy actors were taxed more, this debt could be written off without them even noticing the difference in their circumstances (Ledwith, 2016).

ABCD focuses on existing resources, omitting the fact that the equivalent of mass rationing has occurred under the auspices of austerity (Freidli, 2013). Therefore, self-help strategies can both disempower and further marginalise already deprived communities, as notions of resilience and empowerment can force communities to endure increasingly untenable situations (Shaw, 2016). Moreover, communities and citizens who fare better in the face of adversity often have more resources than those who are less advantaged materially (Ledwith, 2016). Failure to cope is often considered to be a moral deficit, this *perceived* sense of failure is pernicious as it is often internalised (Diprose, 2014). Moral character and demonization of supposed deviant individuals and communities have been key drivers for exacerbating the climate of austerity. This has had devastating consequences, not just for the purposefully engineered 'folk-devils', but for society in general (O' Hara, 2017).

It is argued that British society is marred by a number of 'austerity ailments': shame, instability, isolation, fear and feeling powerless (ibid). Marginalised groups persistently experiencing these 'ailments' include disabled people, migrants, single parents and unemployed people. Notably, all are systematically objectified and depicted as 'welfare scroungers' (Ledwith, 2016). This is described by Tayler (2013) as 'social abjection', a process by which governments 'other' marginalised populations, portraying them as disgusting sub-humans. These views stream through media sources, permeating into the public psyche. Once these drip-fed narratives gain

purchase, detrimental governmental policies are legitimised, thus targeted groups are pushed further to the periphery, ‘abjectifying them outside the realms of citizenship’ (Ledwith, 2016, p.129). However, the current era is one of mass precarity, in which swathes of people are experiencing ‘shit jobs’ or unemployment (Standing, 2014). This process has severe consequences, as employment has been constructed to epitomise status and citizenship (Levitas, 2004). When people are robbed of status, attempts can be made to regain it by inflicting their internalised pain onto those who are on even lower rungs of the social hierarchy (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, p. 166).

Whilst there is growing resentment towards neoliberalism, austerity and globalisation, this unrest is being utilised to remobilise ‘nativist conceptions of “community” that lie behind the dangerous rise of right-wing populism’ (Banks and Carpenter, 2017, p. 238). Kirkwood (1998) argues that the task of community workers is to create unity in diversity, which, in the current socio-economic and political climate, is of increasing importance. Mass precarity illuminates structural faults within the corroding neoliberal machinery, and this offers scope for ‘lines of flight’, which are exclusive to capitalist societies and have the potential to ‘take on a new character, and a new kind of revolutionary potential. So, you see, there is hope’ (Deluze, 2004, p.270). If community development is to make significant ground in this respect, then employability and economic resilience must be circumvented so that a social justice agenda can take centre stage (Ledwith, 2016).

In a bid to stay afloat against the seismic tide of austerity, many community development initiatives have sought financial support by pursuing the golden thread of employability (Diprose, 2014). Strands of underclass language are consistently woven into bids in order to gain funding for upskilling marginalised individuals (Hughes *et al.* 2014). Shaw (2004) notes that practitioners can be adept at playing the game, in which ‘double speak’ is employed to gain funding whilst also delivering meaningful content that is relevant to those they work alongside. Whilst there is a strong argument for this proposition, it is necessary to have an extensive theoretical

base to avoid thoughtless action (Ledwith, 2016). Therefore, aimlessly following national government strategies and funding stipulations favouring employability may compound structural faults since, nationally, employment demand outstrips supply (Freidli, 2013).

Whilst the national context seems gloomy, however, silver linings exist. Macleod and Emejulu (2013, p. 429) argue that the ABCD terminology in Scotland is not crystallised. Whilst much Scottish Government capacity building policy is framed through an economic resilience model, it also recognises tackling injustice as a legitimate objective. Community Learning and Development (CLD) is instrumental in fostering this action (Scottish Government, 2009, pp.11-12). Additionally, the government explicitly states that local decision making should be made *by* communities, not for them (Scottish Government, 2017, p.109). Further, the Community Empowerment Bill (2015) stipulates that any funded initiatives must work towards reducing inequality, whereby, Community Planning Partnerships need to use indicators for evidencing that community needs have been considered (p.5). These factors create potentialities for practitioners to work alongside marginalised communities to deliver effective strategies, but they require imaginative approaches.

Utilisation of indicators is firmly embedded in Community Planning legislation, but these are framed in particular ways. They contain assumptions about how change occurs which can inhibit communities in voicing the real challenges they face and the means by which they feel these challenges can be countered (Sandoval and Rongerude, p. 404). Nonetheless reconfiguring indicators as participatory tools can enable communities to tell their own stories. In this case peoples' narratives can begin to set the agenda for action (ibid., p. 403). In this version, community members become researchers who recognise the importance of evidencing local issues and gaining political leverage. As Omar (2008:200) argues, listening to people is a 'formidable way to imagine new approaches to solving community problems' (Omar, 2008, p.200).

