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Author(s): Jonathan S. Davies

Article Title: Active citizenship: navigating the Conservative heartlands of the New Labour project

Year of publication: 2011

Link to published article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/147084411X581781>

Publisher statement: This version not to be cited. This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Policy & Politics. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Davies, J. S. (2011). Active citizenship: navigating the Conservative heartlands of the New Labour project. Policy and Politics, is available online at: <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/pap/2011/00000039/00000002>

Active Citizenship: Navigating the Conservative Heartlands of the New Labour Project

For publication in **Policy and Politics** in 2011

*Dr Jonathan S Davies
Reader in Public Policy
Governance and Public Management Group
Warwick Business School
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
UK*

*Tel: 44(0)2476 522091
Fax: 44(0)2476 524410
E-mail: jonathan.davies@wbs.ac.uk*

Abstract

This paper develops a distinct perspective on the continuities and contrasts between Thatcherite Conservatism and New Labour, interpreted through active citizenship policy. Revisiting Thatcherism, it argues that the roots of the New Labour approach to active citizenship can be traced to the late-Thatcher period. It explores six facets of New Labour's agenda, arguing in each case that there were affinities with Conservatism. These affinities further highlight continuities in the 'social dimension' of an ongoing hegemonic project, whose objective is to overcome the 'weak citizenship' characteristic of neoliberalism by mobilizing citizen assent. Judged against this benchmark, the project may have had only limited success.

Keywords

New Labour, Thatcherism, conservatism, active citizenship, hegemony, social democracy

Introduction

The relationship between New Labour and Thatcherism has been much debated, but never settled. The task of comparison is complicated by the need not only to put New Labour in its place after its defeat in May 2010, but also the controversy about the nature of the Thatcherite comparator and whether it represented a break with Conservative tradition (e.g. Gray, 1995; Eccleshall, 2000). At the same time, there are numerous avenues for comparison and contrast. It is clear, for example, that as New Labour adapted to the Thatcherite economic settlement it also delivered many policies that the Conservatives would not have; devolution and the minimum wage are obvious examples, although the extent to which they violate the tenets of conservatism in practice might be tested by the Liberal-Tory coalition. As Gilbert (2004) argued, New Labour and the Conservatives both appeal to groups outside their natural constituencies. Both are hybrids insofar as they routinely make concessions to different interest groups to win elections.

With these opening qualifications, the paper finds important continuities between Thatcherite and New Labour policy, marking common ground in an ongoing neoliberal hegemonic project. Arguably, the most interesting continuity lay not in New Labour's conversion to the free market, but in the social sphere and the politics of active citizenship. New Labour emphatically distinguished itself from Thatcherism as the party of community (e.g. Blair and Schroeder, 2003: 112). Beech (2006: 212) adopts this distinction, concluding that New Labour 'reintroduced social democratic principles such as community and have placed their communitarian social philosophy at the front of the ideological battle with the neoliberals who maintain their focus on individualism'. Hence, according to Marinetto (2003: 114), the goal of revitalizing community and active citizenship distinguished New Labour 'both from Thatcherite Conservatism and old socialist Labour'.

However, on closer scrutiny this distinction falls apart. The literature of the period reminds us that contrary to caricature, the Tories promoted active citizenship in pursuing their

own one-nation vision. The paper demonstrates that the New Labour approach had elective affinities with Thatcherism and the Conservative approach generally. Hence, the point is not merely that aspects of New Labour's agenda were like Thatcherism, but that what was often held to differentiate it is rooted in Thatcherite conservatism. The paper argues that the New Labour active citizenship agenda embedded the anti-egalitarian commitments that define Conservatism (e.g. Eccleshall, 2000). Active citizenship policy was a pivotal component of what Gilbert (2004: 40) sees as a 'fully-fledged hegemonic project' in the face of 'weak citizenship', characteristic of the neoliberal period (Retort, 2004). The paper finally suggests that the project has not been entirely successful hitherto and briefly explores a more authentically social democratic approach.

Hegemony, Force and Consent

A state of hegemony can be defined as comprehensive and active cross-societal assent for the socioeconomic goals of a constellation of class forces aiming to secure 'the economic base of the dominant mode of growth' (Jessop, 1997: 57-8). The challenge of studying hegemony is to explore the changing relationship between coercion, resistance, active assent and passive consent for and against the goals of a dominant historic bloc. In his essay on Gramsci, Anderson (1976: 29) argued that hegemony will often be precarious because, being crisis-prone, capitalism cannot fully meet the expectations of subordinate classes. Hence, consent breaks down episodically and comprehensive hegemony is elusive. When the historic bloc resorts to coercion it is abandoning hegemony for domination. Conversely, to the extent that social peace exists, the spectre of violence is sufficient. Consent is, as Gramsci put it, 'voluntarily given' (cited in Anderson, 1976: 52).

