

Communities and social justice

Sean Roberts surveys the crowded field of theories about community and how these have (or haven't) informed Labour's commitment to social justice.

The appeal to 'community' features prominently across a range of the Government's social policies. And at the level of political philosophy, communitarianism – or neo-communitarianism – is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the 'Third Way' between liberalism/conservatism and social democracy. But what has all this got to do with the no less prominent commitment, across the political spectrum, to the pursuit of social justice? – this is the question that the Crime and Society Foundation will be addressing in its 'Communities and Communitarianism' project.

One of the guiding threads of the project will be to investigate possible tensions within and between the different strands of what might be called the Government's communities agenda, and to consider the implications of these tensions. This article aims to provide a flavour of the project by highlighting three of its central elements: the relationship between community safety and civil renewal; the role of the voluntary sector; and the potential of civil renewal as means of promoting social justice.

First, though, a brief word about definitions is probably necessary. The meanings of many of the core terms within this subject area – such as 'civil society', 'community', 'social capital', 'community safety' and 'social crime prevention' – are highly contested. Where definitions are provided in what follows, they should be treated as working or indicative definitions, rather than as representing a firm position in favour of one or other competing alternative (or in relation to the fundamental philosophical and political disagreements that lie behind some of these terminological disputes). The general tendency has been to employ relatively broad and flexible – loose, even – interpretations of the concepts in question.

Community safety and civil renewal

Community safety initiatives are founded on the premise that crime reduction requires social intervention (because, among other reasons, problems of crime and disorder are recognised as just one dimension of multiple disadvantage); and on the idea that communities need to be involved in identifying local crime problems and solutions. This means that the promotion of community safety will be predicated on the ability of communities to perform this role, and will therefore depend upon the Government's efforts to facilitate and support civil renewal.

In particular, it has been argued that levels of social capital within communities will be crucial in determining the success of community safety initiatives – where social capital is defined as comprising the networks, shared values (and informal sanctions that enforce them), and bonds of trust that underpin strong communities (see for example, Prior, 2005; Hope and Karstedt, 2003; and Halpern, 2005; and see also Kathryn Farrow and David Prior's article in this edition of CJM for an empirical study of community engagement as a means of addressing anti-social behaviour). This dependence, however, is problematic. For one thing, it is widely accepted that 'high-crime neighbourhoods',

where improvements in community safety are most urgently needed, are characterised by relatively low levels of social capital. Without claiming to do justice to the complexities involved, this can be seen as a mutually reinforcing relationship: crime fosters mistrust, which undermines community cohesion, thereby eroding social or informal controls, resulting in more crime.

Moreover, it has also been argued that there is an inherent conflict between the drive for civil renewal – which is based on cohesion, inclusivity and trust – and community safety, which is founded on the generation of suspicion, and is essentially exclusionary (see for example Prior, 2005; Crawford, 1998). This is most straightforwardly seen in the context of situational crime prevention, as exemplified by the use of surveillance. But the same conflict is also apparent in those elements of community or social crime prevention that engage with targeted individuals and groups who are regarded as being likely to develop criminal tendencies. Although the ostensible purpose of such interventions is to reintegrate such at-risk groups within the wider community, the underlying motivation for the approach is fear and distrust of those who fail to conform to the prevailing community values.

A related line of inquiry examines the consequences of social crime prevention for the informal controls that are essential to the maintenance of order within communities (and which therefore constitute part of the 'social fabric' of those communities). One suggestion is that encouraging communities to take a more active role in addressing low-level crime and disorder will have an adverse impact on levels of tolerance within society. Another is that the development of the new sciences of crime prevention (which include, but also extend beyond, what we are calling community crime prevention) is marginalizing the role of traditional informal guarantors of social order like bus conductors and sales assistants (see Hope and Karstedt, 2003).

The role of the voluntary sector

The voluntary sector is central to the Government's strategy for civil renewal. As embodiment, representative or component part of civil society, a healthy voluntary sector constitutes (or contributes to) civil renewal. The voluntary sector also provides the mechanism by which individual citizens can fulfil their civil and civic responsibilities, by providing the opportunity for voluntary activity and the channel for civic engagement.

