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Beyond Big Society?

An ethical perspective on state's community action

JÉRÔME GRAND

Teaching assistant and phd student

UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

Department of political science and
international relations

METHOD

- A normative approach aimed to define « what should be »
 - A liberal theoretical framework
 - A coherentist methodology based on the coherence of a system of beliefs
 - A focus on social policies with empirical illustrations
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CONTEXT

- « Crisis » of the welfare state
 - An increasingly delegation of tasks not only to the free market but also to the civil society
 - The rise of perfectionists policies, which aim to stimulate the civil virtues and the public-spirited commitment
 - This phenomenon is best observed in the UK, where the Cameron government's slogan "No Big Government, Big Society" became a key element of the coalition program (2010)
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WHAT IS BIG SOCIETY ?



THE CONCEPT

- Something between the state and the Market
- A focus on empowering communities and families
- As an alternative to welfare state

"Britain today is supposed to be a « broken society » in which participation as well as volunteering is declining mainly because of the central state growth."

THE POLICY

- Community empowerment
- Opening up public services
- Social action

« If there are facilities that the state can't afford to keep open, shouldn't we try to encourage communities who want to come forward and to help them ? » (Cameron, 2011).

TRADITIONAL CRITICISMS TO BIG SOCIETY



- No empirical evidences of a decline in social connectedness and participation of citizens (Hilton, 2012)
- No empirical evidences that a big government is correlated with a weak civic participation (Hilton, 2012)
- Difficulty to act by a proactive policy on the level of volunteering (Ockenden, Hill, & Stuart, 2012)
- A politic of social capital would be difficult to achieve without an empowerment of local governments (Dillon & Fanning, 2016; Szreter, 2012).
- Negatives effects issued from the successive budget cuts in public funding and selectivity of the new funding model (Pharoah, 2012)
- Deprofessionalization of some social sectors (Ishkanian, 2012)

"A « rhetorical intervention» which had the role to shift the attention away from the drastic public funding cuts."

A DEEPER PERSPECTIVE

- Criticisms of Big Society are essentially directed on the empirical effects of its implementation (Dillon & Fanning, 2016; Ishkanian & Szreter, 2012).
 - The philosophical substance of the concept has been overlooked by scholars
 - Comparative and historical approach reveals a continuity in British social policy (Leoni, 2013)
 - Big Society as a "deep historical concept" (Harris, 2012)
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BIG SOCIETY AS DERIVED FROM "GREAT SOCIETY"

- "Great Society" as spontaneous harmony of various private initiatives (Smith, 1775)
- "Great Society" as a "deliberate policy" to foster civic virtues (Wallas, 1920)
- "Great Society" as a "mixed economy" (Balogh 1950)
- "Great Society" as "Big Society" (Blond 2010):
 - « People as culturally empty carriers of rights »
 - Need for a public conception of the good
 - Restore civic virtues and to focus citizens on their responsibilities
 - Reintroducing the moral virtues in the education (education into the good) and in the economy (moral market)

"The concept of Great society has moved from a liberal interpretation praising the virtues of the spontaneous order to an interventionist vision on the civil society trying to foster civic virtue and mixed economy."

SYNTHESE OF THE ARGUMENT

- Big Society is a republican perfectionism approach to civil society and, as such, it is an illegitimate policy if we support the liberal idea that every one has the right to define his own conception of the good life
- With Big Society, individual freedom is threatened in at least three ways : by the paternalist attempt to active citizen, by the discrimination between different type of associations and by the loss of independence of the civic sphere.
- It is nonetheless possible to act on the civil society in a liberal manner. On the model briefly sketched by John Stuart Mill, we argue that the state can be an active circulator and diffuser of the experiments of civil society
- Then we try to show that the Community Action's Unity of the City of Geneva is a good illustration of a liberal policy aiming at equalizing the opportunity of individual to associate.

"It forgets the international organizations when it comes to put forward the decline of participation, it forgets small associations when it reshapes the funding model, it forgets idealistic associations by framing them with its own objectives."