However, there are different degrees of consent ranging from the passive and grudging to the active and enthusiastic. Gramsci (1971: 181-2) maintained that the goal of a dominant hegemonic bloc is not only unity of economic and political goals, but also 'intellectual and moral unity ... on a "universal" plane' (Gramsci, 1971: 181-2). Active citizen assent is thus the mark of

comprehensive hegemony. Since the struggles of the mid-1980s abated, UK governments have been preoccupied with the attempt to mobilize assent through active citizenship policy.

One reason for this preoccupation is the ‘weak citizenship’ Retort (2004: 9-10) sees as characteristic of neoliberalism. There are many definitions of neoliberalism, but it is here understood as the tendentially global project that emerged from the economic and social crises of the 1960s and 70s. At its core, according to Harvey (2005) is the attempt to restore the hegemony of neoclassical economics, market discipline and class power, tempered by the rise of organized labour and the Keynesian Welfare State system after WW2. While neoliberalism developed unevenly and is contested, it is distinguished by an over-riding ideological commitment to the market. Retort (2004: 19) argues, however, that de-traditionalization and the increasing anomie arising from individualization has undermined the social cohesion that enhances competitiveness. The need for cohesion means that neoliberal regimes are unable to avoid the social intervention prohibited by neoliberal ideology. Harvey, for example, sees moral authoritarianism as the inevitable corollary of neoliberalism, stifling dissent and denying the ‘very freedoms that it is supposed to uphold’ (2005: 69). Paradoxically, then, the mobilization of citizen dispositions and practices deemed essential for economic competitiveness has been integral in the struggle for neoliberal hegemony. The paper argues below that active citizenship policy in the UK is an example of this synthesis, characteristic of both the Conservative and New Labour variants of neoliberalism.

Thatcherism, Conservatism and Hegemony

Hay (2007: 199) noted that ‘Thatcherism’ has almost disappeared from the lexicon of political analysis. It is timely to revisit the concept at the close of the New Labour era because, as is argued below, the comparison between Thatcherite and New Labour conceptions of active citizenship is revealing. Gramscian perspectives were prominent in the 1980s and early 1990s in debating the significance of Thatcherism. Thinkers in the post-Marxist tradition (e.g. Hall, 1983) focused on the cultural and ideological aspects while neo-Marxists criticized them for neglecting

the political economy of a project centred on reviving capital accumulation and the politics of 'two-nations' (e.g. Jessop *et al*, 1988). This debate led Marsh (1995) to argue that Thatcherism was multi-dimensional and that the challenge was to understand the articulation of economic, political and ideological dimensions.

Gamble's (1994) book on Thatcherism is an excellent example of this approach, identifying two core themes in the Thatcherite hegemonic strategy, 'the free economy and the strong state', the convergence of the libertarian and patrician fractions of the Conservative Party. Some have argued that Thatcherite neoliberalism represented a break from Conservative tradition (e.g. Gray, 1995), but according to Eccleshall (2000) Tory party history is defined by the changing relationship between the fractions united in pursuit of the master concept of Conservatism, inequality through 'ordered liberty'. 'Ordered Liberty' has a long pedigree in political and constitutional theory, describing the means by which society balances individual freedom with common obligations and the maintenance of order. In the context of British Conservatism, argues Eccleshall (2000: 277), it refers to the core political goal of maintaining inequality: an 'orderly, disciplined and unequal society which benefits from appropriate leadership', or in Rutherford's (2008) words 'fraternity without equality'. However, anti-egalitarianism is usually coded for palatability in euphemisms such as the 'enterprise culture', 'responsible society' and 'opportunity state' (Eccleshall, 2000: 278), terms cribbed or adapted by New Labour. Discursive mirroring cuts both ways. David Cameron's Conservatives appropriated the New Labour discourse of 'social justice', exemplified by the Centre for Social Justice established by former leader, Iain Duncan-Smith, in 2004. The conception of 'social justice' in the Centre's literature emphasizes the traditional Tory preoccupation with voluntarism (now the 'big society'), illustrating the adaptability of the Conservatives in pursuit of their historic goal (see <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>).

Since the primary objective of Conservatism is to defend inequality, the strategic emphasis on 'order' or 'liberty' is a secondary matter, contingent on circumstance. According to

Gamble (1979: 9-10), for example, neoliberals tolerated 'authoritarian' states, such as Pinochet's Chile, because it fostered the 'free market', whereas they detested the 'totalitarian' Communist regimes, which did not. Norman Tebbit could therefore justify Thatcherite strong-statism in Britain arguing that 'the defence of freedom involves the defence of the values which make freedom possible without its degeneration into licence' (cited in Eccleshall, 2000: 279). The authoritarianism of the 1980s could be portrayed as a measure to free the economy from the yoke of social democracy and restore the national enterprise culture, after which liberty would come to the fore once more.

