

What Kind of 'Big Government' is the Big Society?

A response to Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley

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Abstract

This article is a response to Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's recent article on the Big Society, in which they argue that – contrary to the way in which it has been discursively framed by the coalition government – the Big Society is really a form of 'Big Government', in the sense that it actively seeks to remould the ethical outlook of citizens through such programmes as the National Citizens Service and the Community Resilience programme so that they become more 'socially responsible'. We put forward two main criticisms of this approach in our alternative reading of the Big Society. Firstly, we argue that, due to the fact that the ethopolitical strategies Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley focus their attention on are fundamentally flawed and unlikely to produce the kind of transformation in the ethical outlook of citizens they suppose, the real historical significance of the Big Society has to lie elsewhere. Secondly, we argue that, due to their failure to pose the question, what kind of 'Big Government' is the Big Society, Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley are unable to properly account for the lines of continuity and discontinuity linking the Big Society to the forms of neo-liberal governmentality that have preceded it in British politics. In the final section of the article, we argue that – stripped of its 'Big Society' pretensions – the Cameron project amounts to both a partial continuation of the type of neo-liberal governmental rationality

characteristic of the New Labour project, based on systems of financial and other incentives designed to produce good 'partners' in the delivery of public services, and a partial reversion to a more rudimentary Thatcherite form of neo-liberal governmentality preoccupied with opening-up public services to a range of new providers.

Keywords:

David Cameron; Conservative Party; Cameronism; Big Society; neo-liberalism; governmentality

Introduction

In an interesting recent article on the Big Society, Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, writing from an avowedly Foucauldian perspective, argue that the Big Society is really a form of 'Big Government', in the sense that, despite much of Cameron's Big Society rhetoric, his plan for government amounts to a form of *governmentality* – 'a modern form of managing the conduct of individuals and communities such that *government*, far from being removed or reduced, is *bettered*' (Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2013: 2). Furthermore, for Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, what defines the Big Society as a form of governmentality is its reliance on what Rose (cited in Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2013: 9) has termed 'ethopolitics' – a form of power that 'works through the values, beliefs, and sentiments thought to underpin the techniques of responsible self-government and the management of one's obligation[s] to others'. In other words, for Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, the Cameron project is a form of government which exercises power by moulding and remoulding over time the ethical disposition of its citizens. It is a style of government which seeks to create citizens more willing to engage in the kind of 'social action' the Big Society is reliant upon – crucially, not because they have been instructed to, but because they understand that it is the right thing for 'socially responsible' citizens to do. It is a form of power which does not require a governor – at least not in the traditional sense – because citizens come to

internalise the power relation impelling them to engage in social action in the form of their changed ethical outlook and, as a result, the act of governing can be said to have become more efficient (Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2013: 9).

Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's intervention in the debate over the Big Society is a welcome one for a number of reasons. Firstly, because they have helped to provide some theoretical substance to commentary on the Big Society, which has thus far tended to be distinctly a-theoretical and has failed to take the Big Society seriously as a political 'project'. Secondly, and most importantly, Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's intervention serves to bring attention to the fact that – contrary to Cameron's rhetoric on the subject – the Big Society is not about the roll-back of the state or the 'roll-forward' of society. It is, as they explain, about the extension of a new form of state power. This is an important contribution to the literature, not only because it safeguards against interpretations of the Big Society which see it simply as a veil for public spending cuts, but also because, as Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley (2012: 2) note, grasping this important fact about the Big Society – that it is, from Cameron's perspective, about *more* and *better* government, not its absence – is crucial if any strategy of opposition to the Big Society is to prove successful. Nevertheless, we would like to take issue with two aspects of Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's analysis. The first of these is their failure to problematise the notion that the Big Society is primarily about the enactment of 'ethopolitics' and the second is their failure to properly account for the lines of continuity and discontinuity between the Big Society and the forms of neo-liberal governmentality that came before it in British politics and, in particular, the New Labour project.

