

Neither in nor against the state? Revisiting the role of the third sector in constructing civil society

Pete Alcock

University of Birmingham

LEWRG

London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group....

Welfare workers were in the state, but also against it –
challenging current structures, practices and outcomes.

- Law Centres

Welfare reform and improvement required both internal activity
and external engagement.

Third Sector Dilemma

Independence threatened by public sector contracts

- incorporation, hybridity, isomorphism

- Baring Independence Panel, NCIA, Rochester
- Carmel and Harlock – ‘Governable terrain’

Advocacy and campaigning stifled or suppressed

- Legislation restricting TSOs from political campaigning
- ‘Gagging clauses’ in public service contracts

False Dilemma

Should TSOs be 'in or against' the state? Cannot be both!

Irony in this dilemma - LEWRG authors in the 1970s emphasised the need to do both.

False dilemma – TSOs do not have to choose - They are neither exclusively in the state, nor entirely against it.

Rather - their role is, and should be, one of working with state (and market) actors to construct a civil society

Changing Relations

Not a new phenomenon -

Harris - trace this back over three centuries

Lewis - passes through a number of different phases

Kendal three recent shifts -

- Phase 1 – charity centric institution building – up to late 1970s
- Phase 2 – voluntary sector consolidation and engagement – following Wolfenden ()
- Phase 3 – hyperactive mainstreaming – following Deakin and New Labour.

6 and Leat - constructing a voluntary sector in policy discourse ('sectorisation' – Rochester)

Labour and Partnership

Third Way – working across state, market and third sector to deliver welfare – concerned with ‘what works’

Partnership

- Formalisation of state sector relations – Compact(s) – Deakin’s concordat
- Providing direct support for TSOs therefore - Futurebuilders, Change-up, etc. – horizontal funding, capacity building
- Engagement and support for TS representatives – strategic partners, advisory group, recession summits (see below)
- Creation of OTS - led by Campbell Robb

Created - ‘Strategic Unity’ across a broader TS

Interdependence

Interdependence of the state and the TS.

- The third way needed TSOs to expand options for diversity and choice in delivery of welfare.
- TSOs needed support from the state to respond to the new opportunities for service development and organisational growth.

Growth in state income - absolute and proportionate

Recession Summits –how to respond to recession together.

The sector asked for, and got, increased support from state.

Broader Policy Context

Engagement and support for sector from state are not new – though terminology and discourses change

- Vertical support - advice, social care, community development, mental health, and more
- Horizontal support - Voluntary Services Unit and Charity Commission.

Scale and intensity may alter, but interdependence always there

Broader Policy Context

Not only a UK phenomenon

- Overlapping boundaries, ‘tension fields’, and hybridity in European debate – Evers and Laville, Dekker, Brandsen
- US non-profits debate the impact of contracts for public service delivery and the fears of isomorphism.

Within the UK s relations vary following devolution - different policy regimes, and differing (and increasing) degrees of interdependence across England - Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Conservatives and the Big Society

Promoted by Cameron as leader of the Conservative Party prior to 2010 election, Hugo Young speech – November 2009

- *Our alternative to big government is the big society. But... we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen*

Changed the nature of interdependence after 2010 election,

Coalition Government

- Relations cooler – Compact weakened, support for strategic partners withdrawn
- Horizontal support withdrawn – OTS spending decimated focus on projects: National Citizens Service,
- OTS retitled – reduced role in promoting good practice and ‘championing’ sector
- Big Society – not the big state

BUT – support and engagement continued and public funding though reduced, still significant and higher than early years of hyperactive mainstreaming under Labour.

Big Society Failure

Big Society discourse did not work - irrelevant in Scotland, Wales and NI anyway!

- Opportunities to challenge and replace the state (Right to Challenge and Right to Provide) did not lead to significant demand for TS alternatives.
- Most public service contracts went to private sector providers
- Community campaigners and sector activists argued for more support from state to prevent them TSOs going under

The Big Society needed a big state.

Civil Society

- Why did Conservatives change name of OTS to OCS?
- Did they know what they were doing?

Change of terminology to distance from Labour engagement with TS. But in practice location and scope of OCS did not change (Compact retained) – though resources, personnel and policy priorities did.

For Cameron in practice Civil Society was a synonym for Third Sector

Civil Society

Contrast with how Civil Society is conceived more generally, and in a range of other discourses by a range of other actors across the world.

- Journal of Civil Society – democracy, freedom of association, political change
- Civil Society and associational life, the commons, in the US
- Civil Society in post-communist countries and Global South, working with and outside state agencies

Civil Society

Michael Edwards, (*Civil Society* 3rd Ed.) argues that there are the distinctive, though over-lapping discourses on civil society

- Civil society as associational life – where we participate in formal and informal organisations
- Civil society as the good society - where we debate what values should inform social relations
- Civil society as the public sphere – where all public action and debate takes place

Together embrace civil society as the interaction of the state, the third sector - and the market - in promoting associational activity, progressive social relations and a vibrant public sphere.

Civil Society

A normative discourse - how we can act together to make our world a better place. Edwards:

- *Civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means*

I have taken this up in final chapter of my new Policy Press book – *Why we need welfare: collective action for the common good*

<http://policypress.co.uk/why-we-need-welfare>

Civil Society

Civil society is

- The *means* for achieving collective action and promoting the importance of associational activity
- The *ends* to which we aspire through this collective activity. We want, or should want, all to be members of a civil society
- A challenge to a hostile *neo-liberal* discourse of individual freedom and market competition.
- The means to achieve this through associational activity and participation in the public sphere.
- The ideological framework through which we can articulate the need for investment in the common good.

Civil Society

New discourse on Civil Society - third sector has a central role

- Creating space for changing forms of associational activity
- Empowering citizens through collective engagement and community action
- Supplementing public services
- Challenging policy and practice
- Advocating for citizens and communities
- Improving business practices and corporate responsibility
- Promoting collective investment in public welfare

- Working both in and against the welfare state