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'Maximum Feasible Understanding' – Lessons from Previous Wars on Poverty

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This article provides a historical analysis of particular policy initiatives undertaken in the US and the UK in the 1960s and 1970s and asks to what extent the lessons from these policy initiatives can be transferred to current policy development in the UK today. The focus of the discussion is local community-based interventions, aimed at combating poverty and exclusion. These are now generally referred to in the UK as Area Based Initiatives (ABIs).

Introduction

There has been an increasing concern with the issue of policy transfer in the literature on policy analysis in the UK. Much of it has focused upon the extent to which there can be *geographical* policy transfer from one welfare regime to another (see Dolowitz *et al*., 2000), but more recently some have taken up the question of *historical* transfer from past policy initiatives to current policy practice (Powell and Stewart, 2003). Some important messages about such transfers emerge in this analysis. But, it is not just the lessons from the past that may influence the future, there are many enduring legacies of past policy activity that continue to inform the current policy climate. In particular where past initiatives have been tried and found wanting by local citizens, it may be more difficult to develop enthusiasm for something similar in the future.

The focus of this paper is on the role of local community-based interventions aimed at combating poverty and exclusion. These are of particular importance within the policy practice of the UK Labour Government at the beginning of the new century, although they are also being developed widely in other developed nations, notably in Europe and North America. In the UK, they are now generally collectively referred to as *Area Based Initiatives* (ABIs). However, the idea that in developing such policies we should seek to learn from past initiatives is itself a longstanding one – the leading analysts of the US policies of the 1960s, Marris and Rein (1972: 247) commented,

> No one involved in planning the anti-poverty programme seems, therefore, to have looked closely at the troubled history of the models it was proposed to copy, nor to have seen their conflicting implications.

Over 30 years later this lesson, at least, remains a pertinent one, although it is far from clear that current policy planners have an approach to historical policy transfer that is as reflective as their twentieth-century predecessors.

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Area based initiatives in the twenty-first century

At the beginning of the new century, there have been a plethora of new ABI programmes introduced into the UK to provide additional resources to combat poverty, targeted at particular local districts or neighbourhoods. The recent development of these in fact extends back to the previous Conservative administration, in particular the £5.6 billion Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), initiated under Major. But the scale and scope of activity has increased dramatically under the Labour Government, to include the Health, Education and Employment Action Zones, begun in 1997, the Sure Start and Children's Fund programmes (support for work with pre-school and school age children), the New Deal for Communities (NDC, £2 billion over ten years for project work in 39 target neighbourhoods) and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF, £900 million over three years for action projects in the 88 most deprived local authority districts), along with many more smaller and more focused programmes addressing issues such as community safety and environmental protection.

An ABI website maintained by the Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) now lists around 50 separate initiatives (www.rcu.gov.uk/abi). These largely operate in England only, although similar initiatives exist within the devolved administrations within the UK.

These new initiatives are also linked to a broader commitment to combat social exclusion in twenty-first century Britain, spearheaded by the new *Social Exclusion Unit* (SEU). The SEU has openly championed the area based approach to policy action (SEU, 1998, 2000, 2001), and in particular has seen this as critical to ensuring the *partnership* of a range of agencies in anti-poverty activity and the *participation* of local citizens in the promotion of social inclusion (Alcock, 2004). Here in particular the echoes of past area based anti-poverty policy action can clearly be heard.

The US war on poverty

It is interesting to note that the first major anti-poverty programmes of the twentieth century to adopt the area-based approach were to be found in the affluent United States of the early 1960s. They were very much the products of the recognition of the continued problem of poverty amidst affluence, pointed out by social scientists such as Harrington (1962). The message was that not all citizens of the US were benefiting equally from the fruits of economic development, and the policy implication was that policy makers ought to do something to ensure that they were.

Of particular importance here was the publication by Daniel Moynihan in 1965 of a report on 'The negro family: the case for national action'. Moynihan was a senior official in the Labor Office in the Johnson administration and was one of a new breed of public servants who had qualified and practised as social scientists. His report concluded that the poverty and marginalisation experienced in modern US society was not evenly distributed, but was associated closely with key issues of *race* (Negro families) and *place* (black inner-city ghettos).

