



Illuminating the evolution of community participation

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Durose, C., Beebejaun, Y., Rees, J., & Richardson, L. (2012). *Illuminating the evolution of community participation*. (Connected Communities). Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



Connected Communities

Illuminating the Evolution of Community Participation

Catherine Durose, Yasminah Beebeejaun,
James Rees and Liz Richardson



Illuminating the Evolution of Community Participation

**Catherine Durose, Yasminah Beebeejaun, James
Rees and Liz Richardson**

Executive Summary

Community participation is an ongoing pre-occupation of governments in developed democracies as evidenced in the 'Big Society' flagship policy programme of the current Coalition government. In presentational terms, the government has explained and portrayed the Big Society as a 'triangle' of questions directed towards communities with implied policy agendas set in response: 'what can you do for yourselves?' (community empowerment); 'what can you do for each other?' (philanthropy); 'what can the state do for you?' (public sector reform). Each of these policy strands has been translated from discernible historical and geographical settings or what are called here 'illuminators'. Community empowerment policies draw strongly on the community organising model associated with Saul Alinsky's work in Chicago. Philanthropy stems from the British 'classic' philanthropy in the 19th century. The public sector reform agenda is driven by the fiscal restraint but also has clear parallels with the period of fiscal retrenchment and anti-statism associated with Thatcherism in the UK in the 1980s. The review understands the 'Big Society' as an example of policy translation (Freeman 2009). Through reflecting on what is 'lost in translation', the review identifies spaces for contestation and challenge.

Researchers and Project Partners

Project lead

Dr. Catherine Durose, Senior Research Fellow, Policy Research and Practice, De Montfort University

Project contributors

Dr. Yasminah Beebeejaun, Lecturer, Department of Planning, University of Manchester

Dr. James Rees, Research Fellow, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham

Liz Richardson, Research Fellow, Institute for Political and Economic Governance, University of Manchester

Key words

'Big Society', community, participation, translation, organising, philanthropy, reform, challenge

Introduction

The 'Big Society' has been difficult to articulate as a political vision or brand and its critics have interpreted it as intellectually or historically baseless. Yet, the current Conservative leadership has however been careful to position its 'Big Society' agenda as embedded in a longer tradition of One Nation Toryism: claiming a lineage from 'Edmund Burke and Adam Smith in the 18th century, from Hegel and de Tocqueville in the 19th, to Hayek and Oakeshott in the 20th' who share David Cameron's view that 'individual freedom is only half the story' (2011). The 'Big Society' is also often posed in opposition to the continuation of the 'big state' associated with the previous New Labour government, despite the ongoing significance of ideas of communitarianism and social capital (Taylor 2011, 257-8).

This review aims to:

- explore the emblematic and reified historical and geographical antecedents of the 'Big Society'
- advance an understanding of policy making as a process of 'translation'
- use the illuminators to reflect on a series of normative and critical policy relevant questions about the realisation of the 'Big Society'

Table 1 sets out the key antecedents and illuminators of the 'Big Society' used in this review:

Table 1: Illuminators of the Big Society

Big Society	Community Empowerment	Philanthropy	Public Sector Reform
Illuminator	US Community Organising	Victorian Philanthropy	Thatcherite Reforms

Policy as Translation

The starting point for this review is Richard Freeman's (2009) description of policy – and its construction – as a specific instance of translation. Translation at its simplest can mean physical removal and transfer; more figuratively it is the transfer of meaning from one context to another. Because translation will always involve the construction of meaning, it carries with it densely political practices: translation is often associated with liberation, counter-cultural, or indeed equally, hegemonic practices.

Freeman highlights three key insights from understanding policy as translation. First, translation is not merely change but conscious change: this alerts us, in thinking about the process of translating a policy idea, how that process can be opened up and made available for reflection. Secondly translators make conscious choices between alternatives, and in doing so are concerned with getting it right, and hence this is clearly a political and not merely technical process. And finally Freeman makes the claim that we should see translation as not merely a benign and politically un-freighted process of interpretation: 'Interpretation connotes understanding, reception, apprehension of meaning, while translation emphasises the production of a new semantic object. Translation has a more active sense of re-writing, re-production: it may be predicated on interpretation and understanding, but it is also more than that' (Freeman 2009, 435).

