

FROM SOCIAL EDUCATION TO POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

“Thirty years ago Youth Work aspired to a special relationship with young people. It wanted to meet young women and men on their terms. It claimed to be 'on their side'. Three decades later Youth Work is close to abandoning this distinctive commitment. Today it accepts the State's terms. It sides with the State's agenda. Perhaps we exaggerate, but a profound change has taken place.”

Thus begins a sweeping and controversial condemnation of the plight of English youth work, written in January 2009. Its argument that a voluntary young person centred practice was being strangled by the instrumental demands of New Labour was hardly original. However it took the implosion of neo-liberal economics and politics in late 2008, seen optimistically by some as the end of the age of greed, to spark a collective response from below, now visible as the IN DEFENCE OF YOUTH WORK campaign. In this workshop contribution I will delve back as far as the Albermarle Report to provide a historical context to our argument that a progressive commitment to the nurturing of active young citizens capable of 'both governing and being governed' has been usurped by a regressive desire to manufacture young people into compliant and conformist consumers. Drawing on my own experience, by way of anecdote and story, I shall trace the twists and turns of youth work's allegiance to the slippery concept of social education and the present danger of it sliding off the agenda entirely.

For the purposes of our dialogue I have divided the last 50 years into four periods. Of course reality is never so neat, but this schematic overview affords a starting point for debate. Within each of these stages I shall try to unravel the intertwining of the following questions:

What is the State's and/or government's view of Youth Work? To what extent can we identify a clarity or otherwise of policy?

What is the rhetoric and/or theory informing the training and management of youth workers?

What is the real impact of policy, rhetoric and theory upon the actual practice with young people?

And, of particular relevance, what has been the significance of youth work's relationship to the British social-democratic Labour Party, now banished into Opposition after 13 years in power?

1959-1975 The Optimism of the Post-War Settlement Crumbles

- The State's initial optimism about the potential of youth work is expressed through the Albermarle Report (1959). However as the post-war settlement and the social-democratic consensus crumbles, the Milson-Fairbairn (1969) Report's stress on 'critical involvement in a changing society' is met with deep caution.
- A cadre of professional youth workers emerges, guided by an emphasis on method and technique, striving to be technicians in human relations, enabling young people to make the most of the opportunities available. The notion of social education becomes significant, interpreted as an uneven process of development towards social maturity.
- The commitment to a non-directive, person-centred practice is only partially embraced within the work and sits uneasily with the dominant traditional model of leadership and guidance.

1976-1990 Politics from Above and Below

- The deep economic and political crisis precipitates a partial split between national and local government as to the place of youth work, which is mirrored in the ambiguity of the Thompson Report [1982]. The neo-liberal Thatcher administration is suspicious and through its Manpower Services Commission Youth Opportunity Schemes seeks either to bypass or colonise youth work. In opposition a number of 'municipal socialist' councils offer a refuge for a politicised 'social education' centred on gender, race, sexuality and disability.
- The influence of youth work from below, out of the social movements, is expressed in the radicalisation of the training agencies, where an anti-oppressive and discriminatory perspective achieves hegemony.
- Islands of radical practice surface in a sea of conformism. Tensions abound, reflected in the life and death of the National Youth Agency's Enfranchisement Project [1980- 82], which reveals youth work to be a deeply contested and contradictory site of practice.
- Significantly the fortunes of a politicised 'social education' are bound up with the convulsions inside the Labour Party, which provides succour even as its leadership abandons the last vestiges of its socialist credentials.

1990-1997 The Market and Managerialism Prevail

- As the neo-liberal desire to introduce the discourse of the market into all corners of life gathers pace, the Conservative government seems tired. It attempts to draw together the disparate elements into an agreement on a national curriculum. Repelled, it turns to linking the finance for youth work to an agreement to meet allocated targets and outcomes. The die is cast.
- Savaged by cuts youth work is in disarray. In the training agencies a radical agenda seems to survive. In practice a managerial outlook increases in influence. To be legitimate youth work must prove its worth by obeying the diktat of the market.
- As far as the Labour Party is concerned it is in the game of restructuring from the top downwards to achieve power. A notable layer of youth work managers and workers, often previously activists in the social movements, are incorporated into a view that this metamorphosis will be for the better. They put their trust in New Labour.