Again, however, there are tensions. Some of these tensions mirror those identified above, insofar as the changes in the voluntary sector's role envisaged (and enacted) by the Government are seen as having impacted adversely on the ability of voluntary organisations to make their envisaged contribution to civil renewal. For example, research into the relationship between Glasgow City Council and the city's voluntary sector found that the increasing involvement of voluntary organisations in contract-based public service delivery was eroding the 'voluntary ethos' of those organisations, thereby negating

their capacity to provide opportunities for active citizenship. The same research also identified a bifurcation of the voluntary sector in terms of whether or not organisations had contractual arrangements with the council, or were involved in cross-sector consultative bodies – and found that this was resulting in the depletion of trust within the voluntary sector as a whole, and between some elements of the sector and the council (Fyfe, 2005). Similar detrimental effects and consequences in relation to ethos and levels of inter-organisational trust have been identified by Hodgson (2004) in the context of voluntary sector involvement in Sure Start initiatives in Wales.

The two themes discussed so far come together when attention is turned to the voluntary sector's role in promoting community safety. In this context, Adam Crawford has identified a number of tensions within the government's strategy (Crawford, 2001). For example, the multi-disciplinary, inter-agency approach that underpins local crime and disorder partnerships is heavily dependent upon collaborative working and therefore upon inter-agency trust and reciprocity – yet the competitive framework that characterises the voluntary sector's involvement with local government is inimical to this collaborative culture. This erosion of trust is exacerbated by the prevailing managerialist or audit ethos, where, for example, the emphasis on accountability constrains the potential for staff to exercise discretion based on established working relationships.

Civil renewal and social justice

While interesting and important in themselves, the significance of these issues in the context of the current project lies in what they can tell us about the relationship between the Government's 'communities agenda' and social justice. Although, for the time being at least, this must remain a pretty speculative matter, it is possible to indicate some of the main perspectives that can be brought to bear on the question. To give just one example, there is substantial evidence of the link between relative deprivation and high levels of some forms of crime – which, given the difficulty of generating community safety initiatives in high crime areas noted above, implies that some aspects of the Government's communities agenda will be dependent upon measures to address material inequality. This implication is supported by other research showing direct relationships between income inequality and low levels of social capital.

A pressing requirement here is to understand *how* inequality, social capital and crime levels – particularly violent crime – are related. Richard Wilkinson, Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce Kennedy have persuasively suggested that the concept of respect is central to this relationship. Experiences of shame, humiliation and disrespect feature prominently in analyses of the antecedents of violence, and these feelings are related to the way in which wider income differences are likely to mean more people are denied access to traditional sources of status and respect (Wilkinson et al, 1998). All of which suggests a somewhat different relationship between 'respect' and 'social order' than that embodied in the Government's trumpeted 'Respect Agenda'.

In recognising one of the limitations of their research, these authors go on to identify what is sure to be a key theme for the Foundation's project (and one which is pertinent to a number of the issues considered in this article): the fact that most, if not all, of the developing body of work in this area operates under a highly selective understanding of 'crime'. The tendency is to ignore many forms of violent crime, such as domestic violence and motor vehicle violence, and also a wide range of property

crime, including fraud and white collar crime. Beyond this, there is the further dimension of selectivity in terms of the failure to consider those forms of social harm that we choose not to define as crime.

Conclusion

Talking of selectivity, it is perhaps appropriate by way of conclusion to reiterate the partial nature of the overview presented above. It has been necessary to gloss over, not to say misrepresent and ignore, any number of issues that are fundamental to this project. Most fundamental of all, perhaps, is the question of what 'community' means in these various discourses, if indeed it means anything coherent. Nor has it been possible to even touch upon the whole question of how communitarianism as a political philosophy in enacted, or, as some would argue, distorted, in Labour's social policy. Communitarianism is here understood as the 'Third Way' that rejects neo-liberal individualism by emphasising the fundamentally social nature of human existence; while at the same time distancing itself from the 'old style' social democratic reliance on the state (by conceiving of collective action and social norms, as primarily generated by and within families and communities). Tony Blair has explicitly acknowledged his debt to communitarian thinkers such as John Macmurray, and although the accuracy of the Prime Minister's interpretation of Macmurray's thought has been questioned by a number of commentators, the ubiquitous New Labour mantra of 'rights before responsibilities' is a fundamental tenet of the communitarian programme. The implications of this prioritisation of responsibilities for the relationship between civil renewal and social justice will be another key issue for the Foundation's project.

Despite these omissions and simplifications, I hope that this article will at least have succeeded in giving a feel of the issues that this project will seek to explore. Anyone wishing to keep abreast of these explorations can do so through our website: www.crimeandsociety.org.uk

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