The Limitations of the Big Society as a form of Governmentality

Of particular interest for Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley in their analysis of the Big Society is the way in which 'ethopower' is exercised through such coalition government initiatives as the National Citizens Service (NCS). The NCS – one of Cameron's flagship Big Society initiatives – is effectively a Big Society 'boot camp' for young people, designed to help them 'learn what it means to be socially responsible' (Cameron, 2009). Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley (2013: 7), in proper Foucauldian fashion, consider the NCS to be a technology of government and describe its functioning in the following terms:

As well as perhaps producing 'socially responsible' young people, the NCS represents a series of governmental tactics that will produce better, more productive and communally-orientated citizens – what might be termed '*ideal citizens*'. This happens through more and better government via tactics that discipline and regulate behaviour, controlling through values such as responsibility and a sense of service.

These values are instilled in the young people taking part in the NCS through a variety of means. For example, the early stages of a typical NCS programme involves splitting the young people up into small groups and then having them engage in a variety of 'teambuilding' exercises such as rock climbing or kayaking. Upon completion of these exercises the young people will be asked to participate in group discussion sessions in which an NCS mentor 'facilitates discussion on how to link the activities of the day to the general NCS/Big Society programme'. In other words, it is explained to the young people that their success in the teambuilding exercises was dependent upon them exhibiting the values of '*trust, responsibility and understanding*,' and they are encouraged to aspire to these values in their daily lives once they have completed their service. In this way, they are turned into 'socially responsible' citizens conducive to a Big Society style of government. In a similar vein, NCS programmes will typically involve having the young people participate in an exercise modelled after the *Dragon's Den* television programme, but instead of

presenting a business proposal to a panel of successful business people in the hope of winning funds for investment in a profit-making enterprise – as in the original – the young people are tasked with coming-up with a proposal for a project that will benefit their community before pitching it to NCS mentors who will agree to fund the project should it promise to contribute to the programme’s wider Big Society ideal. The goal of this exercise is to normalise the habit of ‘social entrepreneurialism’ on the part of the young people involved (Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2013: 8).

What is problematic about this line of argument is not that Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley have misunderstood the real intentions behind Big Society initiatives such as the NCS, because the NCS and other programmes like it clearly were intended to act as instruments of ethopolitics. Rather, what is problematic is that they do not consider the possibility that these instances of ethopolitics might fail, given the inadequacies of the ways in which they have been implemented. The failings of the Big Society in this regard are demonstrable in two main ways – one of which is relatively straightforward and relates to the readily apparent flaws in some of the ethopolitical strategies Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley describe, while the other is more complex and requires closer consideration of the concept of ethopolitics. Regarding the former, the salient question is, how much stock do we put in a political project predicated on the idea that a fundamental transformation of society and the way in which government works can be achieved by means of having young people take part in what are no doubt some very tedious re-enactments of bad BBC programming? This may seem like a glib point to make, but it does touch on a fundamental problem with the entire Big Society enterprise because, just as this kind of exercise is highly unlikely to be able to transform the behaviour of cynical young people beyond anything longer than the short-term – if at all – other aspects of the way in which the Big Society has been implemented are equally short-sighted. To take the other Big Society initiative Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley focus on – coalition discourse on ‘Community Resilience’ – why should we expect

the coalition government's exhortations alone to lead to an increase in volunteering and community-based planning for emergencies? Furthermore, how can we be sure that 'Community Resilience' – to the extent that it does materialise – is a consequence of the Big Society and not something that would have happened anyway, and which has simply been labelled as part of the Big Society in retrospect? Indeed, as Byrne *et al* (2012: 29) note, exhortation – despite its obvious weaknesses as a governmental 'technology' – has been crucial to the Big Society project from the outset, and several other authors have drawn attention to the myriad structural constraints acting on people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the Big Society ideal and willing to engage in the kind of social action Cameron valorises.

Dawson (2012: 87), for example, argues that a fundamental contradiction lies at the heart of the Big Society project to the extent that Cameron *et al* incessantly implore people to behave in a more altruistic and civic-minded manner while at the same time paying no mind to the detrimental effects of the spread of 'amoral' market relations and growing inequality on peoples' willingness and ability to engage in this kind of behaviour. According to Dawson, the Big Society is likely to lead directly to increased inequality given the fact that it tends to be people in the wealthiest communities who are the least reliant on public services and who are best equipped to take advantage of the new opportunities opened-up by the Big Society, such as the coalition government's Free Schools programme. Similarly, Alcock (2010: 384) has shown that the central premise of the Big Society – the idea that the state has 'crowded out' civic mindedness on the part of communities and led to a deleterious increase in individualism throughout society – is misconceived and that, in actual fact, the growth of the welfare state in the post-war period heralded not a reverse, but a major *growth* in various kinds of activity that could be expected to form part of the Big Society (charitable giving, volunteer work, and so on).

