Rethinking the relationship with the State.

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between community work and the state in the UK in particular. By exploring the relevance and limitations of the book `*In and against the state´*, the article presents the idea that practitioners of community development can play a role in re-defining the role of the state by changing the discourse from `working in and against the state´ to `working for and as the state´. In this sense, constructing an ideological position regarding what the state should be and which role it should play could be equally as important as developing new approaches to practice in response to the influence of the state.

Introduction

In 1980, a group of UK state workers published the book `*In and Against the State´* (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). The aim of the book was to inspire people working in the public sector to reflect upon the influence of the state;

> Although the state may appear to exist to protect us from the worst excesses of capitalism, it is in fact protecting capital from our strength by ensuring that we relate to capital and to each other in ways which divide us from ourselves, and leave the basic inequalities unquestioned. (…) Those of us who work for the state are inevitably part of the state. We must find ways to oppose it from within our daily activity (…)

The publication of `*In and Against the State´* happened in a context in which the role of the state was not only questioned by state workers but also by the Conservative government then in power. In the decades that followed, the belief in the superior

efficiency of the market over the public sector was endorsed and acted upon by the succeeding Labour and coalition governments. These changes affected the British welfare state and influenced the practice of community work (Craig et al, 2011).

In the current context, the debate over the role of the state and its influence in community work remains (see Craig et al. 2011; Hoggett, Mayo & Miller, 2008; Shaw & Martin, 2000). Yet, practitioners should consider not only the influence that the state has on their practice but also the role of the state itself. Rethinking the role of the state in community work could be equally as important as developing new approaches to address the influence of the state.

In this article, I will argue that in order to respond to the current of practice, the `working in and against the state´ argument has to be re-adapted and expanded. It has to be re-adapted because the role of the state and the organisation of the wider society differ significantly from that which existed in the 1970s. It has to be expanded because the ambivalent nature of the state requires that practitioners not only work `in and against the state´ but also `for and as the state´. Because practitioners work `for and as the state´ they have the opportunity to play a critical role in redefining the state as instrument for the achievement of progressive goals.

Community work and the state.

Community work has unavoidably been tied to the role of the state. It has functioned as a mediator between the state and the civil society (Hoggett et al., 2008), and as an instrument to deliver policy (Shaw, 2008). In its early years, community work was predominantly a conservative practice concerned with social control. Within the UK, community work aimed to respond to the concerns of the upper classes regarding social conflict and the spread of diseases. In the colonies, it aimed to maintain the political power of the state and prevent any potential dissent or insurgency (Craig, 1989). In both cases, community work was a combination of paternalistic and charitable approaches that seems to have been more interested in pursuing the interests of the state (and wealthy classes) than in alleviating poverty.

From the 1940s until the early 1970s, the practice continued to be shaped by the state despite the fact that, in the definition of community work by United Nations, community organisations were recognised as separate from government agencies. During these decades, community work was located as a mediator between `the needs of capitalism for a literate and obedient workforce and the struggles of the working class to improve their living conditions´ (Williams, 1998 cited in Shaw, 2003, p. 18). However, the rise of civil rights movements questioning the effectiveness of the welfare state reframed the role of community work from functioning as a mediator to working as an instrument of social control (Waddington, 1979). During the 1960s, state-sponsored projects, such as the UK Community Development Project, were established to respond to the emergent crisis in social democracy and the perceived threat of disaffection, dissent and conflict (Corrigan, 1975, cited in Shaw, 2003, p. 20). The work within communities served then to characterise poverty as a marginal problem rather than as the failure of the state (Community Development Project, 1977). Community work became a practice to regulate communities, promote cultural norms and bring `deviant´ citizens back into line (Shaw, 2003, p. 19).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the crisis of the welfare state, and the embrace of free-market values led to a reconstruction of the role of the state. The new state originated under the Thatcher Government regarded the welfare state as a source of dependency and the free-market as the answer to dependency. This influenced the practice of community work that had to shift the responsibility of providing public services from the state to individuals (Clarke & Newman, 1997). However, even when the government claimed to diminish the interventionist role of the state, the actions taken suggested the opposite. According to Ruth Levitas (2012) the state under Thatcher defended economic principles while reducing people´s rights such as free assembly or freedom of movement. (p. 329)