Accordingly, Thatcherism invoked the highly illiberal ideology of 'Authoritarian Populism', a term coined by Hall (1983) to describe the strategy for capitalizing on public frustration with economic decline and social unrest by demonizing its enemies: the unions, benefit 'scroungers' and foreigners 'swamping' British culture. It rallied support for what Thatcherites saw as the distinctively British characteristics of moral rectitude and entrepreneurship. The concept was criticized for excessive ideologism, but it illustrated that far from being crude laissez faire ideologues, the Thatcherites sought to mobilize consensus around the anti-egalitarian values of individual enterprise and property ownership, united by common citizenship through loyalty to nation (Gamble, 1994: 219). Requiring force to break the social democratic bloc, it presented a political vision to which a quiescent working class might ultimately aspire, fashioning a conservative hegemony. If comprehensive hegemony depends on active citizen assent, it is this dimension of Thatcherism, championing the 'native characteristic of robust individuality' (Eccleshall, 2000: 286), that revealed it as a distinctly Conservative hegemonic project rather than an atavistic strategy for domination through market relations.

The Conservative Government and Citizenship after 1987

Once serious union resistance was subdued, the Tories increasingly turned their attention to building a new consensus and the challenge of citizen acculturation. In 1987, Mrs Thatcher made her most notorious remark in an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine. She stated:

... you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation (<http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>) (see two alternative renderings of this passage in Fry, 2008: 107).

Fry (*ibid*) argues that Thatcher's critics quote her selectively because, taken as a whole, they reveal her 'fully displayed idealism'. As patriots, leading Conservatives apparently 'instantly regretted' the opening sentences (Gilbert, 2004: 32) and the latter part is certainly a better reflection of Thatcherite philosophy than the initial soundbyte. Taken out of context, however, the soundbyte allowed New Labour to distance itself from Thatcherism and ignore the affinity between the rest of her remarks and Blairite thinking about citizenship. Fairclough (2000: 41) illustrates that like Mrs. Thatcher's, New Labour's formulation prioritized responsibility over rights. For example, when it talked about 'rights' it qualified the term by coupling it with 'responsibilities'. On the other hand it used 'responsibility' without 'rights', signifying its ideological precedence. Whether or not New Labour plagiarized her, Mrs. Thatcher first authored the claim with which it became indelibly associated, that obligations have priority over entitlements. There is nothing between her formulation and the Blairite mantra 'no rights without responsibilities'.

A year later, in a speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Mrs. Thatcher defined individual goodness as the Christian duty to be merciful and generous to others (Thatcher, 1988a). This remark reflected her Burkean commitment to individual responsibility as the key to revitalizing 'not just the economy and industry but the whole body of voluntary associations, loyalties and activities which gives society its richness and diversity, and hence its real strength' (Thatcher, 1980). Mrs. Thatcher further argued that Conservatism is defined by

‘self-reliance, personal responsibility, good neighbourliness, generosity to others’ (Thatcher, 1988b). These ethics of personal responsibility represent a tacit theory of citizenship, which Tory leaders elaborated in the late 1980s.

Oliver (1991: 157) records how, around the time of the Church of Scotland speech, prominent ministers including Kenneth Baker and Douglas Hurd began talking about citizenship. Hurd saw ‘active citizenship as a way of overcoming the lack of a sense of community, lawlessness and overdependence on the state’. The 1988 Speaker’s Commission on Citizenship highlighted the importance of law and emphasized the duties of civility and obedience to ‘community norms’ (Kearns, 1995: 157). According to Fry (2008: 108), when Mrs Thatcher left office, she was assembling a package of measures, including the Child Support Agency, to strengthen the family whose decline she saw as a significant cause of social suffering.

Kearns (1995: 158) saw this turn to citizenship as a logical progression from the emphasis on liberty, responsibility and wealth creation to the release of generous, caring activity thereafter, symbolizing a move from confrontation to consensualism and social reconstruction. The task of rebuilding consensus began in the late 1980s, continued under Major and became a New Labour priority after 1997. Crick (2002: 492) criticized Tory forays into citizenship for being ‘highly moralistic’ and excessively biased towards good behaviour and helping others. However, apart from Mrs. Thatcher’s purportedly careless remark that ‘there is no such thing as society’, there is little that New Labour could object to. Key elements of their approach after 1997 were rooted in late Thatcherite Conservatism, a fact obscured by the spurious distinction between communitarian New Labour and individualistic Thatcherism.