Moynihan's report was controversial as well as influential. In particular his link between benefit dependency and the failings in family and community structures in black ghettos, led many critics to argue that he was promoting a paternalistic and pathological model of poverty causation (see Rainwater and Yancy, 1967). His proposed

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response, positive discrimination to target extra resources on those living in black ghettos, established a theoretical legitimacy for policy programmes that concentrated on the symptoms of black poverty (ghetto dwelling Negro families) rather than on their cause (white racism and economic power) – a problem which remains a core legacy of the area based approach to anti-poverty policy.

However, as Piven and Cloward's (1972 and 1977) analyses of American anti-poverty policy reveal, the anti-poverty programmes of the 1960s actually have a much broader and longer-established pedigree, linked to more general concerns about cycles of economic deprivation (rising levels of unemployment and welfare dependency) and the social and political activities of the poor (the need to compensate, or contain, potentially militant or riotous marginalised groups). Anti-poverty policy had an economic and political context as well as an ideological one.

The most influential programme, both within the US and beyond, was the 'War on Poverty', initiated by Kennedy and taken up Johnson, and spearheaded after 1964 by a new Federal agency, the *Office of Economic Opportunity* (OEO). Initially the programme was quite small scale. Only $350 million was allocated to the programme in 1964 (Piven and Coward, 1972: 257); but this had doubled within a year and had reached $4.5 billion by 1972 (Loney, 1983: 26).

The language of opportunity was of critical importance, capturing many of the key features of area intervention. The beneficiaries of action were to be given 'a hand-up not a hand-out', within a 'doors not floors' approach to combating poverty and inequality. In the words of the first OEO Director, Sargent Shriver, 'opportunity is our middle name' and 'we don't give handouts' (Kershaw, 1970: 24). Similar language has been used in the new century by the UK Government, whose annual report on their anti-poverty and social exclusion strategy is entitled *Opportunity for All* (DWP, 2004).

This meant that the Community Action Program (CAP) quickly became the central feature of the programme, receiving over half of OEO funding (Kershaw, 1970: 44). Within this one of the earliest major programmes was *Headstart*, which provided resources for work with the families of pre-school children in deprived neighbourhoods. In 1999 the UK government started a programme called *Sure Start*, which had a remarkably similar focus and with much the same policy goals. Another significant strand, which emerged a little later, was provision of access to legal services, in particular to pursue rights to welfare, housing and other social services. This 'welfare rights' activity has also figured significantly in UK area based programmes both in the last century and this.

One of the main reasons why the CAP became such an important feature of the War on Poverty was the requirement, 'hidden away' in Title II-A, Section 202(a) (3) of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, that programmes were to be, 'developed, conducted and administered with the *maximum feasible participation* of residents of the areas and members of the groups served' (emphasis added). This potentially obscure clause in fact became something of a watchword for all community action within the work of the OEO and beyond, providing a justification for a strong focus on community development work and a commitment in general to working *with* rather than *for* local people (Kramer, 1969: 6).

It also provided a focus for some high-profile commentaries on the programme and its activities, most notably perhaps from Moynihan himself, who in 1969 published a critique provocatively entitled *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*. In this he argued that the focus on participation had created unreasonable, and unrealisable, expectations

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amongst local residents, both about how much power could be devolved to them and how much change such processes were likely to achieve, with the result that the dashed expectations may actually have done more harm than good to the more general goals of anti-poverty action. In part, of course, this raises more general questions about the extent to which any community action programme such as this could expect to engineer major social change. As Kershaw (1970: 161) noted, after five years of activity most poor people in the USA had not heard of the War on Poverty, and, in terms of economic regeneration (and in particular the move from welfare into work), the investments made in the war in Vietnam had been far more effective.