In the current context, community work has continued to be affected by the state and its market driven values. Under the New Labour government from 1997, community work was embedded within a discourse which moved `from government to

governance´ in which enhancing consumer choices was regarded as a synonym for empowering individuals (Craig, Mayo, Popple, Shaw, & Taylor, 2011, p. 195). Similarly, the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat government has used its idea of the `Big Society´ to justify social cuts and the privatisation of public services (Fraser, 2012). In government discourse, the `Big society´ empowers local people and communities by shifting the power from politicians to the people (Prime Minister´s Office, 2010). As a result, social policy has echoed this new conception of 'empowerment' by promoting the idea of self-help through lifelong learning and asset-based community development approaches. However, despite the rhetoric of 'empowerment', the state continues to maintain an interventionist position by protecting the principles of the market and retaining control of social policies (Kenny, 2002, ps. 293-295)

The role that the state plays in community work is crucial to understand the contemporary relevance of the argument of `working in and against the state´. Yet, we also have to consider the role that ideology plays. Community work is a contested practice that includes a wide range of ideologies, motivations and moral values. According to Hoggett et. al (2008), community work is seen as `more than a job´. It includes a set of values and aims that ranges from political mobilisation to individual feelings of compassion and care (ps. 77-95). In these terms, community work can be committed to helping communities develop resilience, acquiring instrumental knowledge and adapting to the current context, or it can be committed to challenging the status quo by promoting critical thinking and political actions. These different and competing ideological positions imply that practitioners cannot be `the value-free professionals who objectively mediate between the state and the community´ (Shaw, 2008b, p. 147).

Like practitioners, the state itself is not ideologically neutral. Throughout the history of community work, we have observed how the state´s policies have followed specific ideological principles. The consideration that neither practitioners nor the state are free of ideology, involves accepting the possibility that a practitioner's ideological stand could be in strong opposition to that of the state. If in addition, we consider the

fact that practitioners are frequently in the situation of delivering state policies, either by being employed, funded or guided by the state, then it is easy to understand why practitioners frequently find themselves in the paradoxical position of `working in and against the state´. Consider, for instance the words of Pete Alcock and Lars Christensen (1995) regarding local community-based organisations in relation to the state;

> Local community-based organisations are against the state, because
> they challenge its priorities and working practices; but they are also in
> the state, because they rely on grant funding to provide the facilities
> and paid workers which they need to organise and to campaign.
> (Alcock & Christensen, 1995, p. 118)

If this describes the situation that community workers frequently find themselves in, as seems to be the case, then we can understand why the argument of 'working in and against the state' has remained relevant. However, if community work aims to respond to the social, political and economic context of practice, then practitioners need to be aware of the limitations of that argument of `working in and against the state´ have.

The limitations of `working in and against the state´

The argument of `working in and against the state´ was the response to what many state workers thought of the welfare state as being `part of the hegemonic apparatus …aimed at organizing consent and managing dissent´ (Martin & Shaw, 2000, p. 404). Looking at the history of community work help us understand the relevance of this argument. However, when applied to the current context it presents serious limitations. I will focus on three.

The first limitation is that it is too centred on a narrative of social class and socialist reform. The view of society in class terms fails to recognise the wider culture of politics in which people, organisations and community workers do not necessarily define themselves exclusively in terms of social class. The current political struggle

includes, besides trade unions and progressive political parties, women´s organisations, cultural minorities, autonomous communities and rights movements. Moreover, the weight given to structure and social class ends up reducing those people who do not define themselves in class terms `to the passive objects of policy as distinct from active subjects in politics´ (Shaw & Martin, 2000, p, 405). As well as defining society in terms of social class, `In and Against the State´ recurrently called for developing a new socialist identity.

> We are socialists. We believe that the struggle for socialism includes a struggle against the state …we must find ways of bringing the struggle for socialism into our daily work (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p, 1)

Yet, in a context in which many people do not identify themselves as socialists, the identification of a progressive movement as necessarily a socialist movement is likely to alienate many potential allies. Hence, it is essential that community work includes a wider cultural and political spectrum in order to effectively involve communities and social organisations when `working in and against the state´.

The second limitation is that it seems to make community workers unable to legitimize their practice when they continue working within the state;

> Best to make what we can of a bad job. In this spirit, community workers lead working-class people to take part in local government participation exercises, schooling them in committee procedure and public speaking, in the hope that they can get a fair deal by stating their case through the proper channels. (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980)

The original argument was embedded in a narrative of constant dichotomy between the state and the civil society in which community workers were either part of the problem (if working in the state and defending the role of the state) or part of the solution (if working against the state and defending the interest of the working class).