The literature of the period records how active citizenship policy became more prominent during the Major administration of 1990 – 1997. It introduced the Citizens Charter of consumer rights in 1991 and the ill-fated ‘back to basics’ campaign for law and order, family values and moral probity in 1993 (Doig, 2001). Major’s ‘classless society’ became the precursor to New Labour’s ‘equality of opportunity’, discussed below. Interestingly, the Major government

moved further away from unvarnished voluntarism towards the institutionalized citizen-activism of today. Kearns shows how during the early 1990s, it began sponsoring local partnerships, first centred on business and local government and later incorporating the voluntary sector. He interpreted Major's institutionalist turn as part of a strategy to further discourage protest and advocacy (1995: 160), later a familiar theme in New Labour's 'rhetoric of reconciliation' (Fairclough, 2000: viii) and its propagation of partnerships. The roll-forward of partnership during the Major years showed the interventionist state coming to the fore in pursuit of traditional conservative goals, carried forward by New Labour from 1997.

New Labour and the Remaking of Citizenship

Whereas conservatism is fundamentally anti-egalitarian, supporters and critics of New Labour agree that 'equality' is the heart of left-of-centre politics (e.g. Giddens, 2001: 39). New Labour therefore stands or falls on its egalitarianism (Finlayson, 1999: 278). It adopted 'equality of opportunity' as its preferred benchmark for citizen rights, a concept whose roots lie not in social democracy but the liberal theory of rights and claimed by liberals, neoliberals and conservatives alike (Beech, 2006: 145). Mindful of this inauspicious heritage, Holtham (1999: 54) sought to distinguish social democratic equality of opportunity, arguing that it must be judged by whether it leads to greater equality of outcome. According to Tawney, 'a large measure of economic equality' had to be the basis of social democratic citizenship because it allowed a 'common culture' to flourish (1964: 48) and nurtured 'human fellowship' (1964: 113).

However, in the wake of its fourth successive General Election defeat in 1992, New Labour discarded equality of outcome, endorsing meritocratic principles: '[n]ot the old version of equality of opportunity - the rise of an exclusive meritocracy where only some can succeed and others are forever condemned to fail. But a genuinely meritocratic Britain, a Britain of all the talents' (Gordon Brown cited in Beech, 2009: 6). 'Equality of opportunity' draws a 'veil of discretion' over these meritocratic principles, for which inequality of outcome is axiomatic. Income inequality duly rose to its highest recorded levels in 2009 (Brewer *et al*, 2009: 1).

However, New Labour thinkers willingly conceded continuities with Thatcherism in economic policy, while pointing to definitive differences in social policy (e.g. Wright, 2003), where it championed ‘one nation’ politics. The idea of ‘one nation’ has a long and contested history in British politics. In the post-war period it was symbolized by corporatism. Thatcherism dismantled corporatism, envisioning ‘one nation’ as a property owning democracy in which entrepreneurial citizens were united by loyalty to Britain and its values. In turn, New Labour presented its own ‘one nation’ vision, dissolving the traditional social democratic view of the tension between the market and social justice in favour of a third way in which, said John Prescott (2004) ‘economic prosperity and social justice are two sides of the same coin’. For Tony Blair (1997), the over-riding goal was ‘national renewal. Britain re-built as one nation, in which each citizen is valued and has a stake’. Further:

The creation of an economy where we are inventing and producing goods and services of quality needs the engagement of the whole country. It must be a matter of national purpose and national pride ... One-nation politics is not some expression of sentiment, or even of justifiable concern for the less well off. It is an active politics – the bringing of the country together, a sharing of the possibility of power, wealth and opportunity (cited in Fairclough, 2000: 87).

Some critics of this approach call it ‘social neoliberalism’ (e.g. Crouch, 1997), referring to the commitment to building community alongside the market economy and distinguishing it from *laissez faire* neoliberalism (e.g. Wright, 2003: 366). However, as the foregoing discussion suggests the ‘social’ dimension is integral to neoliberalism, unavoidably so given the need for even the most market-friendly societies to foster a modicum of social cohesion. If so, the key question is what was the political content of the New Labour social and how did it differ from the Thatcherite social? For current purposes, what were the politics of active citizenship?