A GENERAL CONCEPTION OF LIBERALISM

- A strong institutional protection of the individual
- A requirement of liberality : equal respect for all the philosophies of good life (Rawls 1997)
- A requirement of equality: equal care regarding the interest of each (Rawls 1997)
- Egalitarian liberalism tries to show how freedom, defined as the absence of interference and more substantially as the capacity to lead his own good life, can be conciliated with equality, understood as an moral equality translated by a fair equality of opportunity.
- Citizenship as status (Oldfield, 1990)

« The freedom to form and pursue a conception of the good life - that is, to formulate one's own, personal response to fundamental questions of values and meaning and then to live authentically in accordance with this personal response » (White, 1998).

ARGUMENTS

Individual freedom is threatened by:

➤ The paternalist attempt to influence citizens

- Individuals have the fundamental right to pursue their conception of the good life
- Nothing can neither oblige them to be active nor expose them to moral messages condemning their passive attitude.
- The governmental discourses of Big Society conveys an idealized relationship between the individual and the State, and asserts a particular moral conception according to which a good life is a life politically and socially active

"The heart of liberal democracy has been to guard against the tutelary intent authorities who want to mold minds, call up moral sentiments, or exact displays of virtues and enthusiasm" (Rosenblum 1998).

➤ The loss of independence of the civic sphere:

- The implications of the standard of liberty for the freedom of association are the principle of voluntary membership and organizational autonomy
- Big Society expects that association, philanthropy, foundations and other corporate funding will fill the gap of the public sector (Leat, 2012, p. 137).
- Associations and foundations have been created with a specific purpose which can conflict with the governmental objectives. To think that they could replace the State is to forget that they will have to adapt their purpose to the public objectives
- Big Society undermines the expressive function of association regarding the necessity to link political objectives with resources.

"As ethical agents, individuals share beliefs about fundamental questions of value and meaning, and frame their life-projects in the light of these views. Frequently, they may wish (or need) to associate with like-minded others to explore and to advance this view "(White, 1998, p. 385)

➤ The discrimination created between different type of associations

- The standard of moral equality requires that government should not favor a specific type of association (White, 1998, p. 333).
- Big Society has moved the funding model from statutory funding to financial funding, based on the social entrepreneurship model and on the corporate funding.
- The new financial model has selective effects and exclude small organisations which are « affected by the loss or decline in statutory funding and will find it difficult to access alternative sources » (Ishkanian & Szreter, 2012, p. 10).

"Big Society favors big associations based on social entrepreneurship models to the detriment of small associations and local groups. Individual citizen-volunteers doing good in their community have to be self-financed."

➤ However

- Many authors agree on the fact that freedom of association is not an absolute right and justify in consequence some intrusions in the name of rival moral values (Gutmann, 1998)
- Whatever the political objectives of Big Society might be, promoting moral virtues or reducing public deficit, they are referring to collective goals and to a specific conception of the good life. They have no moral value.

➤ So

- Big Society is an indirect interference in the freedom of association in at least two dimensions: the need to realize political objectives through civil sector compromise the expressive function of association (liberality) and the funding model which favors social enterprises and big associations compromise the equal treatment requirement (equality).

"In short, individual freedom is threatened by the paternalist attempt to influence citizens, by the discrimination created between different types of associations, and by the loss of independence of the civic sphere."

A LIBERAL PROPOSAL:

- The idea that citizens can substitute the actions of the State is not new and classic thinkers of the liberalism also supported this idea.
- Mill defended it as limitation of the state intervention: « when the thing to be done is likely to be better done by individuals than by the government » and when individuals can't do it better but can learn from the experiment (Mill 1864)
- State as an "active circulator and diffuser (...) to enable each experimentalist to benefit by the experiments of others" (Mill 1864)

« Government operations tend to be everywhere alike. With individuals and voluntary associations, on the contrary, there are varied experiments, and endless diversity of experience. What the State can usefully do, is to make itself a central depository, and active circulator and diffuser, of the experience resulting from many trials. Its business is to enable each experimentalist to benefit by the experiments of others; instead of tolerating no experiments but its own. » (Mill, 2012, p. 93).

