

A response to Vol. 11, Supplementary Issue, 2020

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This special issue is really important in reminding us, as Mae Shaw points out, that we are far from being ‘all in this together’. Government statistics clearly demonstrate that Covid-19 has a much greater impact on people living in poverty. For example, the Office for National Statistics has revealed that there were 55 deaths for every 100,000 people in the poorest parts of England, compared with 25 in the wealthiest areas, and the National Records of Scotland show that Inverclyde, at the top of the Scottish index of Multiple Deprivation, has the highest death rate in Scotland from the virus. These statistics give us the bigger picture, but the *Concept* articles illuminate what that means for the experience of particular groups of people. These illustrations are crucial in helping us understand both how it is experienced on the ground, and also how we might work in solidarity to take action for change.

The articles also question the dominant assumption in policy that socio-economic adversity can be overcome by individuals exercising their agency and if they fail to do so they ‘are constructed as deficient and inferior others who cannot be full members of society’ (Fraser, 2003:23). Again, many of the contributions show how particular groups of people, such as those that are homeless, are constructed in this way and the resulting negative consequences for their health and wellbeing. The articles also demonstrate another aspect of this ‘deficit’ assumption in the way that people classed as ‘vulnerable’ are treated. Disabled people in particular are seen as not having the ability to determine their own needs and, as George Lamb points out, instead of having the right to be heard they are rendered voiceless by a society that apparently knows what they should want!

The other value of this special issue is that it offers ‘resources of hope’ (Williams, 1989) that enable us to engage in struggle and action together. As the articles illustrate, we can build alliances based on our previous experiences of actions and institutions that were formed in the past but still have resonance in the present - what Raymond Williams (1977: 123) calls ‘residual resources’. These resources enable us to resist thinking and acting in ways that fit with market rationality and, instead, base our work on empathy and committed engagement in ways that prioritise people over profits. It is important that we draw on our long-term commitment to working in solidarity, but now is also the time to prioritise ‘emergent’ cultures (Williams, 1977: 126) that lead to changes in deep structures of feeling and imagination that carry new meanings and values, as well as finding new forms of action.

If we are to promote more radical changes in society then this is where we need to concentrate our efforts. Callum McGregor provides one example of how we might weave together existing struggles against privatisation with a new struggle for real human rights and an inclusive welfare state. I also think that Nancy Fraser’s (2008) concept of ‘participatory parity’ might be another way of thinking more radically about what we should seek to achieve. The parity that she seeks requires that individuals participate on an equal footing in processes that give them a voice in democratic decision-making, particularly over issues that directly affect them. If this concept was embedded in our work as a key outcome, instead of the more usual measures of numbers participating and narrow employability goals (see Allatt & Tett, 2019), then it would potentially lead to much more radical changes. I think we should see this pandemic as an opportunity to change deep structures for the better, and this special issue of *Concept* gives us the stimulus to do so.

References

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