A hegemonic strategy requires that obsolete ways of thinking and acting be unlearned and replaced with dispositions, habits and norms such that a new, ‘second nature’ is constructed

(Fontana, 2002: 163). New Labour distinguished its desired habits and norms from those of Thatcherism, among other means by appealing to Christian socialism (e.g. Carter, 2003). Wright (2003: 363-4), for example, claimed that New Labour followed in Tawney's footsteps. Part of Tawney's appeal was the priority he accorded to the moral aspect of the personality, envisioning a society of individuals united in pursuit of the common good. However, as was noted above, he believed, unlike New Labour, that social unity required a high level of substantive economic equality. Moreover, he objected to the acquisitive morality of capitalism, which he thought subordinated the working class to the ends of the ruling class (Carter, 2003: 178). Hence, 'freedom for the pike' was 'death for the minnows' (1964: 164), whereas for New Labour the pike was a role model. Hence, Tawney was arguably corralled into legitimizing an approach with which he would fundamentally disagree, which jettisoned his distinctively social democratic outlook. The following discussion of citizenship policy shows that he was not the only non-conservative thinker appropriated to conservative ends. As the remaking of citizenship is concerned with the whole social personality, the paper considers six policy areas: citizenship education, public participation, volunteering, family, asset-based welfare and consumerism. It finds a Conservative sub-text in each case.

The Citizen-Learner

Citizenship education became part of the national curriculum in England's schools in 2002, based on the report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship chaired by the democratic socialist, Bernard Crick. Throughout, the report (QCA, 1998) stressed the social democratic concern with fostering the critical disposition in young people, Crick (2002: 503) later describing the goal of citizenship education as nurturing 'informed scepticism' toward the State.

However, citizenship education policy ended up reflecting a different set of concerns. According to Kisby (2007), it emerged from a policy network concerned with rebuilding social capital, following Robert Putnam's discussions with New Labour leaders. It included Thatcherite ministers Kenneth Baker and Douglas Hurd as well as David Blunkett (Crick 2002:

492), himself part of the earlier Speaker's Commission on Citizenship (Kisby, 2007: 96) and renowned for his moral conservatism. Looking back at the development of citizenship education policy, Crick (2002: 502) lamented the 'decline of democracy' in New Labour, its centralization of power and excessive devotion to the market. Echoing his earlier critique of the Tories, he was 'just a little nervous' when ministers 'seem more often to talk about "volunteering" than "citizenship"' (2002: 488).

Crick's concern was justified. In the 1999 education White Paper, for example, David Blunkett stated the government's objectives for learning thus: 'Our vision is to build a new culture of learning which will underpin national competitiveness and personal prosperity, encourage creativity and innovation and help build a cohesive society' (DEE, 1999: 6). The document made no mention of democracy, rights or fostering the critical disposition. For Landrum (2002: 222), citizenship education represented the 'purposive conservatization' of policy from the outset, conflating 'good citizenship' with Tory voluntarism. Hence, whereas the Advisory Group report reflected Crick's aspirations for fostering a critical, politically active subject, the policy reflected the goals of the wider network: advancing a conservative notion of social capital in response to social fragmentation.

The Citizen-Participant

Public participation is a policy area which, at face value, was strikingly different from the Conservatives. Under New Labour, partnerships were broadened, focusing more directly on citizen engagement. Contemporary social democrats, like Habermas (1984), see discursive democracy as just as important as economic equality. For Habermasians, deliberation is emancipatory, holding out the possibility of an equitable consensus between actors from different backgrounds and deepening their democratic commitments in the process. Optimists, particularly early on, saw New Labour's commitment to a state-society partnership as faithful to social democratic principles, having the potential to create empowered spaces where mutualism and inclusive policy making could develop (e.g. Goss, 2001).

However, an avalanche of critical research suggests that the democratic voice in partnerships has been subordinated to technocratic managerialism (e.g. Skelcher *et al*, 2005; **Author**, 2007). As Wright *et al* (2006: 347) put it in a devastating critique of the flagship regeneration scheme, New Deal for Communities, ‘if NDC is a community-led programme, it is community led in the sense that government decides how the community will be involved, why they will be involved, what they will do and how they will do it’. Building on critical observations of this kind, **Author** (2011) argues that partnerships tend to operate as control technologies, seeking to embed the principles of ‘contributory consensualism’ - the duty of citizen-activists to mobilize community resources in pursuit of non-negotiable government policies.

One explanation for these developments is that the underlying communitarianism of New Labour had more in common with Conservatism than with egalitarian social democracy. Tony Blair, for example, claimed to have been influenced by the Idealist philosopher, John Macmurray. At the heart of Macmurray’s communitarianism was the idea of a relationship ‘which has no purpose beyond itself; in which we associate because it is natural to human beings to share their experience, to understand one another, to find joy and satisfaction in living together’ (Macmurray cited in Hale, 2002: 193-4). This outlook has obvious affinities with the Habermasian commitment to open deliberation as the means of determining public action. However, Hale (2002: 192) argues that Blair’s philosophy was in ‘stark opposition’ to Macmurray’s, grounded in his conception of community as an obligation. Here, then, Blair stands accused of appropriating a non-Conservative thinker in pursuit of conservative goals that became embedded the public participation agenda.

