The Respect Agenda: fit for purpose?

Charlie Cooper views ideas about social 'respect' in philosophical context, and finds New Labour's agenda unlikely to promote a more tolerant society.

By the mid-1990s a growing consensus had emerged in mainstream British politics that something needed to be done about the perceived rise in 'incivility' and 'anti-social behaviour' in society. In an attempt to counteract the Conservative Right's apparent dominance over the law and order debate, Labour sought to re-launch itself as *the* party 'tough' on crime. 'New' Labour politicians – particularly Blair, Straw and Blunkett – increasingly engaged in the political rhetoric that there were to be 'no excuses' for 'crime' and that people should be made morally responsible for their 'anti-social behaviour'. Since their election victory in 1997, tackling 'anti-social behaviour' has been at the heart of New Labour's social policy agenda and a plethora of legal remedies and strategies aimed at managing 'anti-social acts' have been introduced. A recent addition to the government's armoury against 'anti-social behaviour' is the Respect Agenda – a programme which sets out a "framework of powers and approaches to promote respect positively" (Respect Task Force, 2006).

This article considers the likely effects of New Labour's Respect Agenda on social relationships in Britain – is it likely to promote more 'positive' social interaction and, consequently a safer, more just, tolerant society (as the Home Office claim)? It begins by placing recent concerns for identifying and managing 'anti-social behaviour' in historical context in order to demonstrate that such concerns are not new and have been a consistent feature of modern capitalism – a clear reflection of the Durkheimian understanding that 'deviant' acts benefit society through their contribution to social cohesion: identifying deviance not only legitimates punitive policy measures but also provides the rest of us with lessons on how not to behave - thereby reinforcing social solidarity amongst 'law abiding', 'well-behaved', 'respectful' citizens. The article then moves on to offer a critical examination of New Labour's Respect Agenda and its likely impact on the way individuals relate to each other. The assessment presented argues that New Labour's approach will do little to promote a more positive society, because New Labour's efforts at tackling the very difficult social and economic conditions which disadvantaged individuals endure persists in pathologising the 'dysfunctional' behaviour of 'dangerous others' at the cost of addressing the structural conditions in which social relationships are played out.

Historical context

A concern for identifying and managing the 'anti-social' tendencies of specific populations through social policy interventions is nothing new. Throughout modernity, the behaviour of particular sections of society has been pathologised as 'anti-social' and this has invariably served to legitimate corrective social policy interventions in the interest of the *status quo*. For example, one of the earliest pieces of housing legislation, the *1851 Common Lodging Houses Act*, invested powers in the police to inspect lodging-houses, the homes of "the near-destitute and near-criminal classes...such places represented an affront to decency and morality, and an invitation to disease, crime and prostitution...the first category of working-class accommodation to come under legislative control" (Burnett, 1986).

In 1833, Peter Gaskell described the occupants of lodging-houses in Manchester as "Young men and young women; men, wives and their children – all lying in a noisome atmosphere, swarming with vermin, and often intoxicated. But a veil must be drawn over the atrocities which are committed: suffice to say that villainy, debauchery and licentiousness are here portrayed in their darkest character" (Burnett, 1986).

The Victorian *laissez faire* response to poverty and difficult living circumstances was one of castigatory law and order, rather than better housing. Similarly, Victorian approaches to social work – such as those pioneered by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) – were also disciplinary. The COS engaged in intrusive case work investigations with poor families (including speaking with their neighbours) to determine the extent to which their poverty was due to 'dysfunctional' behaviour. The COS case worker would strive to 'help' the family achieve 'independence' – usually through a combination of work incentivisation, parenting support and moral reform (Lewis, 1991; Foord and Young, 2006).

For a brief period, in the second half of the twentieth century, social policy developments took a different turn with the maturing of the Keynesian welfare state. Whilst the benefits of state welfare provision have been uneven (particularly in relation to 'race', class, gender and physical ability or 'ablebodiedness') and its rules of entitlement conditional (to distinguish the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving') many people did secure improved social protection, health care, housing and education as a result of the 'social democratic' post-war settlement.

However, following economic decline and rising unemployment, a more punitive and moralistic social policy agenda re-emerged at the end of the 1970s, coinciding with the rise of neo-liberalism in British politics – an ideology that espoused limits to state involvement in economic and social affairs. Mrs. Thatcher won the 1979 general election on a manifesto promising free market reforms, reduced state welfare and tougher law and order measures. As the state withdrew its direct role in welfare provision – particularly in the fields of social protection, health, social care and housing – it became incumbent on individuals and families to

take greater responsibility for their own problems. Further rises in unemployment alongside welfare retrenchment in the early 1980s led to increasing social and economic marginalisation for many disadvantaged groups and, in some areas of Britain, urban riots erupted.

Since the 1980s, numerous commentators have alluded to an apparent heightened public concern over crime and 'anti-social behaviour' – even though the official rate of crime has fallen (Hughes, 2007). This concern is something 'realist' criminologists from both Right and Left have sought to exploit – arguing that governments should take 'crime' (those crimes most central to the public's imagination – youth crime, street crime, car crime, burglary and so forth) more seriously. At the same time, social inequality in Britain has risen, adding to social tensions (Wilkinson, 2005). It was in this context – a grossly unequal society seemingly gripped by a growing 'culture of fear' – that New Labour came to power in 1997 with a manifesto pledge to be "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime".