The second way of demonstrating the inadequacy of the Big Society as a governmental rationality is possible by means of a careful reading of Rose's explanation of the functioning of ethopolitics in contemporary society. As was noted above, Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley subscribe to Rose's (2000: 1399) understanding of ethopolitics as a form of government which attempts to conduct the conduct of human beings by means of acting upon their ethical outlook. However, what Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley fail to note is that, for Rose, this moulding and remoulding of the ethical outlook of citizens that is intrinsic to ethopolitics can only take place by means of 'community'. According to Rose, with the emergence of New Labour and the 'Third Way' in British politics we witnessed a shift from the government of 'society' to the government of 'communities.' Forms of government prevalent in the 20th century which took as their object 'society' operated on the assumption that it was possible to manage society such that the interests of all sections of society could be brought into essential harmony with one another, and that the betterment of one was not at the expense of any of the others. Interventions in order to improve conditions in the workplace and to redistribute money to the lower classes through the tax system would ensure the happiness of workers; interventions in order to promote the health of the working population and to tame working class radicalism by means of the co-option of the trade unions would ensure the happiness of the bosses; the construction of systems of social security would ensure the welfare of both the unemployed and the elderly, and so on (Rose, 2000: 1400). In the last two decades of the 20th century this 'social state' began to be supplanted by a new image of the state as the 'enabling state', under the rubric of which the responsibility for guaranteeing the various kinds of social welfare described above was to be 'devolved' to the population itself. However, the new freedoms this entailed did not escape the purview of the state: instead, the state sought to conduct the apparently autonomous conduct of individuals by means of acting upon the touchstone they use to orient themselves in the world – namely, their community-belonging.

For Rose (2000: 1398), community is both a network of affect-laden relationships binding together groups of people and a set of 'shared values, norms and meanings', and it is by acting upon these collections of values, norms and meanings that governmental strategies are put into play in contemporary society. However, these governmental strategies cannot be considered *state* projects, even if we posit the widest possible definition of the state. As Rose (2000: 1399) notes:

contemporary ethopolitics reworks the government of individual and aggregate souls in the context of the increasing role that culture and consumption mechanisms play in the generation, regulation, and evaluation of techniques of self-conduct. Politically organized and state-directed assemblages for moral management no longer suffice. Schools, asylums, reformatories, workhouses, washhouses, museums, homes (for the young, old, or the damaged), unified regimes of public service broadcasting, housing projects, and the like have been supplemented and sometimes displaced by an array of other practices for shaping identities and forms of life. Advertising, marketing, the proliferation of goods, the multiple stylizations of the act of purchasing, cinemas, videos, pop music, lifestyle magazines, television soap operas, advice programs, and talk shows – all of these partake in a civilizing project very different from 19th-century attempts to form moral, sober, responsible, and obedient individuals, and from 20th-century projects for the shaping of civility, social solidarity, and social responsibility.

In other words, this transformation in the scope of government entailed a multiplication of the sites from which ethopower emanated, and the range of ethopolitical injunctions to which citizens are subjected in contemporary society encompasses not just the efforts of politicians and policy-makers, but also a variety of marketers and various kinds of cultural guardians. In addition, this shift also entailed the fracturing of the nationalist identities which underpinned the interventions of the social state (Rose, 2000: 1401).