The Citizen-Volunteer

David Blunkett and Gordon Brown were pivotal in developing New Labour’s thinking about citizenship. Drawing on a value base he attributed to civic republicanism, Blunkett conflated dutiful citizenship with freedom. ‘Unless we are active in the public realm, as citizens

helping to shape the world around us, then we are not really free' (Blunkett, 2003: 1). For him, government's role was to mobilize and acculturate:

We cannot stop the pace of technical change or globalisation. But we can show leadership in developing a wider and deeper democratic engagement with citizens so that they are more able and inclined to take responsibility for shaping the well-being of their communities (Home Office, 2003: 4).

Blunkett thus conflated freedom and democracy with responsibility. He continued: 'only by engaging and developing citizens ... will there be hope of achieving ambitions for a robust, knowledge-driven economy, for vibrant, self-sustaining communities and for a universal culture of lifelong learning' (Home Office, 2003: 11). Moreover, the goal of civil renewal policy was to 'regenerate communities and the culture and lifeblood of mutual support in a highly complex 21st century globalised economy' (2003b: 38).

These goals, entirely compatible with patrician conservatism, were further reflected in Gordon Brown's conception of the gift culture. Lloyd (2000) noted that all the mainstream parties had embraced Edmund Burke's 'little platoons'. Like any other thinker, Burke can be appropriated. However, New Labour intellectuals could hardly fail to have been aware of his influence on modern Conservatism. Moreover, Gordon Brown's conception of voluntarism was unambiguously Conservative:

There is a strong case for saying that in the age of enlightenment, Britain invented the modern idea of civic society-rooted in ... our 'civil responsibilities', eventually incorporating what Edmund Burke defined as little platoons: two ideas we would today recognise as being at the heart not only of the voluntary sector but of a strong society. Call it community, call it civic patriotism call it the giving age, or call it the new active citizenship, call it the great British society - it is Britain becoming Britain again (Brown, 2000).

Unsurprisingly, some Labour supporters were uncomfortable commandeering Burke in this way, Davies and Crabtree (2004: 42) worrying that ‘progressives and one-nation conservatives often look spookily similar to one another’. Social democracy is not antithetical to volunteering, but prioritizes distributive justice over gift and collective over individual responsibility. Interestingly, however, this is one area where New Labour openly acknowledged its debt to Conservative philosophy.

The Citizen and the Family

Recognizing the impact of de-traditionalization on the family, as well as class (e.g. Bentley and Halpern, 2003), New Labour differentiated itself from Conservative policies. Among its most progressive measures was the embrace of gay and lesbian relationships and the enactment of civil partnerships. The latter measure was striking precisely as a liberal measure in the context of otherwise strong conservative support for the nuclear family. Jack Straw said early in New Labour’s first term that ‘the evidence is that children are best brought up where you have two natural parents and it is more likely to be a stable family if they are married ... It plainly makes sense for the government to do what it can to strengthen the institution of marriage’ (cited in *The Guardian*, 1998). Twelve years later, former Secretary of State at the Department for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, echoed him in a Green Paper on the family: “Strong, stable families are the bedrock of our society. Families give children the love and security they need to grow up and explore the world, and the moral guidance and aspiration to make the most of their talents and be good citizens” (DCSF, 2010: 2). The Green Paper extended the *Think Family* approach rolled-out in 2007 (Social Exclusion Taskforce, 2007), focusing intervention on the whole family unit. It asserted that it is not the business of government to prescribe the nature and form of family life. However, prescription was precisely what it proposed for dysfunctional families perceived to be ‘at risk’.

Governmental attitudes to teenage pregnancy are a good illustration of the underlying conservatism of family policy. By the late 1990s, teenage mothers were a totem of ‘adolescent

sexuality out of control' (Smith, 2002: 497-498). New Labour saw single motherhood as locking young women into dependency and out of work, access to which was interpreted as the only route to individual prosperity and the key to good citizenship. It issued dire warnings about 'shattered lives' and 'blighted futures' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 4). Accordingly, programmes like NDC made 'tackling teenage pregnancy' a priority. The Government ignored critical views that in an enlightened society where it was not stigmatized, and with proper social support, motherhood could be a positive lifestyle choice for young women (e.g. Haylett, 2003). Through the medium of the Child Support Agency, established in 1993, it forced mothers into naming absent fathers and depending on them for financial support. It eventually scaled down the shambolic and divisive agency, but remained a firm advocate of parental responsibility. Sure Start, for example, is seen as one of New Labour's most progressive family policies. Yet it too was criticized for trying to accentuate personal responsibility and inculcate middle-class family values (e.g. Gewirtz, 2001). Consequently, although it is an area where some non-conservative policies were introduced, New Labour conceived family life primarily in Conservative terms, as the foundation of social order and the bedrock of good citizenship.

