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Editorial [Art and the Public Sphere]

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Volunteering for dissent

Mel Jordan

Volunteerism is the New Jerusalem, according to the Lib-Con coalition in the UK. Cameron and Clegg's 'big society' describes a world in which we all participate in public life by running post offices, libraries, transport services and initiating and administering new schools. They suggest that these acts of volunteerism will give us more 'people power' and more control over our own lives.

The pair claim that they want people to have more 'say' in planning decisions and for voluntary groups to be able to run public services – activities that previously commanded wages. The current rhetoric is carefully articulated to deflect attention away from an ideological attack on the public sector to instead imply a relationship between volunteering and participation in democratic decision-making. The correlation of 'having more say' and 'being involved' suggests that if you volunteer you have more influence in your community, more local control of resources and more control over your own future.

At the same time the coalition is spearheading an all-out attack on the unemployed, all of whom are 'shirkers' apparently, despite the government announcing half a million public-sector job losses to make economic savings. Do they expect the new half a million unemployed public sector workers to return to work voluntarily and buttress the state that has cast them aside? And with the 'shirkers' all back to work or on the streets, the volunteering will have to be done, it seems, by the comfortably off with time on their hands.

What about those who do not have the means to volunteer? If the rhetoric is true then the poorest members of society will inevitably have less of a say while middle-class volunteers enjoy the privilege of participation. Does this mean the poor are excluded from participating in the 'big society'?

In his motto 'people power at the heart of government', Cameron exploits the Black Panthers radical slogan 'Power to the People'. There is a distinct difference between the two: the Black Panthers campaigned for the people to be given the power to lead society, Cameron wants to channel and convert the power that we have as individuals into agency that contributes to the conversion of the state from the guarantor of welfare to the saviour of high finance, big business and hollowed out services; one is about confronting the state with an organized and visionary grass-roots alternative, and the other is a top-down cost-cutting exercise that recruits good will for the narrow interests of neoliberal ideology. One is about freedom and the other about control.

If we are to have people power then power has to be transferred to communities, who must be given real powers like purchasing power, legislative power, decision-making power. Participatory budgets hand over real power to communities; volunteering does not.

In fact the idea of 'big society' is a return to a philanthropic civil society whereby state intervention is replaced by a set of charitable individuals. This is privatization in a major key. The problem with a civil society of wealthy volunteers, which is what the welfare state was introduced to combat, is that it is not democratic: it is steered by private individuals who decide amongst themselves what they will do with their power. To be active in civil society you must already be a person of means and have 'free time' to contribute to the social order, therefore your participation is always with 'interest' – what is best for your type of person etc. is what you strive for – it is not your responsibility to think about the others that are not part of your interest group – this is where the state comes in. With the demise of state intervention, civil society gains power and market interests lead social as well as economic decision-making, but this needs overseeing by the state. I am not advocating Hegel's version of state control that is kept in check by civil society, (as I do not want a return to civil society in any guise) but what about a new kind of state, a state that intervenes in capitalism to strive for a new kind of socialism.

There is an idea that volunteering is good per se. Cameron is working on the ideological 'common sense' apparently inherent in us all; agreeing with the notion of volunteering is expected, almost popular – how can helping out be a bad thing? But it does not stop there – if we are going to partake in society properly (which is what they are saying they want) we have to ask why are we volunteering? And what are the conditions that has rendered volunteering necessary?

After the Bolsheviks took over the state, Lenin promoted volunteering. Workers were encouraged to work an extra day, not for pay but for the benefit of all. He argued that militant workers before the revolution would resist the bosses by slouching and shirking, but to continue this after the revolution is to take sides against the workers. Working an extra day for capitalism is self-exploitation. Working an extra day for socialism is a method for securing universal human development. Volunteering under neoliberalism continues the Thatcherite mission of annihilating every last trace of 'socialism' and the welfare state, transferring the burden of care from democratic collective agencies funded by progressive taxes, to individuals and families. This is 'care in the community' for all.

New Labour developed a rhetoric of inclusion through publicly funded art in a claim that there were opportunities for marginalized communities to contribute

and develop as citizens through participating in public and community art projects; these projects were phoney public spheres, as this type of participation was managed and constructed in order to arrive at consensus and therefore control. Now, however, under the Lib-Con coalition it's back to bourgeois public spheres: participation in decision-making for people with money and power.

Neoliberalism promotes the value of consensus in order to arrive at agreement and collective decisions in a seemingly reasonable and rational way. A public sphere calls for debate and allows for dissensus but dissensus needs to be managed and fought for. For those of us committed to the idea of the public sphere (be it a counter-public sphere as opposed to the 'official' public sphere) and notions of dissensus, the first setback is that dissensus is not the opposite of consensus; it just does not operate in an equivalent way. We need to carefully construct opportunities for dissensus; we need to intervene and take care of the idea of dissensus in the same way ideas of consensus have been nurtured and promoted over the history of liberal democracy.

Volunteering under neoliberalism is utopian. It assumes we are already living in a fairer society. But it is utopian in another sense, too. Just because the Lib-Con's have nominated 'volunteering' as their new initiative let us not forget, that volunteering really is collective action outside of market forces.

So let us volunteer. Let's create centres for dissent, give lessons to the working classes in expressing and directing their anger. Train single mothers in argument and rhetoric. Make the rich and comfortable speak their opinions; regardless of the effect such daring would have on their material interests. Instil courage and hope in those that have given up dreaming, set up counter-public spheres, grow vegetables in the parks and paint the roads red. Set up journals that call for the totality of art by aligning it to the public sphere.