With all of this being the case, two interlinked problems with Cameron's Big Society agenda – which Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley have failed to address – begin to emerge. Firstly, the Big Society has – to a large extent – discarded 'community' as a mediator of its ethopolitical injunctions and is, consequently, less effective as a form of ethopolitics than would otherwise be the case. As was noted above, for the most part, the Big Society is reliant on exhortation, and the manner in which it seeks to remould the ethical subjectivity of citizens involves forming a relationship directly between state (or its recognised intermediaries) and citizen. To return to the example of the NCS, this initiative bears closer resemblance to the 19th century reformatory than any of the strategies for acting upon the moral formation of communities that Rose describes in terms of ethopolitics. It is, to borrow a phrase from Rose, a 'politically organized and state-directed assemblage' for the moral management, not of communities, but of *society*. For Cameron *et al* the promise of the NCS may well be that the young people that pass through the programme will come out the other side better equipped to take part in community life, but they fail to make use of 'community' as a technology of government to aid in the construction of these communally-orientated citizens. Much the same is true in relation to other Big Society initiatives. Take, for example, the Big Society Awards (typical award, 'Award for Outstanding Contribution to Community') launched shortly after Cameron took office. These were clearly predicated on the notion that the Big Society would spring into life and that people would become more 'socially responsible' if only there was greater recognition and appreciation of socially responsible behaviour. This may well be the case, but it is difficult to see how if this recognition and appreciation comes from the state and not from 'community', given that the 'affect-laden' relationships Rose describes as an intrinsic part of community do not, for the most part, exist between state and citizen – and even less so now than in the past, after successive scandals – from 'cash for questions' to MP's expenses – which have led to widespread public antipathy towards the political class. Furthermore, to compound this problem, the Big Society is framed in explicitly nationalist terms. As Cameron made abundantly clear in the run-up to the 2010 general election, the basic rationale behind the Big Society is that we are faced with 'broken

Britain', which can only be 'fixed' by means of a conscious effort on the part of the state to re-moralise society and, in so doing, pave the way for increased levels of social action. As such, the Big Society sets itself in opposition to the long-term historical trend, mentioned above, away from 'territorialized image[s] of national and civic culture' and towards the fracturing of the nation into a diverse array of communities which demand autonomy from the state and from nationalist visions of collective being (Rose, 2000: 1401).

Secondly, the Big Society fails to pay heed to what Rose, quoted above, referred to as the increasing role that 'culture and consumption mechanisms' play in the formation of the ethical subjectivities of citizens in contemporary society. We know that the ethical outlook of citizens is, to a large extent, informed by the purchasing decisions they make (think of the growth of 'ethical consumerism' in recent years, or the cult-like following that certain brands of consumer goods attract) and the various cultural identities they pledge allegiance to (religious identities, political identities, identities linked to various sexual subjectivities, identities linked to various youth cultures, and so on). However, Cameron (2009) at times gives the impression that he thinks the re-moralisation of society is something that is within the grasp of the state alone (think of his comments on the need for the state to be used to 'remake society'). However, he also at times acknowledges some of the difficulties inherent in the project of a state-led re-moralisation of society:

The big society demands mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation. But how do we bring this about?... if Facebook simply added a social action line to their standard profile, this would do more to create a new social norm around volunteering or charitable giving than any number of government campaigns (Cameron, 2009).

The salient point here is that, even though Cameron may well be correct in supposing that, if Facebook were to take this line of action, the result would be a significant increase in volunteering and charitable giving, he is more or less powerless to make this happen.

This brings us to the second major problem with Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's argument, which is that, due to their failure to pose the question, what form of 'big government' is the Big Society, they have nothing to say about the relationship between the Big Society and the forms of neo-liberal governmentality that preceded it in British politics. This is an important question to ask because even though the origins of the Big Society can clearly be traced back to the Thatcher experiment in the 1980s, and even though there has been a very substantial degree of path dependency characterising the relationship between successive forms of neo-liberal governmentality – from Thatcherism to New Labour to the Big Society – it is also clear that each of them has enjoyed a large degree of 'relative autonomy' from the others – which is to be expected given the fact that the agents of each of them have operated against backgrounds of distinct ideological traditions (Bevir, 2005: 41). This holds true even if we limit our focus to just Thatcherism and the Big Society, given that each draws on distinct currents within the conservative and liberal canons (Barker, 2011; Jennings, 2012).

Determining the Specificity of the Big Society as a Form of Governmentality

With this being the case, how then do we account for the specificity of the Cameron project as a form of neo-liberal governmentality? Ling (2000) may be of help in answering this question: Ling posits a 'double movement' in the scope and nature of government that has taken place over the past forty years, the first part of which involves a shift from government to 'governance' in the late-1970s and the second part of which involves a shift from governance to 'governmentality' approximately a decade later. In this reading, government refers to a form of state power in which representative politicians task public officials with implementing policies