The view of community work within this dichotomy, leads practitioners to see themselves as the victims of the system rather than as active agents of democracy. Moreover, it prevents them from recognising the value of their practice when it is directly employed, funded or guided by the state (Shaw & Martin, 2000). There are many local community-based projects that would not have been possible without collobaration between the state and communities or without the state´s support and funds (Alcock & Christensen, 1995; Craig, 1989; Hayton, 1995). Thus, it is important that practitioners are encouraged to recognise the opportunities that the state brings as well as to develop creative strategies for working within the state.

Finally, the third limitation is that the original argument of `*Working In And Against The State*´ considers the role of the state exclusively as an instrument of oppression and social control;

> It is not possible to separate off a "good" side of state activity and see this as being simply in the interests of the working class (…) the state, then, is not "our" state. It is 'their" state, an alien, oppressive state. (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980)

However, as Craig (1989) pointed out, the state can neither be the homogeneous entity that systematically opposes the interest of the working class, nor the entity that benevolently provides services in the interests of its citizens. (p, 16). The state is, in fact, ambivalent. It can be an oppressive institution concerned with social control but it can also be an `enabling´ institution that supports democratic and collective participation (Emejulu, 2013, p, 60) For liberals, the state can be a form of community: `a collective enterprise in which citizens jointly achieve the common good of a just society´ (Swift, 2006, p,168). While that liberal vision may be surely surely optimistic the possibility of achieving it should not be rejected out of hand.

In the current context, the promise of governance by the `Big Society is essentially undermining the role of the state by depicting it in direct opposition to the interests of individuals. Yet, what is behind of the idea of governance can be translated as the

government´s technique to `absolve the state of its own responsibility for addressing social injustice´ (Taylor, 2011, p. 293). In failing to recognise the ambivalent nature of the state, the original argument of `*Working In And Against The State*´, equally fails to enable community workers to respond to a context in which cuts on public funding are justified under the banner of reducing the control of the state and increasing the power of people.

`Working for and as the state´

The recognition of the state as ambivalent is extremely important. If the state is considered as an ambivalent institution, community work can support the struggles of communities and citizens over the role of the state rather than merely abandon it to the trends of the market. In this sense, practitioners of community work not only have to work `in and against the state´ but also `for and as the state´.

`For the state´, because within a free-market context, re-gaining the sovereignty of the nation-state as the enabling institution responsible for providing social justice, is decisive in developing, accordingly, strategies and policies of community work. In these terms, community workers can help reconstruct the essence of democracy and the role of the state by activating the voices of citizens and communities. As Martin & Shaw (2000) suggest, community work can help develop the `settlement between the cultural politics of communities and the political culture of the state´ (p, 409).

`As the state´, because community workers should not only be the professionals that promote active citizenship by helping communities raise their voices, but also be active citizens themselves. They can become the `active subjects that shape and influence the exercise of the government´ (Morison, 2000, cited in Taylor, 2011, p. 291). Practitioners as active citizens are, in a sense, part of the state since a democratic state involves and depends upon active citizens. This involves taking an ideological stand. As Habermas (1992) claims, `the institutions of constitutional freedom are only worth as much as a population makes of them´ (Habermas, 1994, cited in Kymlicka & Norman, 1994, p. 353). In these terms, community workers have

to make the decision of whether to be citizens in `the world as it is´ or be the active citizens for `the world as it could be´ (Shaw, 2008).

Conclusion

The influence that the state has in community work and the role that ideology plays in its practice, unavoidably involves placing practitioners in the somewhat paradoxical position of `working in and against the state´. On the one hand, the practice of community work is tied to the role of the state, since the state is often the employer or funder. On the other hand, the ideologically contested nature of community work makes it almost impossible to avoid a situation in which the focus and aims of practitioners differ significantly from those of the state. In these terms, community work practitioners need to creatively manage the tensions of `working in and against the state´.

However, the social, political and economic changes have reconfigured the context in which community work currently operates. In a context in which communities find it extremely difficult to voice their interests, community work appears as a key actor to regain the role of the state as democratic, egalitarian and just. In these terms, community workers should work `for and as the state´. `For the state´ by including communities `not only as the legitimate expression of active citizenship but also as the essence of democracy itself´ (Shaw & Martin, 2000). `As the state´ by including themselves as active citizens and defending the enabling role of the state as it should be.

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