The Citizen-Saver

Like the Conservatives, New Labour attached considerable value to asset ownership. Blunkett (2003: 12) argued that it 'helps develop self-reliance and responsibility, while opening up opportunity and rewards'. As Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, he argued that assets 'offer unparalleled opportunity in the fight to prevent future poverty – stopping people falling into poverty when circumstances change and by enabling families to build inter-generational stepping stones out of poverty' (Blunkett, 2005). He further explained how private assets were instrumental to the culture change New Labour was trying to foster, commenting that income provides for 'decency', but 'assets equal expectancy and self-determination in society'. Self-determination is tied to personal responsibility and Blunkett suggested that asset ownership makes people better 'prepared for difficult times' so they 'do not need to rely on emergency

payments from the State in the future'. This conception of the thrifty citizen-saver removes the barrier that social democrats seek to erect between the public and private spheres. Now, the private enhances the public.

For Watson, privatism inspired the entire public sector reform agenda. He shows how Gordon Brown justified asset-based welfare by appropriating Adam Smith. He argues that Smith's philosophy was based on an interpersonal conception of sympathy nurtured through the self-tutoring of moral faculties by individuals contemplating action from the standpoint of other people's needs (Watson, 2009: 196). He contrasts Smithian sympathy with Brownian duty, arguing that Brown relied on a technocratic and instrumentally rational reading of social justice (*ibid*). For Glaze (2008), the significance of Brown's misreading was that what he, erroneously, approved of in Smith, his alleged moral conservatism and utilitarianism, is more revealing of Brown's own conservative predilections. Like Macmurray and Tawney, Smith was corralled into legitimizing Conservative politics that he would disdain.

The Citizen-Consumer

The politics of consumerism, the flip-side of thrift, exhibited a similar mix of instrumentalism and authoritarianism. Crouch's (2008) analysis of 'privatized Keynesianism' illustrates. The New Labour boom was built on an extravagant speculative bubble. Easy credit for personal consumption and house purchases, backed by the burgeoning trade in asset-backed securities, mainly mortgages, helped sustain price inflation and the illusion that spending could always be defrayed against increasing 'wealth'. Crouch calls this system 'privatized Keynesianism' because growth was underpinned by personal debt, where state-led demand management supported it under old-fashioned Keynesianism. It began to unravel with the credit crunch and house price crash, simultaneously undermining the foundations of asset-based welfare.

One factor that can be added to Crouch's account is the role accorded to consumption in this system; not as a choice by empowered individuals but as a social responsibility. Hilton

(2004: 106), for example, argues that consumption is an obligation of neoliberal citizenship, a form of 'individual economic chivalry'. When consumer confidence reached a low ebb in the UK and USA in 2003, it prompted fears that global recession was imminent. Smart (2007: 172) argued presciently that '[t]he duty to consume is clearly considered to be of paramount importance for the fate of the global economy appears to hang on it'. In one sense, this perspective is old-hat. Marcuse (1964) identified consumerism as a form of social control creating 'false needs' almost half a century ago. A century before that, Marx found the sources of alienation in commodity fetishism remarking that '[n]eediness grows as the power of money increases' (cited in Merrifield, 2002: 15). However, the idea that consumerism is the product of social engineering is an important challenge to New Labour, depriving it of a key justification for unleashing quasi-markets across the public sector. It has tended to depict consumerism as a sociological *fait accompli* that it had no choice but to indulge (e.g. Bentley and Halpern, 2003), whereas in reality it actively encouraged consumption to keep a feeble economy growing. Thrift and extravagance were meant to balance each other somehow, yet the approach to both was the same. It was inspired by New Labour's conception of good citizenship encompassing the commitment to private property, market-led growth and the politics of obligation.

Reflections on Citizenship, Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Properly evaluating the impact of the New Labour project would be a massive undertaking. However, some tentative observations are possible. First, despite the crisis, there are currently no counter-hegemonic forces in the UK imminently capable of displacing the dominant neoliberal bloc. Moreover, until the credit crunch, New Labour was arguably very successful in using easy money to stimulate consumerism. However, these achievements do not themselves attest to the success of the wider project for fostering active citizenship based on conservative values and dispositions.

Judged from this standpoint the evidence, such as it is, suggests that New Labour was not entirely successful. In relation to citizen education, for example, Pykett (2007) argues that

neoliberal governmentalities are contested in day-to-day teaching and learning. She argues that if citizenship education is about 'governability' it does not follow that teachers or pupils are 'governed'. She found that dispositions vary from school to school, suggesting that potentially subversive practices persist.

