

Rethinking community activism as policy, politics and practice: the current crisis

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I want to consider three themes which I don't have time to develop fully, but which pose pressing questions for those involved in or with community activism at this time.

1. Contesting community

Much has been written about the potential for community to provide competing legitimacies for different interests and purposes, claimed with equal enthusiasm across the political spectrum. Its legitimising potential has been recognised within policy from the second half of the 20th century on; its latest iteration to be found in the familiar 'community empowerment' discourses which pervade much contemporary policy aimed at reorganising or, in some cases, dismantling welfare state provision and infrastructure.

Since by definition community assumes a consensual 'we', with common interests, questions arise as to what those common interests are deemed to be, by whom and with what consequences.



Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation has a commercial interest in community development worldwide, and similar adverts co-opting local stereotypes are to be found in many places. Aside from the crude cultural representation of Scottishness, what is most striking about this image is its confident assertion of a consensual community: Together *we* thrive? The question is Who are *we*? and (just as important) Who are *they*? This is an important question for how we understand community activism and takes me to my second theme, and back to covid 19.

2. Naming, framing, shaming, blaming

One of the assertions made about Covid 19 is that 'we are all in it together, but the pandemic has sharply exposed a number of key disjunctures:

First, the way in which global ideologies of unfettered markets and minimal government have led to an evisceration of the kind of social infrastructure and public services that might have made us more capable of responding earlier and more effectively.

Second, it has magnified a social crisis centred on low pay and insecure working, an enduring housing crisis, and entrenched inequality, which is highly racialised.

Third, it has shown above all that 'the public interest' is not the same as the mere aggregation of private interests, however much corporate appropriation of communitarian ideals would suggest otherwise.



This set of images illustrates the third disjuncture. As we all clapped weekly for NHS workers/keyworkers - local heroes - we were perhaps unaware of the pay claims which had been serially denied, the shortage of critical staff because of austerity cuts, and the low morale and high levels of staff illness which pervade the health and social care sectors. The weekly ritual, however collective and heart-warming, began to be seen (rightly or wrongly) as a tightly controlled spectacle managed by marketing people; and it has spawned a whole new market in 'altruistic cool'. There is an additional fear that the pandemic is being used by government to accelerate ongoing privatisation of the NHS - a version of 'disaster capitalism' - and indeed many are already cashing in.

Finally, the pandemic has exposed the extent of privatisation: in the care sector, the health sector, social housing; the prison system, track and trace, you name it. Behind every story of government incompetence, there lies at least one private company. When there were reports of criminal shortages of PPE for care homes from February on, were people aware that 84% of social care is run for profit, much of it processed offshore in tax havens? They are now! We have also been made painfully aware of appalling working conditions in call centres, factories and farms. It takes a crisis like this to shine a light on just how precarious supply chains of goods, services and workers are.

So, naming the problem, and locating blame (and shame!) in its rightful place is an important educational task, and may even begin to counter some of the negative forms of solidarity, turning people against each other, which have also characterised community activism, particularly in online forums.

3. Reconnecting agency and structure

At this time, personal and communal agency is inevitably emphasised. Our eventual delivery from Covid 19 depends upon the willingness of individuals to comply with government guidelines and laws; on communities' willingness to supply food, fun and friendship to vulnerable people on and offline. Resilience and resourcefulness are of course to be valued, but agency should not be mistaken for power. As we are reminded by a recent briefing from the Third Sector Research Centre, we need to acknowledge that the possibilities for activism are always located within wider power structures, including contemporary market relations and ideology. So, if community activism is

not to end up as an alibi for an ill-funded and inequitable distribution of resources, then the realities of structure must always be asserted.

Micro kindness, which we have seen in abundance over these last months, does not have to mean macro blindness. Both need to be in clear sight at this time, and education has a role to play in making the connections.

4. Fostering mutuality and interdependence

It is said that before the pandemic we were alone in communities, but now we're in communities alone. Lockdown, which started with fears of social breakdown, appears to be ending with people more closely bonded. There is some evidence of an increase in mutually-enhancing relationships and actions, although we must remember that there have been differential impacts including the dramatic rise in violence against women and children, and there are fears for longer-term mental health.

I have been particularly struck by the interventions of disabled people around questions of vulnerability and interdependence, and the invaluable insights their historic struggles for dignity and justice bring now. Their assertion that there is no such a thing as 'independence' has been confirmed in the most profound of ways - the pandemic has provided a stark reminder of the reality that we are all interdependent; we are all vulnerable, and economic, political and social life must be constructed in such a way as to reflect this fundamental truth. The conditions for imagining a different, more equitable and sustainable world couldn't be more compelling, and should provide a critical focus for community activism for the foreseeable future, opening up opportunities for what Tett and Hamilton (2019) call 'dialogic emancipatory spaces' in a hostile environment.

In years to come, perhaps we will look back at this time as a moment of change and truth in society. But, as American feminist Gloria Steinem's new book title reminds us: *The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off* (Gloria Steinem, 2019).

Reference

Tett, L and Hamilton M (eds) (2019) *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education Local, National and International Perspectives*, Bristol, Policy Press