designed to tackle pressing social problems, and public officials go about implementing those policies using a state machinery characterised by hierarchy and bureaucratic, inflexible rules (Ling, 2000: 87). Governance, meanwhile, refers to a form of state power which actively solicits the assistance of external organisations in the delivery of government policy, and which is largely preoccupied with managing the complex networks consisting of state, voluntary and private sector bodies that result (Ling, 2000: 88). Lastly, governmentality involves a recognition on the part of the central state that ‘inter-organizational collaboration’ – in other words, bringing-in voluntary and private sector groups to assist in the delivery of policy – only works well when there is an almost total coincidence of interests between the various parties involved in the delivery of a particular policy and that, when that coincidence of interests is missing, external organisations can often lose sight of policy objectives in the pursuit of their own self-interest. As a response to this problem, governmentality involves the central state undertaking to actively remould the subjectivities of those involved in the delivery of policy so that that coincidence of interests that is so important to the success of any given policy initiative comes into being – or, in other words, ‘changing the thinking and behaviour of individuals and organizations’ so as to create a *de facto* unity of purpose among a diverse array of groups with differing backgrounds, priorities and ambitions (Ling, 2000: 95).

The relevance of this line of argument for present purposes is that, while there is evidence to suggest that the Big Society represents a partial continuation of the type of neo-liberalism practiced by New Labour – which Ling terms ‘governmentality’ – there is also ample evidence to suggest that the Big Society represents something of a return to Thatcherite *governance* strategies – that is, that it is a less interventionist form of neo-liberal governmentality than the New Labour variant that preceded it, and one which is chiefly concerned with the task of incorporating new providers into the delivery of public services, and not necessarily with the task of remoulding the subjectivities of those individuals and organisations so that they become

good 'partners' in the delivery of public services. Although the coalition government has carried on a number of policies that were first introduced by New Labour, and although many of the financial and other incentives that New Labour used to cajole peripheral parts of the state apparatus are still in place, it is also clear that there is a much greater element of coercion in the coalition government's plans for the reform of the public services. For example, in the case of the Academies programme – which was inaugurated by the first Blair government in 2000, and which has been massively expanded upon by the coalition government – the promise of additional funding remains one of the means by which the Department of Education has marginalised 'conservative' local authorities, instilled an ethic of entrepreneurialism within the management of schools (in particular, in relation to finding new sources of funding), and encouraged schools to become more 'flexible' in relation to teacher pay and conditions and the teaching of the National Curriculum. However, under the coalition government, it has proven itself much more willing to mandate change and to simply force it through if necessary, with some critics arguing that there has been a process of 'forced Academisation' under way since 2010 in which schools, often under the flimsiest of pretexts, are being labelled failures as a means to trigger procedures that will eventually lead to those schools taking on Academy status, with private sector 'sponsors', regardless of the wishes of staff or local parents (Monbiot, 2013). Much the same is true in relation to the coalition government's *Open Public Services* agenda. The express guiding principle of *Open Public Services* is that '[a]part from those public services where the Government has a special reason to operate a monopoly (e.g. the military) every public service should be open so that, in line with people's demands, services can be delivered by a diverse range of providers' (Cabinet Office, 2011: 39). Despite being couched in the language of 'people power' and the downplaying of the role of private providers by the government, this is widely expected to result in a major expansion of the role of the private sector in the provision of public services (Whitfield, 2012). However, what is significant about this for present purposes is that the governmental rationality of the coalition does not seem to

include any means of remoulding the subjectivity of these 'partner' organisations in order to ensure that their efforts will contribute to 'better, more efficient' government.

Conclusion

Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley's intervention in the debate over the Big Society and the coalition government's broader political significance has helped us to understand that the coalition government is about more than just scaling back the public service and acts as a welcome corrective to accounts of the Big Society which view the project economically as a form of 'class war conservatism' (Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013, see also Rustin, 2011 and Clarke, 2009). However, we believe that, in failing to ask a number of important questions about the Big Society – the most important of which is, what kind of 'big government' is the Big Society – Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley have misunderstood the latter's real historical significance. The ethopolitical strategies enveloped in the coalition government's Big Society agenda are fundamentally flawed and are unlikely to meet their objectives of a remoulding of the ethical outlook of citizens. With this being the case, what we are left with is a partial continuation of the type of neo-liberal governmentality practiced by preceding New Labour governments and a partial reversion to a more rudimentary Thatcherite form of neo-liberal governmentality which Ling (2000) has termed 'governance'.

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