Hall (2003) argues that New Labour sought to cultivate citizen-consumer indifference to who controls and profits from public services. However, Clarke and Newman's (2007) study of attitudes in the health sector suggests that citizens resist the consumerist disposition. They consider the matter in Gramscian terms, arguing that the predominant citizen disposition 'looks like a condition of "passive dissent", rather than active consent' (*ibid.*: 754). They suggest that this disposition reveals the 'limited accomplishments of New Labour as a political project', supporting the distinction between consent and assent posited in this paper. **Author** (2007) arrived at a comparable conclusion in his study of strategic partnerships. He found that they have not been as effective in generating public assent as in damping down overt political conflict (e.g. Geddes, 2006). The study revealed that public officials internalized a Conservative view of the active citizen's role in partnerships, the 'contributory principle'. However, citizen-activists saw partnerships as mechanisms through which to exercise a political voice and acquire resources, a social democratic 'culture of entitlement' tacitly opposing the 'contributory principle'. From the standpoint of 'contributory consensualism', this disposition was subversive and can be construed as a tacit challenge to hegemony.

Implicit in these mild refusals is a Marshallian claim on political and economic rights that might be one possible ideological platform for the revival of counter-hegemonic politics. As suggested above, the otherwise fissiparous social democratic tradition is distinguished from Conservatism by its commitment to greater equality of opportunities and outcomes, as the condition of human fellowship (Tawney, 1964: 113). From this perspective, equality of entitlement is the basis from which we are most likely to empathize with and recognize

responsibilities to others. What, then, might these responsibilities be from the standpoint of social democracy today?

Dean's (2003) quasi-Marxist account depicts capitalism and citizenship as the 'impossible partnership', a position that most social democrats reject. However, her claim that citizenship should rest on a solidaristic conception of responsibility might be instructive. Dean seeks to foster a global sense of community, where to exercise responsibility is not about developing the capacities to participate in a market society, but to deliberate 'on what private and public good might or could mean' (2003: xi). In Dean's conception of publicly spirited citizenship, citizens put 'their imaginations and their emotions' at the disposal of a global public sphere (2003: 113) and have 'a sense of indebtedness to past, future and "other"' (2003: xii). From her perspective, then, a social democratic conception of responsibility demands transnational solidarity, grounded in the application of critical capacities that reveal and transform power relations, such as those where responsibility is conflated with self-reliance. However, if reclaiming responsibility is a task for the contemporary social democrat the means of completing it, counter-hegemonic or otherwise, remain unclear.

Conclusion

One way of distinguishing a hegemonic project from a project for domination is through its strategy for nurturing active citizenship. Since the late 1980s, revitalizing citizenship has been a central challenge for neoliberal governance, addressed by successive Conservative and New Labour governments. While there were important differences in *modus operandi*, each drew on common political principles. If conservatism is defined by its anti-egalitarianism, and social democracy by its commitment to increasing economic and political equality, then New Labour's approach to active citizenship sat clearly in the former tradition.

The argument hinges on the perspective that despite the struggles of the 1980s, the image of a thuggish, laissez-faire Thatcherite project is crude. New Labour attempted to distance itself from Conservatism by caricaturing Thatcherism and through specious appeals to non-

conservative thinkers. If the ultimate objective of Thatcherism was a new entrepreneurial, anti-egalitarian consensus, there was nothing in New Labour's active citizenship agenda to disassociate it from that goal. Inequalities of opportunity and outcome were axiomatic and empathy, deliberation and solidarity had little influence in a praxis promoting charity, individual responsibility and filial duty. Obligation was a cardinal virtue, the common content of 'the social' spanning the Conservative and New Labour variants of neoliberalism.

Some scholars maintain that New Labour was, at least partly, faithful to social democratic principles (e.g. Beech, 2006). This paper adds weight to competing accounts arguing that its policies were devoid of social democratic content (e.g. Wood, 2010). There is no easy way of evaluating decisively between these viewpoints, but those who assert New Labour's fidelity to social democracy are vulnerable to the counter-claim that conservatism was usually the dominant subtext. If so, excavating the relationship between text and sub-text in public policy could be productive terrain for future research. This task is as much about maintaining a sharp critical temperament as it is about method. However, **Author's** (2007, 2009) decentred research on strategic partnerships, based on non-participant observation of collaboration and narrative analysis of interview transcripts, is one fruitful way of examining the relationship between policy rhetoric and practice and casting light on the micro-politics of the state-citizen interface.

Looking back over 13 years, it is clear that there was an elective affinity with Thatcherite Conservatism in New Labour's pursuit of hegemony through active citizenship. In drawing this conclusion the paper provides a benchmark for comparing the Lib-Tory coalition with its New Labour and Thatcherite predecessors. As he entered 10 Downing Street, David Cameron echoed the language of 'no entitlements without responsibilities' and further emphasised the need to revitalize family and community. A common thread running through the neoliberal hegemonic project is therefore intact as the new government starts to unveil its approach to resolving the challenge of weak citizenship.

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