This has clear implications for the way that critics of policy can think about the ways in which ideas are translated from different historical and geographical references points, highlights that there are power interests at play in translating them, and alerts us to the complexity and instability in the process of construction of new meanings. In very real terms this helps to disentangle how new policies, programmes, and instruments are created. One final observation is that what is created through this constitutive and communicative process may not be what the (most powerful) actors intend.

Three Examples of Policy in Translation

Community Empowerment

The 'Big Society' builds upon but also challenges the role for citizens outlined by New Labour. The challenge comes in the shift from citizens 'influencing' or shaping decisions which affect their everyday lives and the public services they receive to actively being involved in the delivery of public services. Government's aspiration is that community

organisers will agitate for social action and empower local communities to tackle the issues that matter to them (Cabinet Office 2010).

The US provides an appealing model for the 'Big Society' if one perceives a thriving civil society despite or indeed directly because of the absence of state support, but the significant differences between the US-UK contexts appear to have been 'lost in translation'. At specific moments, the US federal government has been pivotal in financing and supporting community organisations, for example during the early 1970s, the strength of the sector has been sustained through philanthropic support (Brokensha 1974, Savitch and Vogel 2009). In the UK, third sector partnership with the state, if not direct dependence has been the predominant relationship; as such expenditure cuts to infrastructure and public service contract undermine confidence in the third sector 'delivering' the Big Society.

Government interest, sparked by the success of former community organiser Barack Obama, has referenced the model of community organising pioneered Saul Alinsky in the 'back of the yards' area of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s (Satter 2010). Alinsky aimed to build community capacity through finding issues of conflict- a 'point of agitation' - which the community could mobilise around and get results on (1972, 116). The reification of Alinsky's model seems to focus on but de-contextualise his assertion of the 'enormous importance of people [communities] doing things themselves' (1969, 174).

Alinsky's model of community organising has been criticised in the US for its promotion of self-interested aggressive strategies (Stall and Stoeker 2008) which often replicate 'machine politics' and exclude minority groups (Mills and Robson 2010). Alinsky's model is now more associated with 'quick win' organising than challenging social and economic polarisation (Beebeejaun and Vanderhoven 2010). In Chicago, many organisers now derive their practice from Freire (1970) which focuses more on critical dialogue and lived experience as a basis for action and transformational change; and is closer to the strong UK tradition of community development (Taylor 2011).

The Coalition Government contracted Locality, over the more explicitly Alinsky-ist UK Citizens, to deliver proposals for establishing a National Institute of Community Organising and training an 'army' of 5000 mostly voluntary community organisers. Yet it is doubtful that the UK government is genuinely interested in the often confrontational 'speaking truth to power' approach associated with Alinsky or the transformational

aspirations of Freire. Despite localist rhetoric, the Coalition has been quick to condemn un-sanctioned organised action or dissent, for example trade union protests, striking over public sector pensions, the rioting in many UK cities. The key idea lost in translation is that many US community organisers see their work as 'un-fundable' by government due to its inherent challenge to power.

Philanthropy

The Giving Green Paper sees social action as an exchange that builds or emphasises a reciprocal, mutually rewarding relationship between people, and that this should be made more tangible (HM Government 2010, 7). 'Big Society' discourse suggests that social action should be about 'people giving what they have, be that their time, their money, or their assets, knowledge and skills, to support good causes and help make life better for all' (HM Government 2010, 4). Policy therefore, should recognise the 'warm glow' of giving and support 'people to see and feel the benefits they can derive from contributing as well as the impact their contribution has on others' (HM Government 2010, 15).

Gertrude Himmelfarb points to the importance of de Tocqueville's emphasis on the "moral tie" established between the donor and the recipient which were the subject of extensive debate in the 19th century. De Tocqueville argued that the reciprocal obligations and impact on behaviour of a charity recipient are more strongly enhanced through private aid rather than a right to public assistance. This assertion immediately opens up a debate about the nature of the reciprocal obligations of a charity recipient, and the goals of charity in trying to achieve what would now be labelled "behaviour change". Philanthropy in the Victorian period had moral and religious overtones with clear ideas about what was and was not acceptable behaviour and attitudes. Examples include the temperance principles of Leverhulme and others; Joseph Rowntree's emphasis on 'manliness of character and self-control' (1911) through exercise; and Octavia Hill's attempts to strengthen self-reliance and sobriety amongst her clients. Whilst such assertions may now seem outmoded or paternalistic, a century on, the nature of philanthropic relationships – the recipient's gratitude to the donor, the sense that a donor should attempt to improve the recipient, or at least restrict receipt to those morally deserving – are important considerations neglected in the current Big Society discourse on philanthropy.