In the early years of the 1970s, under a new Director, the more right-wing Donald Rumsfeld (Holman, 1972), the OEO was run down and eventually discontinued. Marris and Rein's (1972) most comprehensive review of the programme concluded that it remained dogged by the contradictions between process and outcome, and could never in practice mount any serious challenge to the existing structures of political and economic power. In large part this was because, like Moynihan, it operated within a pathological model of the causes of (and solutions to) ghetto poverty.

This was captured neatly by Ryan (1971: 8) in his book entitled *Blaming the Victim*,

> All this happens so smoothly that it seems downright rational. First, identify social problem. Second, study those affected by the problem and discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice. Third, define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself. Finally, of course, assign a government bureaucrat to invent a humanitarian action program to correct the differences.

This questions more generally the notion that it is local people who must be the motors of their own social improvement. Local initiatives working with local people to help them to develop local solutions to their problems sound quite positive, and yet implied in this is a view that other (more powerful) actors outside need take no action over the problems as they are not really theirs. Clark and Hopkins (1968: 256), in another overview of the War on Poverty, concluded,

> that deprivation in many areas . . . may not be responsive to programmes of amelioration and community action. The problems of poverty cannot be resolved as if they were isolated from the wider economic, social and political patterns of the nation.

This should not lead us to conclude that no good at all came out of the CAP initiatives in the poor black ghettos, rather that we should judge rather cautiously and carefully just how extensive local achievements can be. This is an important historical lesson, and it is one that can be drawn too from the UK anti-poverty programmes, which followed closely on the heels of the American War on Poverty.

The community development projects

The are a number of striking similarities between the political context of the area based anti-poverty programmes of the 1960s and early 1970s in the UK and those of the earlier War on Poverty in the US, and similarities in the policy frameworks and policy practices that were developed within these. In part these were due to structural and political convergence. UK society in the 1960s had also experienced the relative affluence of

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the long post-war boom, and yet recent research evidence had 'rediscovered' significant levels of poverty continuing alongside this affluence (Abel Smith and Townsend, 1965). As in the US, this rediscovered poverty was not evenly distributed across the social or geographical spectrum, although the links with Britain's (still then only recently growing) black population was less clear cut or remarked on. This led to arguments for government action, and for this to be informed by the need for positive discrimination towards the 'pockets of poverty'.

However, there were also more pragmatic explanations for the close similarities between US and UK area based policy programmes. There was a deliberate attempt at policy transfer here. British policy makers had watched with interest the developments in the US and felt that similar programmes could work in Britain too. A range of new programmes were therefore introduced including the Educational Priority Areas (EPA), support for schools and pupils in a small number of designated neighbourhoods, and the Urban Programme, a partnership between central and local government to support innovative projects for neighbourhood renewal in urban areas (see Eyles, 1979). However, it was the Community Development Projects (CDPs) that were most closely modelled on the US experience, and most clearly reproduced most of its strengths and weaknesses.

The CDPs (originally Community Development Areas) were the 'brainchild' of a Home Office civil servant, Derek Morrell, who had been across to the US to observe the workings of the OEO first hand. He was also instrumental in arranging an Anglo-American Conference at Ditchley Park in 1969, the year the CDPs were launched, at which some of the American evaluators and commentators, including Marris and Rein, shared their experiences with British academics and policy makers such as Halsey, the first academic co-coordinator of the research programme associated with the CDP. In fact the US commentators brought with them some warnings about the contradictory tensions of the OEO and the CAP; and, as Higgins (1978: 40) later commented,

> Had the assembled British policy-makers and politicians really absorbed and taken account of some of the more astute remarks of the Americans there would probably have been no CDP at all or at least no project in the form it eventually took.

In fact, however, the CDPs did go ahead and reproduced many of the key features of the American community action programme, albeit on a much smaller scale and with considerably less resources. The CDPs were small-scale area based action projects located in neighbourhoods generally of only a few thousand people. Four were created first in 1970, with a further eight following in three phases in 1971. The total estimated cost was only £5 million (Loney, 1983: 4).