1997-2010 Positive Youth Development – Prescribed and Predictable

- New Labour imposes an instrumental and behavioural agenda, utterly in keeping with a neo-liberal insistence on individualised conformity. It is reflected in the continuing shift towards targetting recalcitrant individuals.
- Youth work as a distinctive site of practice comes under increasing attack with the introduction of Integrated Youth Services. Indeed as a way of describing work with young people it is replaced increasingly by talk of Positive Activities. This shift is supported by the back door introduction of Positive Youth Development, the renaissance of the stageist and functionalist framework of adolescent psychology.
- Within the training agencies, the impact of modularisation and the fragmentation of knowledge, the stress on standards and competencies undermines further a commitment to theoretically informed, creative practice.
- The incorporation of many youth workers into a view that the Labour Party would be a progressive force stalls criticism and undermines resistance to the government's insistence on the very antithesis of the youth work process - prescribed and predictable outcomes.

Facing up to the Present : Questions for Debate

The Coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats promise a prolonged period of austerity, central to which are severe cuts in public services, which bodes ill for youth work. Except that the Coalition is ideologically confused. The Tories remain distrustful of local authority youth work, whilst the Liberals have been traditionally sympathetic to the idea of a statutory Youth Service. Overarching this rift stands a mutual desire to encourage generalised conformity, dressed up as individual choice, softened in comparison to New Labour by less intrusive efforts to manage and determine young people's behaviour through State intervention.

Against this uncertain backcloth the effort to resist the total eclipse of a 'democratic and emancipatory' youth work is fraught with contradictions. Amongst the many questions we face are:

- Is the concept of social education past its sell-by date? As a *raison d'être* for youth work in England its very pluralism allowed a diversity of interpretation from the conformist to the radical within a ruly and unruly world of association and conversation. In contrast Positive Youth Development seeks to impose programmed order upon problematic youth, much to the comfort of more youth workers than we might care to acknowledge.
- Is professionalisation and professionalism the basis for resistance? The concern to identify a regulated and certificated vanguard of graduate workers, bonded by licence and ideology, symbolised by the Community and Youth Workers Union, may well be the bulwark against cuts in jobs and conditions in the public sector. However its existence and focus throw up difficulties. Thousands of volunteers and practitioners seem to be left on the sidelines. The professional fixation on a supposed common core of abstract Youth Work Values and its contemporary obsession with Ethics is at heart a flight from politics, masking deep divisions about the purpose of youth work itself. Youth work is not a cluster of corporate ideas or values. Rather it is a distinctive site of practice, a negotiated space of interaction, within which ideas and values are argued about. Ironically too, as we search for pockets of oppositional and prefigurative practice, we discover that professionalisation might well have weakened rather than strengthened workers control and autonomy.
- In the present circumstances, are we being utopian to argue for an unpredictable, improvisatory and critical dialogue with young people, which carries no 'tick box' guarantee as to the nature of its outcomes? In its desire to gain legitimacy and finance has youth work lost its way by claiming to be an interventionist and preventative agency, able to reduce all manner of supposedly anti-social behaviours?
- Given my references to the implicit and explicit allegiance of many within youth work to the Labour Party and, in my opinion, to its dire consequences, how are we to understand growing noises about attempting to resuscitate and revitalise the corpse of New Labour as the way forward.
- Without doubt we do need to recreate a collective imagination and organisation. In my view this must be composed from below. It must be outward looking and not at all precious, making alliances with social workers, teachers, community activists both nationally and internationally - on the basis of a shared emancipatory, humanist optimism about the prospects of social and political change. And, in forging together such a vision, more than ever, we need to reach out to young people themselves, who are so often the missing actors and actresses in our script. As Castoriadis suggests, "it is not what is, but what could be and should be, that has need of us."

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