The process of reification and simplification which occurs in policy translation has resulted in policy on social action appearing to 'float free' of the historical and ideological roots of philanthropy. 'Big Society' policy translation results in an emphasis on giving as a kind, morally responsible behaviour as well as something always socially and personally beneficial. Motivations for giving are depicted as morally neutral, for example a feeling of 'it was the right thing to do', or wanting to be actively involved in solving a problem, or even the more vacuous argument that people simply '[feel] like giving' (HM Government 2010, 22).

The translation of Victorian philanthropy in the 'Big Society' appears to rest on a wish to recreate the perceived advantages of this 'golden era' by reducing the reliance on the state funding. It attempts to construct a morally neutral image of philanthropy as always socially and personally beneficial. As with community organising, the progressive, radical and emancipatory aspects of some Victorian philanthropy have been ignored: many industrial philanthropists were also influential campaigners for social reform, as well as making significant improvements to the lives of their workers. The focus on translation shows that the core idea that has been lost is that giving is often part of a wider vision of how society should be.

Public sector reform

The Coalition Government has now outlined its intentions for public sector reform in the *Open Public Services* White Paper which argues that the 'old, centralised approach to public service delivery is broken' (HM Government 2011, 7). This assertion is based on a perception of public services being organised on a now outdated hierarchical model, managed by central government that stifles both public service ethos and innovation. The solution put forward in the paper is that citizens should be able to exercise greater choice with public services being opened up to a range of providers who compete to improve services, with power being decentralised away from Whitehall (2011, 7-11). A new development is the community *Right to Challenge*, facilitating the take-over of parts of public services, matched by an employee *Right to Provide*, encouraging public sector workers to set up employee-owned cooperatives and mutuals. The White Paper rests on an – unacknowledged and largely silent – ideological critique which has close parallels with that made by the Thatcher Government in the early 1980s; associated with the influence of the New Right (Thornley 1991) and highly influential in subsequent public service reforms (Pollitt and Harrison 1992).

A process of translation is apparent where inspiration is drawn from a period whilst playing down (or conveniently forgetting) the sophisticated critiques and the lessons which have emerged from earlier reform processes. The New Right critique of public services in the 1980s has important parallels with today, it gained ground in the context of the crisis of the welfare state in the 1970s but also reflected disquiet across the political spectrum about the inability of 'monolithic' state bureaucracies to respond to individual needs and changing demand (Lewis 1999). The reforms of the Thatcher government but were generally intended 'to replace the traditional profession-dominated integrated hierarchies of the post war statutory services with systems organised on market principles and oriented towards "consumers" in the name of "choice" and "efficiency"' (Lewis, 1999, 260).

'Big Society' public sector reform essentially reifies the need for non-public sector models and the superiority of private and third sector providers (in competition); thus displaying a dogged normative adherence to particular structures and the market mechanism. Translation highlights how 'Big Society' public sector reform is, despite claims to the contrary, still highly ideological: for example creating a false division (public bad, 'alternative' providers good); as well as a false equivalence (voluntary sector organisations can compete equally with others). Translation unmasks this attempt to downplay ideological and intellectual continuity, and in doing so opens up opportunities for contestation. Earlier reforms encountered significant practical difficulties of implementation as well as creating unintended consequences such as increased complexity and blurred accountability (Skelcher 2000). There remains great uncertainty whether it led to genuine improvements in services. The 'Big Society' reification of the market reforms of the public sector neglects the extensive conflict and resistance they engendered (Barnes and Prior 2009).

Conclusions

Key elements of the 'Big Society' policy agenda have been translated from other geographical and temporal contexts. The concept of policy as translation fundamentally alerts us to the political constructions and ambiguities of meaning inherent in the process. Analysing these three 'illuminators' as translation helps to highlight what is being reified, and what is lost and the act of articulating this opens up a space for contestation. Whilst some advocates have suggested that the 'Big Society' is post-ideological (Blond 2010), a focus on translation shows that this may be a mis-perception.