The small scale of the CDPs was in part a product of the experimental role that they were intended to play in policy planning and practice. The idea was that innovative development work would be undertaken, and would be observed and evaluated by teams of academic researchers. Each of the 12 projects had its own academic research team and there was also a central team under the directorship of Halsey and led in practice by John Greve. The thinking behind the CDP experiment, however, was directly drawn from the community development aspirations of the US CAP. As Labour Minister, Richard Crossman, commented the projects would, 'assess the problem of how such a community can pull itself up by its own bootstraps . . . the team must then get down to the job of seeing that the community tackles it itself' (quoted in Loney, 1983: 49).

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As in the US, much has been written about the achievements and failings of the CDPs, both at the time (see Lees and Smith, 1975) and on the basis of later research (Loney, 1983). Of particular interest in the CDPs, however, was the way in which research and reflection were built into the experiment by its designers, and the voice that this gave to the CDP workers and researchers themselves. A range of papers and pamphlets were published by the CDP teams. Many of these describe in detail the problems faced by the local communities with which they worked and the range of different schemes and projects run for and with local residents, and as such they are a testimony to the real practical achievements of the CDPs for their local residents, many providing models for community action today. The publications also ranged more broadly, however, as exemplified by perhaps the most famous, *Gilding the Ghetto*, published by the inter-project team (CDP) in 1977.

Gilding the Ghetto took its title from an 'off-the-cuff' remark by a Home Office civil servant in 1969, that the CDPs might operate to provide such a diversion from the broader structural problems besetting Britain's areas of deprivation. The paper argued, in similar themes (though more Marxist language) to the work of Ryan, and Piven and Cloward, that, 'the problem experienced by the working class can no longer be explained as a marginal problem of the inner city and the blame put upon the inadequacies of the people living there' (p. 63); and that, 'Thus the Poverty Programme . . . was not developed in order to solve or alleviate *their* problems, but to help the state to meet its problems in dealing with these people' (p. 64, emphasis in original). In short, they were there to put some gilt on the ghettos, but no more.

As with the American War on Poverty, the CDPs were run down and closed in the later 1970s, as had been the early EPA experiments. The Urban Programme ran for much longer and other area based initiatives, such as the Inner Cities Programme, followed. It would be a mistake to conclude therefore that either the policy makers or the practitioners subscribed to the conclusion that area based action was inevitably and fundamentally flawed. And, as we said earlier, it would be a partial judgement indeed to suggest that because of these broader contradictions, the work of the community activists and local residents within the CAPs and CDPs was without value or achievement. The point of returning to these questions and criticisms, however, and of situating them within a review of the aims and objectives of the area based programmes of over 30 years ago, is to recall the importance of the lessons that were learnt then about what we should and should not expect from area based policy action, so that current and future policy planning can operate with clearer, and perhaps more circumspect, expectations, and perhaps can even challenge the legacies of distrust that history may have handed down.

Policy transfer in area-based action

History does not repeat itself, and the ABIs now being developed at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the UK and other welfare capitalist countries are not attempts to copy directly the earlier community action programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. However, there are some striking similarities between current ABIs and these earlier anti-poverty programmes. In part this can be seen in the language used. Sure Start captures much the same interventionist tone as Headstart, and has many similar goals and features. The New Deal for Communities has echoes of the Community Development Projects and Community Action Programme. Concerns about transmitted deprivation and cultures of

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exclusion also feature in modern concerns about the dynamics of local poverty and social exclusion. Assistance is referred to as a 'hand-up' rather than a 'hand-out', with projects aiming to work 'with' local people and aiming to ensure participation of residents in decision-making and policy practice. Community development is now sometimes referred to as capacity building, but the aims and the methods of development owe much to past theories and methods.

More generally, however, the structure and operation of modern programmes, such as the NDC, take a similar form to the CDPs and CAP. The Social Exclusion Unit, like the American OEO, has a relatively small budget and is intended to support small-scale, additional, experimental and time-limited projects, rather than substitute for mainstream programmes or redistribute significant resources. Like the CDPs, the current UK programmes are being evaluated by researchers, both nationally and locally. The current UK government stresses in particular its concern to discover 'what works' and to base policy development upon clear evidence of outputs and achievements.