Tackling community issues also requires an analysis of power. Communities cannot realise what changes are required without such an appraisal (Ledwith, 2016). Gaventa's (2006) Power Cube can aid community activists and practitioners to make use of both 'invited' and 'demanded' spaces effectively. This is achieved by understanding how visible, hidden and invisible power interweave and operate across micro, meso and macro spheres. The focus here is on invisible power and claimed spaces. Neoliberalism is a ubiquitous force that sets the parameters of participation by moulding psychological perceptions, thereby maintaining the status-quo; it frames people's sense of self, so they accept their place in the social hierarchy (Chang, 2014). To counter such hegemonic power structures, change strategies focus instead on reconfiguring socio-political culture, and people's sense of powerlessness to bring about positive change (Gaventa, 2006).

Much research views localised change strategies that demand spaces as the most effective strategy for mobilising communities to voice their opinions, as well as challenging invisible power and oppressive structures (ibid., p.30). Furthermore, claimed spaces allow fresh demands to develop organically. These can enable communities to enter and affect other levels and spaces which is necessary for sustained progressive change (ibid.). Ledwith (2016) extends this point: to counter the oppressive effects of neoliberalism, localised initiatives must form alliances, since there is power in numbers. Government policy may be malleable enough in this regard, given its commitment 'to see the ongoing strengthening of groups who are committed to equalities and connecting to their wider communities' (Scottish Government, 2009 p.14).

Using a retrospective lens of the CDP may allow for informed innovation and 'inspire us to develop collective visions today' (Banks and Carpenter, 2017, p. 236). Lovett (1982) argues that community workers have a core function to act as networkers who build alliances with community groups. Perhaps community workers could act as a nexus between local groups and trade unions, for example, to foster a 'swords of

justice' strategy, through which alliances are underpinned by mutual concerns at local and national levels and which can extend beyond one-off issues (Tattersall, 2010). Currently, Unite and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) are reinvigorating themselves specifically to expand membership in marginalised communities. Community practitioners often work in and against the state, a tension which means they should treat this strategy with an air of caution but, importantly, creative methods can be employed to work towards it (Mayo *et al.*, 2016).

Neoliberalism is unravelling but advocates are grappling to find ways to sustain an economic model based upon individual wealth accumulation and GDP expansion, an unsustainable framework considering resources are finite (Monbiot, 2017). However, knowledge of this, along with the Scottish Government's (2016) Community Right to Buy scheme, could be one way to forge an alternative vision to the individual, economic growth binary. Like other policy documents for community planning this document also 'reads more like a business plan than a serious attempt to engage with people on what really matters to them' (Shaw, 2005) However, scratching beneath the surface, it *does* matter, as the policy covers communal spaces being sold (Scottish Government, 2016, p.1) This is an opportunity to hold onto spaces which otherwise are all too likely to become privatised, a common occurrence under neoliberalism, especially in the wake of austerity (Monbiot, 2017). Whilst Community Right to Buy is essentially an empowerment narrative, it does offer potential to be appropriated for progressive change.

This argument may seem contradictory to those outlined above, but 'it might be suggested that the more radical [peoples'] aims are, the more practical must be the means' (Wall, 2017, p.123). Communities stepping out of the public sphere and becoming entrepreneurial could enable the reclaiming of public spaces, in order to then make demands of the state (Jeffs, 2015). This is where community workers could be pivotal. They can assist in navigating bureaucratic policies to enable communities to gain such spaces, as well as inform people on how to build networks and

democratic templates. Communities are not homogeneous, and claimed spaces often create power imbalances of their own (Gaventa, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative to instil mechanisms for ensuring everyone's views are seriously considered (Quinn and Knifton, 2012, p. 598). Community workers are committed to work to an ethos of acceptance, equality, altruism and social justice (Ledwith, 2016). Taking these steps could assist the catalysation of a progressive narrative, which is vital as we are on the cusp of political change.

To conclude, neoliberal ideology has appropriated radical community development by using empowerment and resilience narratives. This masks how inequalities are maintained within a regressive, individualised, wealth creation system. However, the contradictory demands of neoliberalism may create scope for challenging this ideology. The abjectifying of marginalised groups has been a core factor in breeding isolation, distrust, fear and poverty. Clearly, neoliberalism is not working in the interests of the majority, but hegemonic narratives are obfuscating the real causes of precarity and leading marginalised people to blame each other. This is precisely why it has been argued that practitioners need to meaningfully engage with people to build networks and utilise policy in the interests of communities. Reclaiming public spaces is of crucial importance and this template may offer scope for similar projects to develop and unify towards a progressive vision.

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