'Respect' and 'anti-social' behaviour

Since 1997, New Labour has continued to pursue neo-liberal orthodoxy in economic policy whilst striving to offer a different shade of social policy through its stated commitment to 'social inclusion' (to distinguish itself from the 'uncaring' Conservatives). As Ruth Levitas (2005) demonstrates, New Labour's approach to social inclusion is largely founded on the dual (communitarian-influenced) strategy of getting people into paid work and moral regulation. A central theme of the latter is the management of 'anti-social behaviour' of which the Respect Agenda is a part. For New Labour, 'anti-social behaviour' is one of the most serious threats to community well-being. As Prime Minister Tony Blair explains: "What lies at the heart of this behaviour is a lack of respect for values that almost everyone in this country shares – consideration for others, a recognition that we all have responsibilities as well as rights, civility and good manners... But some individuals are not learning these values or choose to disregard them" (Respect Task Force, 2006).

The 'Respect Agenda' is set out in the Respect Action Plan, published in January 2006, which defines respect as: "something people intuitively understand...The conditions for respect in society are not difficult to define. They depend ultimately on a shared commitment to a common set of values, expressed through behaviour that is considerate of others. Almost everyone of any age and from any community understands what it is and thinks it is right" (Respect Task Force, 2006).

The Respect Agenda builds on a number of previous legal remedies designed by New Labour to deal with 'anti-social behaviour' that are contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Police Reform Act 2002 and the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003. Key measures contained in the Respect Action Plan include plans to:
• increase access to constructive activities for young people;

• ensure parents take responsibility for their child's behaviour in school and when excluded from school, and to target persistent truants;
• tackle irresponsible parents and improve parenting skills;
• establish a national network of intensive family support schemes – including sanctions for those who refuse to take up offers of help (e.g. loss of housing benefit);
• ensure that public service providers demonstrate accountability to their local communities for tackling anti-social behaviour;
• strengthen summary powers to ensure swifter responses to anti-social behaviour – e.g. new fixed penalty notices for disorder, conditional cautioning, new powers of eviction, night-time curfews, and so forth.

As Foord and Young observe, New Labour has pushed parenting policy to centre stage of its crime and disorder agenda – an agenda "increasingly driven by a moralising turn to regulate and control the behaviour of marginalised families" (Foord and Young, 2006: 180) – a throwback to the punitive and moralising approach of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, it is an agenda fraught with intrinsic contradictions and pitfalls. In particular, to moralise on 'respect' is naïve and problematic given that 'respect' is not, of course, as New Labour claim, "something people intuitively understand". 'Respect' is a highly complex and contestable concept that has attracted substantial philosophical attention.

Philosophical interest in 'respect'

An important and fundamental distinction in the philosophical literature on 'respect' is that between 'respect for persons' and 'self-respect', a distinction that raises important philosophical issues for social policy and for building a safer, more just and tolerant society. Immanuel Kant was one of the first Western philosophers to place 'respect' at the heart of moral theory. Writing in the eighteenth century, Kant argued that people, as ends in themselves, had an absolute dignity that was worthy of respect. This notion of 'respect for persons' "commonly means a kind of respect that all people are owed morally just because they are persons, regardless of social position, individual characteristics or achievements, or moral merit" (Dillon, 2007). This does not mean that people's qualities cannot be assessed and differentiated in other ways – they can be, of course – but these judgments should not be made in a way that denies people their due respect. Kant's notion of due respect was a strictly negative one – "consisting in not engaging in certain conduct or having certain attitudes" (Dillon, 2007) that might impinge on the well-being of others. In contrast, "many philosophers have argued that respecting others involves positive actions and attitudes as well...[We] respect them (positively) by protecting them from threats to their autonomy...and by promoting autonomy and the conditions for it" (Dillon, 2007).

Here we touch on the important issue of 'self-respect' and a consideration of such questions as

"what aspects of the social context...support or undermine self-respect?" (Dillon, 2007).

The political philosopher John Rawls defined self-respect as "an entitlement that social institutions are required by justice to support and not undermine....because it is vital to the experienced quality of individual lives and to the ability to carry out or achieve whatever projects or aims an individual might have...individuals' access to self-respect is to a large degree a function of how the basic institutional structure of a society defines and distributes the social bases of self respect, which include...the distribution of fundamental political rights and civil liberties, access to the resources individuals need to pursue their plans of life, the availability of diverse associations and communities within which individuals can seek affirmation of their worth and their plans of life from others...Since self-respect is vital to individual well-being, Rawls argues that justice requires that social institutions and polices be designed to support and not undermine self-respect" (Dillon, 2007).

Rawls' vision of a society that supports self-respect is far from being realised in Britain. Too many people in one of the most unequal societies in the world remain marginalised, stigmatised and exploited by the powerful – particularly working-class people, women, young people, older people, ethnic minorities, people practising different 'sexualities' and 'disabled' people. A recent analysis of community well-being by Richard Wilkinson explores the effects of widening social inequality and marginalisation on social interaction. Wilkinson's findings offer convincing evidence to suggest that it is the degree of inequality in a society that most affects the quality of social relations and 'respect' between people: "the quality of social relations is better in more equal societies where income differences between rich and poor are smaller... in these more equal societies, people are much more likely to trust each other, measures of social capital and social cohesion show that community life is stronger, and homicide rates and levels of violence are consistently lower" (Wilkinson, 2005).

Conclusion

The Respect Agenda is a continuation of New Labour's communitarian approach to social cohesion – one that focuses primarily on the management of 'anti-social behaviour' through moral regulation. It is an approach that persists in pathologising 'dangerous Others' – stigmatising and marginalising further some of the most disadvantaged people in society. Meanwhile, the structural context identified by Wilkinson – the difficult circumstances in which many social relationships are played out (circumstances caused by economic changes and social policy choices since the 1980s) have been down-played. As a consequence, the Respect Agenda offers little prospect for a safer, more just society, tolerant of difference and diversity – no doubt an 'evidence-based' finding that the Home Office will neither respect nor tolerate.

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