Instead, ideologically conflicting antecedents have been deliberately re-constituted so as to retain a progressive appeal but with the inherently challenging aspects removed. The review shows the 'Big Society' to be a strongly ideological and instrumental agenda. The very contestability of this translation perhaps explains why the Big Society agenda appears to have been particularly difficult to embed in the UK setting.

Additional Outputs

Durose, C., Beebeejaun, Y., Rees, J. and Richardson, L. 'Lost in Translation: understanding the making of the Big Society' (to be submitted to *Social Policy and Administration*)

Recommendations for Future Research

- Further development of trans-disciplinary analyses of policy making;
- Development of activist-academic narratives on the 'Big Society' and its alternatives.

References

- Alcock, P. 'Building the Big Society: a new policy environment for the third sector in England' *Voluntary Sector Review* 1(3) 379-389
- Alinsky, S.D. (1969) *Reveille for Radicals* New York, Vintage Books
- Alinsky, S.D. (1972) *Rules for Radicals* New York, Vintage Books
- Barnes, M. and Prior, D. (2009) *Subversive citizens: power, agency and resistance in public services* Bristol, Policy Press
- Beebeejaun, Y. and Vanderhoven (2010) 'Informalising Participation: Insights from Chicago and Johannesburg' *Planning Practice and Research* 25(3), 283-296
- Blond, P. (2010) *Red Tory: how the left and right have broken Britain and how we can fix it* London, Faber and Faber
- Brokensha, D. (1974) 'Maximum Feasible Participation' *Community Development Journal* 17-27
- Cameron, D (2009) *The Big Society* Speech, Tuesday, November 10
- Cameron, D (2011) *Building a bigger, stronger society*, Speech to launch Giving White Paper, Monday, May 23 2011
- Freeman, R. (2009) 'What is translation?' *Evidence and Policy* 5(4), 429-47
- Freire, P (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* London, Continuum
- HM Government (2010) *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide* London, HMSO
- HM Government (2010) *Giving Green Paper* London, Cabinet Office
- HM Government (2011) *Open Public Services White Paper* London, HMSO
- Kingdon J. (1984) *Agendas, alternatives and public policies* HarperCollins, New York
- Lewis, J. (1999) 'Reviewing the Relationship between the Voluntary Sector and the State in Britain in the 1990s' *Voluntas* 10(3), 255-270
- Massie, A. (2010) 'The Tocquevillian Tories' *The Spectator*, April 13
<http://www.spectator.co.uk/alexmassie/5910187/the-tocquevillian-tories.shtml>
- Mills, J. and Robson, S. (2010) 'Does community organising empower or oppress?' *CDX magazine*, Winter
- Pollitt, C. and Harrison, S. (1992) *Handbook of Public Services Management* Oxford, Blackwell
- Rowntree, J. (1911) *Mr Rowntree's Retrospect: an abbreviated version of the acceptance speech made by Joseph Rowntree to the City Council on 17 May 1911, upon being made*

an honorary freeman of the city of York. <http://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/rowntree-family/joseph/index.php>

Satter, B. (2010) *Family Properties: race, real estate and the exploitation of Black America* New York, Harry Holt and Publishers LLC

Savitch, H. and Vogel, R. (2009) Regionalism and Urban Politics in J.S. Davies and D.L. Imbroscio, *Theories of Urban Politics* London, Sage

Skelcher C (2000) 'Changing Images of the State: Overloaded, Hollowed-Out, Congested' *Public Policy and Administration* 15(3), 3-19

Stall, S. and Stoeker, R. (2008) 'Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment' in J. DeFillipis and S. Saegart (eds) *The Community Development Reader* New York and London, Routledge

Taylor, M. (2011) 'Community organising and the Big Society: is Saul Alinsky turning in his grave?' *Voluntary Sector Review* 2(2), 257-264

Thornley, A. (1991) *Urban planning under Thatcherism: the challenge of the market* London, Routledge

Tocqueville, A. (1997) *Memoir on Pauperism* (translated by Seymour Drescher with an Introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb) London, Civitas

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