Modern programmes are enjoined to identify targets and to develop indicators and milestones against which progress towards achievement can be measured; and here too there are parallels with the past. At the Ditchley Park conference in 1969, which launched the CDPs, Greve proposed a list of indicators to gauge effectiveness of local projects, including improved family functioning, improved child-rearing practices, improved education, and improved physical conditions in communities (Loney, 1983: 77). Very similar indicators are now listed by the UK government in its annual review of progress on social inclusion, *Opportunity for All* (DWP, 2004).

More fundamental still, it is clear that the theoretical underpinnings of the new area based policy drive draw directly upon the assumptions that underlay the US and UK anti-poverty programmes of the earlier eras. For a start, they repeat the focus upon area, and in the case of the NDCs and Neighbourhood Renewal upon relatively small areas indeed. There is continuing evidence that many aspects of poverty and deprivation are in practice unevenly distributed across geographical areas, now provided by the Indices of Deprivation (ODPM, 2004). However, there is a fundamental problem with basing anti-poverty action on such geographical targets – generally referred to as the 'ecological fallacy'.

Many people living in areas of high deprivation are not themselves poor; and many (indeed most) poor people live outside such areas, especially the increasingly recognised rural poor. Powell *et al*. (2002) have recently articulated this more clearly as a distinction between 'people poverty' (which may not be amenable to locally based responses) and 'place poverty' (which may). However, the distinction was in fact recognised in earlier analysis of 'areal activity', for instance, in a critical appraisal of area based policy, Hamnett (1979: 253) wrote,

> Whilst is may be true that area-based policies constitute a valuable weapon where deprivation is areally concentrated and, to a certain limited extent areally caused, it is most unlikely that such policies *in isolation* can significantly reduce or ameliorate the extent and incidence of multiple deprivation given that they are only partly attributable to areal causation.

This was the over-riding message from the evaluation of the US initiatives of the 1960s (Marris and Rein, 1972) and from the CDP researchers in the UK in the 1970s (CDP, 1977); and it remains of critical importance today. Whatever the spatial unevenness revealed in

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different measures of inequality and exclusion, the forces behind such phenomena lie in large part outside of the local neighbourhoods where their effects are most acute. Activities focused in these neighbourhoods, whatever their achievements, cannot challenge or change these forces, and may even contribute to the pathologisation of local problems so critically dismissed by Moynihan (1969) and Ryan (1971).

Moreover, the legacies of past community misunderstanding can act to undermine, rather than promote, future capacity building and participation. Where past projects to promote participation and community action have resulted in little change in economic and social fortunes and little challenge to existing structures of power and influence, then securing support for, and involvement in, future projects may be difficult to achieve. Policy transfer can take place at 'the bottom' as well as 'the top', with local citizens concluding that they have been invited to the table before, only to discover that the agenda has already been set; and so they will not believe it is going to be any different this time.

Conclusion

At the heart of these issues of area focus, community action and pathologisation of local poverty and social exclusion, both now and 30 or 40 years ago, is the fundamental question of the relative roles of structure and agency in policy planning and policy practice. What is clear from the terms of the US Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the work of the UK Social Exclusion Unit in the early twenty-first century is that policy makers believed that agency was critical to achieving social change; and that, if those who had been excluded from the affluence, which abounded in modern welfare capitalism could be encouraged to challenge the dynamics of their exclusion, then progressive social change would follow.

Of course, in part they are right in this. Agency is required for social change and agents can act to change the world and their place within it – 'social activation', as it is now sometimes called, should thus be a goal of social policy. However, the actions of agents are constrained by the structural forces that determine their current circumstances and future prospects, as the poor inhabitants of the ghettos and the run-down estates know only too well.

The conclusions drawn by the community activists and the academic researchers of the 1960s and 1970s were that area based agency could not combat structural inequality and deprivation and that social and economic policies were also needed to address these broader social forces and the power structures that maintained them. Those conclusions remain just as relevant to the ABIs of the twenty-first century as they did in the past. If we wish to transfer policy from history, there is much here from the past that can inform current policy practice.

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