- It implies to build the conditions necessary to permit all citizen to effectively enjoy the experiment.
- We argue that the role of facilitator of the state encompasses transmitting experiments as well as equalizing citizens effective opportunity to associate:
 - This proposal exceeds the requirement of formal equality granted to the freedom of association as a basic liberty by Rawls (Rawls, 2009, p. 93) and it asks for a requirement of "fair value of opportunity" usually reserved to political liberty in the theory of justice (Rawls, 2001b, p.150)
 - But disparities of access to the associative freedom reflect disparities in the conditions necessary for the formation of group (Cohen & Roger 1992, Rosenblum 1998)
 - This can be done with a specific support for a sub-right of freedom of associate, the *right to create* an association. They are correctible without interfering with the condition of liberality (Fleischacker, 1998; Tamir 1998).
 - Equalizing citizens effective opportunity to associate may be done in strengthening the egalitarian frame of associative liberty without interfering in the associative freedom itself

"It will be a specific support for a sub-right of freedom of associate, the *right to create* an association. It is not, in principle, a support for a particular type of association, but for a particular right. This last one is justified on the principle of equality of opportunity, to allow people with low ressources to access to the sphere of collective action like the well-off."

CASE ILLUSTRATION



Unité d'action communautaire + Servette/Petit-Saconnex + 022 418 97 90



VILLE DE
GENÈVE

COMMUNITY'S ACTION UNIT

- The **social service** of the City of Geneva has for mission to favor the "*bien vivre-ensemble*" in Geneva, « by contributing to the improvement of living conditions, by fostering social relationship and by allowing the residents to participate completely in the social life » (Sa Barretto & al., 2015, p. 1, our translation).
- **Community Action Unit (CAU)** - « an organizational and technical support for a group of people or for a community, which undertakes a community action or which faces a problem to which a collective answer can be brought » (Sa Barretto & al., 2015, p. 1)

- ▶ An important autonomy with a methodology for project appraisal.
- ▶ Adopt various modes of intervention and can be either a "leader", or a "co-administrator" or "facilitator of the project"
- ▶ Considered as an external resource for the group, by acting on their request and by supplying them organizational advice and techniques:
- ▶ Whereas the purpose of the established group is to reach the goals which presided over his creation, the purpose of the support for the social workers is the autonomy of the same group.

"A practical support for a community action with financial, logistical and methodological help which reflects faithfully a bottom-up approach which does not try to impose external objectives on the group but which support the social initiatives of citizens without attention to their objectives or for the type of formal organization."

- This support offered by the community sector to organizations is translated in particular by a logistic help and by networking:
 - Providing rooms for meetings and activities
 - Playing the role of mediator for the group, when situations of conflicts emerge regarding their internal organization (definition and distribution of tasks and responsibilities)
 - Helping the association to communicate on its activities at the neighborhood level: conception of a flyer and a publication of the events in the schedule of the City of Geneva
 - Looking for volunteers and new members
 - Providing micro-financing on a project basis
 - Helping to the clarification of the requests for the authorities
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EXEMPLES OF ACTION





CONCLUSION

- CAU offer a practical support for citizen initiatives with a bottom-up approach which does not try to impose external criterias or objectives
 - It indirectly leads to reduction of the demand for public services and as such it can be a liberal answer to the growing social needs in the context of decreasing resources.
 - Nonetheless, the non-directive logic at the heart of this approach involves that no result can be guaranteed and no political objectives can be pursued.
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A member of the National Coalition for independent action:

« The government wants to institutionalise the idea that the preferred way to fund traditionally charitable activity is through social enterprise methods: loans and income generation through contracts, charging or trading, rather than grants or other public subsidies. (...) Most community groups have no interest in delivering public services. Their vision of what is needed may or not fit that of government. (...) getting involved in a local group to improve your community is different from taking responsibility for a social enterprise and bidding for contracts. (...) Community groups that emerge for other reasons than to deliver services are a way for people with less power in society (most of us) to look out for each other and represent ourselves (...) the space in which people are free to do things, large or small, not because the government promotes them or because they will generate profit, but to try to change the world. » (A member of the National Coalition for independent action quoted in Ishkanian & Szreter, 2012, p. 13-14).

THANKS

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CONTACT: JEROME.GRAND@UNIGE.CH